

THE POPULIST MOMENT

A Short History of the
Agrarian Revolt in America

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The Irony of Populism

"The People" vs. "The Progressive Society"

The foundations of modern America were constructed out of the cultural materials fashioned in the Gilded Age. The economic, political, and moral authority that "concentrated capital" was able to mobilize in 1896 generated a cultural momentum that gathered in intensity until it created new political guidelines for the entire society in twentieth-century America. Not only was previously unconsolidated high ground captured in behalf of the temporary needs of the election of 1896, but the cultural tactics tested and polished during the course of the campaign for "honest money" set in place patterns of political conduct that proved to be enduring. After McKinley's impressive victory in 1896, these patterns became fully consolidated within the next generation of the Progressive era and proved adequate during a brief time of further testing during the New Deal. They have remained substantially unquestioned since, and broadly describe the limits of national politics in the second half of the twentieth century. The third party movement of the Populists became, within mainstream politics, the last substantial effort at structural alteration of hierarchical economic forms in modern America.* Accordingly, twentieth-century American

*The point, here, of course, is that the liberal and socialist alternatives discussed in this concluding chapter were, respectively, either not substantive or were culturally isolated and outside the mainstream of American political dialogue.

reform has in a great many ways proven to be tangential to matters the Populists considered the essence of politics. This reality points to the continuing cultural power exerted by the political and economic values which prevailed in the Gilded Age and which today serve to rationalize contemporary life and politics to modern Americans.

The narrowed boundaries of modern politics that date from the 1896 campaign encircle such influential areas of American life as the relationship of corporate power to citizen power, the political language legitimized to define and settle public issues within a mass society yoked to privately owned mass communications and to privately financed elections, and even the style through which the reality of the American experience—the culture itself—is conveyed to each new generation in the public and private school systems of the nation. In the aggregate, these boundaries outline a clear retreat from the democratic vistas of either the eighteenth-century Jeffersonians or the nineteenth-century Populists.

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Understandably, during such a moment of cultural consolidation priorities were not quickly isolated or identified; it took awhile for the full implications of the era to become evident. But the power of the hegemony achieved in 1896 was perhaps most clearly illustrated through the banishment of the one clear issue that animated Populism throughout its history—the greenback critique of American finance capitalism. The "money question" passed out of American politics essentially through self-censorship. This result, quite simply, was a product of cultural intimidation. In its broader implications, however, the silencing of debate about "concentrated capital" betrayed a fatal loss of nerve on the part of those Americans who, during Populism, dared to speak in the name of authentic democracy. Since the implications were so huge, a brief recital of some relevant specific details seems in order.

The enormous success of *Coin's Financial School* induced gold-bugs to counterattack in 1895-96 through the writings of a

University of Chicago economist named J. Laurence Laughlin. Laughlin produced not only theoretical works but also books, articles, and pamphlets for popular consumption. His widely syndicated newspaper column imparted an aura of scholarly prestige to the sound money cause, though his journalistic efforts, like his other writings, were almost as conceptually flawed as "Coin" Harvey's efforts. Yet Laughlin's campaign in behalf of the gold standard drew no critics outside the ranks of Populism, for the nation's university faculties were solidly "gold-bug." Among respectable elements of American society, greenback doctrines were culturally inadmissible.

However, in 1896 a young Harvard economist, Willard Fisher, decided he personally had endured enough of the currency theories of both "Coin" Harvey and Professor Laughlin. One of the nation's better-informed students of monetary systems, Fisher penned a biting attack on the two competing advocates of metallic-based currencies. Entitled "'Coin' and His Critics," Fisher's article appeared in the *Quarterly Journal of Economics* in January 1896. Fisher treated with gentle tolerance "Coin" Harvey, whose writings, while badly "flawed," nevertheless produced a number of insights that were "intelligent." He reserved his harsher adjectives for goldbugs, and particularly for his academic colleague, Professor Laughlin. The latter, among other things, was "wrong." In the aggregate, the sheer momentum of Fisher's critique of the arguments of goldbugs and silverites carried him dangerously close to an inferential endorsement of the greenback heresy. No academic *enfant terrible*, Fisher cautiously stepped around this pitfall with an oblique reference to a scholarly alternative to metallic-based currencies—one he euphemistically described as "the familiar tabular system." The reference was cordial, but ultimately noncommittal. Beyond such obscurantism the young professor dared not venture. Though a metallic currency was not an intelligent system of money, Fisher declined to say what was. The word "greenback" was avoided throughout his article. Coupled with the routine orthodoxy that ruled elsewhere in the academic world, the extreme circumspection of the Harvard economist tellingly measured the power of the cultural consolidation at that moment

being fashioned in America. Certain ideas about the economy, no matter how buttressed with evidence and interpretive skill, had become dangerous.

Though the gold standard was formerly legislated into law in 1901 over scattered and desultory opposition, the financial panic of 1907 convinced the Eastern banking community of the need for a more flexible currency. J. Laurence Laughlin, having proved his mettle in 1896, received the blessings of large commercial bankers and was once again pressed into service, this time as the nation's foremost spokesman for "banking reform." Laughlin and two associates wrote the Federal Reserve Act, which was enacted into law in 1913. The measure not only centralized and rationalized the nation's financial system in ways harmonious with the preferences of the New York banking community, its method of functioning also removed the bankers themselves from the harsh glare of public view. Popular attention thenceforth was to focus upon "the Fed," not upon the actions of New York commercial bankers. The creation and subsequent development of the Federal Reserve System represented the culminating political triumph of the "sound money" crusade of the 1890's.

These developments abounded in irony. The panic of 1907 corroborated an essential feature of the analysis behind Charles Macune's sub-treasury system, for the crisis partly materialized out of the inability of a contracted currency to provide adequate capital markets during the autumn agricultural harvest. Throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, calls on Eastern banks by Western banks for funds to move the autumn crops had created stringent shortages within the entire monetary system. While this condition worked to depress agricultural prices—and was not without its benefits to bankers in the matter of interest rates—the banking system itself broke down under these and other burdens in 1907. The demand for a more flexible currency that issued from the banking community following the panic of 1907 was oriented not to the needs of agriculture, however, but rather to the requirements of the banking community itself. Thus, while the 1912 report of the blue-ribbon National Monetary Commission

recommended new legislation establishing adequate credit for the nation's farmers, the Federal Reserve Act written by Laughlin and his associates failed to follow through. Though proponents of the Federal Reserve System often described the twelve regional banks established by the act as "cooperative banks" specifically designed to meet the impasse in agricultural credit—a description particularly prominent during public discussion of the enacting legislation—they were not, in fact, so designed. The Act provided easier access to funds only for the nation's most affluent farming interests.

The Federal Reserve System worked well enough for bankers in the ensuing years, but its failure to address the underlying problems of agricultural credit became obvious to all during its first decade of operation. The severe agricultural depression of 1920–21 once again focused public attention on the problem, leading to a marginal expansion of government policies through the establishment in 1923 of federal intermediate credit banks. But the 1923 amendments effectively extended the aid only to the agricultural middle class. In no sense were the credit problems of the "whole class" touched upon in ways that Charles Macune and other Populist greenbackers would have respected. Not until the farm loan acts of the New Deal did the nation directly address the credit requirements of the family farmer. Unfortunately, unlike the Macunite plan of making direct, low-cost government loans not only to aid farmers but as a competitive pressure on bank interest rates generally, the system of New Deal government loans operated wholly through commercial banks. It thus served as an artificial prop for the prevailing financial system. In any event, by the time of the New Deal legislation, literally half the farmers in the cotton belt and the Western granary had long since been forced into landless peonage and were effectively beyond help.

A final irony was implicit in these developments—and had they lived to see it, it was one that might have proved too much for old-time greenbackers to bear. The collective effect of twentieth-century agricultural legislation—from the Federal Reserve Act of 1913 to the abrupt ending of the Farm Security Administration's land relocation program in 1943—was to

assist in the centralization of American agriculture at the expense of the great mass of the nation's farmers. The process of extending credit, first to the nation's most affluent large-scale farming interests, and then in the 1920's to sectors of the agricultural middle class—while at the same time denying it to the "whole class" of Americans who worked the land—had the effect of assisting large-unit farming interests to acquire title to still more land at the expense of smallholders. Purely in terms of land-ownership patterns, "agri-business" began to emerge in rural America as early as the 1920's, not, as some have suggested, because large-scale corporate farming proved its "efficiency" in the period 1940 to 1970. In essence, "agri-business" came into existence before it even had the opportunity to prove or disprove its "efficiency." In many ways, land centralization in American agriculture was a decades-long product of farm credit policies acceptable to the American banking community. The victory won by goldbugs in the 1890's thus was consolidated by the New Deal reforms. These policies had the twin effects of sanctioning peonage and penalizing family farmers. The end result was a loss of autonomy by millions of Americans on the land.

In a gesture that was symbolic of the business-endorsed reforms of the Progressive era, William Jennings Bryan hailed the passage of the Federal Reserve Act in 1913 as a "triumph for the people." His response provided a measure of the intellectual achievements of reformers in the Progressive period. Of longer cultural significance, it also illustrated how completely the idea of "reform" had become incorporated within the new political boundaries established in Bryan's own lifetime. The reformers of the Progressive era fit snugly within these boundaries—in Bryan's case, without his even knowing it. Meanwhile, the idea of substantial democratic influence over the structure of the nation's financial system, a principle that had been the operative political objective of greenbackers, quietly passed out of American political dialogue. It has remained there ever since.

The manner in which the citizens of a democratic society become culturally intimidated, so that some matters of public discussion pass out of public discussion, is not the work of a single political moment. It did not happen all at once, nor was

it part of a concerted program of repression. Martial law was not declared, no dissenting editors were exiled, and no newspapers censored. It happened to the whole society in much the same way it happened to young Willard Fisher at Harvard, silently, through a kind of acquiescence that matured into settled resignation. This sophisticated despair, grounded in the belief that hierarchical American society could, perhaps, be marginally "humanized" but could not be fundamentally democratized, became the operative premise of twentieth-century reformers. Their perspective acquired a name and, rather swiftly, a respectability always denied Populism. In 1900-1930, it was popularly recognized as "progressivism." Later, it became known as "liberalism." In such a way, a seminal feature of the democratic idea passed out of American culture. This rather fateful process was inaugurated during the climactic political contest of 1896.

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Popularly known as the "Battle of the Standards" between gold and silver, the presidential campaign between Bryan and McKinley witnessed the unveiling for the first time in America of the broad new techniques of corporate politics. Under the driving supervision of Ohio industrialist Mark Hanna, unprecedented sums of money were raised and spent in a massive Republican campaign of coordinated political salesmanship. The nation's metropolitan newspapers, themselves in the midst of corporate centralization, rallied overwhelmingly to the defense of the gold standard. Their efforts were coordinated through a "press bureau" established by the Republican leadership. The power of the church added itself to that of the editorial room and the counting house, and the morality of "sound money" and the "nation's honor" temporarily replaced more traditional themes emanating from the nation's pulpits. Cultural intuitions about respectability, civic order, and the sanctity of commerce, augmented by large-scale campaign organizing, coordinated newspaper and publishing efforts, and refurbished memories of Civil War loyalties combined to create a kind of electoral politics never previously demonstrated on so vast a scale. Though

individual pieces of this political mosaic had been well tested in previous elections, the sum of the whole constituted a new political form: aggressive corporate politics in a mass society.

The Democrats responded with something new of their own—a national barnstorming tour by the youthful and energetic Bryan. Though such undignified conduct was considered by many partisans to be a disgrace to the office of the presidency, the silver candidate spoke before enormous crowds from Minneapolis to New York City. The effort seemed merely to spur the Republican hierarchy to ever-higher plateaus of fund-raising, spending, and organization. The nation had never seen a political campaign like it, and, for one heady moment at least, Bryan thought the electorate would react heavily against such self-evident displays of political propagandizing. But Republicans were able to generate such intense feeling against the "anarchistic" teachings of William Jennings Bryan that many modest church-goers as well as industrial captains felt that no sum of money was too great to ensure the defense of the Republic from the ravages of the silverites. Indeed, one of the striking features of the 1896 campaign was the depth to which many millions of Americans came to believe that the very foundations of the capitalist system were being threatened by the "boy orator of the Platte." That was hardly the case, of course—particularly when it came to the nation's currency. A monetary system responsive to the perspectives of commercial bankers was not at issue in 1896; the relationship of the government to bankers on the matter of currency volume and interest rates was not at issue either. In view of the shared faith of both Bryan and McKinley in a redeemable currency, the entire monetary debate turned on a modest measure of hard-money inflation through silver coinage. The narrowness of the issues involved in the "Battle of the Standards" should have put strong emotional responses beyond possibility—yet the autumn air fairly bristled with apocalyptic moral terminology. Indeed, the fervor of the campaign, for both sides, was authentic: the true issues at stake went far beyond questions of currency volume, to a contest over the underlying cultural values and symbols that would govern political dialogue in the years to come.

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A great testing was in process, centering on the relative political influence of two competing concepts—that of “the people” on the one hand and of “the progressive society” on the other. Those phrases were by no means habitually employed in 1896, either as informal appeals or in the capitalized versions of political sloganeering destined to become common in the twentieth century. But the values underlying the concepts authentically guided the campaigns of 1896 in ways that imparted enduring meaning to the outcome of their competition.

When he was not talking specifically about silver coinage, Bryan actually used the idea of “the people” as a centerpiece of many of his political speeches. When in Chicago, he said:

As I look into the faces of these people and remember that our enemies call them a mob, and say they are a menace to free government, I ask: Who shall save the people from themselves? I am proud to have on my side in this campaign the support of those who call themselves the common people. If I had behind me the great trusts and combinations, I know that I would no sooner take my seat than they would demand that I use my power to rob the people in their behalf.

To many Americans the idea of “the people” represented the very foundation of democratic politics, and many thousands believed it had genuine meaning in the context of the Bryan campaign. But in 1896 the idea was even more specific, for it described not just “the people” in the abstract but a specific “people’s movement” that had pressed itself upon the national consciousness, energized the silverites, and generated the preconditions for reform influence in the Democratic Party. Because it was not clear to the nation that the people’s movement itself had been destroyed—its cooperatives crushed and its political party co-opted—Bryan came to symbolize its enduring life. This explained why Clarence Darrow, Eugene Debs, and many other Populists who had no illusions about the healing powers of the silver crusade ultimately came to join the “Great Commoner.” They hoped he could rally the people to a new sense of their own prerogative and stimulate them, in L. L. Polk’s old phrase,

to “march to the ballot box and take possession of the government.” To the extent that the silver crusade made much sense at all, it was in this symbolic context. The stirring rhythms of Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” speech had energized the delegates at the Democratic convention—perhaps he could stir the American people as well. In the autumn of 1896, the hope was there, and this hope gave the Bryan campaign the deepest meaning it possessed.

Given the ballot box potentiality of “the people” as against “the great trusts and combinations,” Republicans obviously could not afford to have the campaign decided on that basis. The countervailing idea of the “progressive society” materialized slowly out of the symbolic values embedded in the gold standard. The “sanctity of contracts” and “the national honor,” it soon became apparent, were foremost among them. But, gradually, and with the vast distributional range afforded by the Republican campaign treasury, broader themes of “peace, progress, patriotism, and prosperity,” came to characterize the campaign for William McKinley. The “progressive society” advanced by Mark Hanna in the name of the corporate community was inherently a well-dressed, churchgoing society. The various slogans employed were not mere expressions of a cynical politics, but rather the authentic assertions of an emerging American world view.

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From a Populist perspective, the contest between “the people” and “the progressive society” was, in a practical sense, wholly irrelevant to the real purposes of the reform movement. Indeed, the narrow controversy over the “intrinsic value” of two-competing metallic currencies was an affront to greenbackers. Not that they could do much about it; Populism had ceased to be an active force in American politics from the moment the third party had sacrificed its independent presence at the July convention.

The People’s Party was therefore not a causative agent of anything significant that occurred during the frenzied campaign between the goldbugs and the silverites. From James Weaver to

Tom Watson, from Nebraska fusionists to Texas mid-roaders, the People's Party had become a reactive agent, responding as best it could to the initiatives of others. This being far from the proper business of an autonomous democratic movement struggling to break through a hierarchical party system, Populism quietly dissolved in the fall of 1896 as the morale of its two million followers collapsed. Democratic managers treated their Populist "allies" with such studied contempt that, for two months following the summer conventions, Marion Butler, the new Populist national chairman (replacing the discredited Taubeneck) was afraid to officially notify Bryan of his nomination for fear it would be publicly rejected. On the state level, fusion obliterated the party across the South where the standard-bearer of its bitter enemy, the Democratic Party, also graced the top of the Populist ticket. It is necessary to trace the actions of only one man—Tom Watson—during the autumn campaign of Populism to reveal the utter chaos that had descended upon the reform movement in every corner of the nation.

In his inaugural campaign speech in Atlanta early in August, Watson began actively pressuring the Democratic Party to remove Sewall from the ticket: "You cannot fight the national banks with any sincerity with a national banker as your leader." Butler reacted negatively to the speech, not because he wanted Sewall to remain but because he had been intimidated and outmaneuvered by the Democratic national chairman and by the silver lobby and, as a result, had lost a sense of his own prerogatives and those of the party he headed. Butler's course—to "do nothing of doubtful propriety while matters are happily shaping themselves in our favor"—betrayed a fatal lack of political self-confidence. Watson thereupon took a remarkable step that revealed the extent of his mistrust of fusion leaders. In interviews with the New York press, he attacked them publicly.

If the National Convention at St Louis did not mean that Messrs. Bryan and Watson should be notified, why was a committee appointed to notify them? Why does Senator Allen, the chairman of the Committee, refuse to do what the convention instructed him to do? Is he afraid Mr. Bryan will

repudiate our support? If so, our party has a right to know that fact. If Mr. Bryan is ashamed of the votes which are necessary to elect him, we ought to know it.

By the standards of any self-respecting political party, these observations were eminently reasonable. They also were judged by the Republican press of the East to be highly newsworthy, as the intra-party quarrel among Populists had the effect of complicating Bryan's position as well.

Though Marion Butler, understandably, had cooled to the idea of a highly visible Watsonian presence in the fall campaign, the Georgian nevertheless embarked on a trip to Texas and Kansas early in September. The political atmosphere Watson found in Texas was hardly conducive to the kind of "patience and moderation" for which Butler had labored. A Watson intimate reported to Butler from Dallas that "Texas we find ripe for revolt. . . . The Pops are solid here against Bryan and Sewall." Indeed, a substantial number of the Texas third party leaders regarded the Bryan candidacy as a positive evil. Not only were they concerned that Populist support of Bryan would destroy the identity of the third party, but they also believed that the campaign's emphasis on free silver would undermine the basic monetary reforms of Populism. The Texans were so disturbed that they seriously considered the endorsement of McKinley as the "least of evils" in the 1896 campaign. When black Republican leaders in Texas offered to support the Populist state ticket in return for third party support of the Republican presidential ticket, the Texas mid-roaders took the matter under close advisement. Rumors of these discussions were in the air when Watson arrived in the state, and he responded warmly to the convivial Populist environment. "You must burn the bridges if you follow me," he asserted. To wild cheering, he announced his belief in "Straight Populism," for he did "not propose to be carried to one side of the road or the other." The campaign, he added, was "a movement of the masses. Let Bryan speak for the masses and let Watson speak for the masses and let Sewall talk for the banks and the railroads." Sewall was "a wart on the party. He is a knot on a log. He is a dead weight on the ticket." For

good measure, Watson brought Butler and the national fusion leadership of the third party into his line of fire. The Texans, who shared most of those opinions and had a few others of their own, roared their approval.

While the reverberations from this speech rattled through the ranks of the silverites, Watson's itinerary took him to Kansas. There the Populist vice presidential candidate walked into Populist state headquarters under streaming banners that proclaimed, "Bryan and Sewall." As if to heighten the insult, Watson found that the very front of the Populist campaign office was decorated with huge portraits of the two Democrats whom the Kansas party took to be its national standard-bearers. The action in St. Louis by the politician-led Kansas party—one of full public support for Bryan and Sewall—was consummated back home through an arrangement with Democrats who exchanged Populist support of Sewall electors for Democratic support of the Populist state ticket. In speaking in Kansas, Watson was addressing party leaders who had sacrificed him in the name of their own local and state campaigns. The atmosphere was, to say the least, tense. As much as any man in America who responded to the call of reform launched by the Farmers, Alliance, Watson had labored tirelessly in the people's movement. In Kansas in 1896 he gave his answer to the idea of fusion:

Someone else must be asked to kill that Party; I will not. I sat by its cradle; I have fought its battles; I have supported its principles since organization . . . and don't ask me after all my service with the People's Party to kill it now. I am going to stand by it till it dies, and I want no man to say that I was the man who stabbed it to the heart. . . . No; Sewall has got to come down. He brings no votes to Bryan. He drives votes away from Bryan. . . . My friends, I took my political life in my hands when I extended the hand of fellowship to your Simpsons, your Peffers, your Davises in Georgia. The Georgia Democrats murdered me politically for that act. I stood by your men in Congress when others failed. I have some rights at the hands of Kansas. I have counted on your support. Can I get it?

The Populist audience responded with enthusiasm, pressed around the rostrum, and surrounded his carriage as he prepared

to leave. Touched, Watson wrote his wife, "it is quite apparent that the rank and file of our party in Kansas are all right and will vote against their leaders if they get the chance."

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The Kansas Populists who swarmed around Watson's carriage, like Watson himself, like the old Texas Alliancemen, had too many memories to acquiesce comfortably in the fusion politics of 1896. The spirit of Populism possessed meaning because of these memories. Indeed, collectively, they constituted the essence of the agrarian revolt: memories of farmers on the crop lien bringing food to striking railroad workers; of Alliancemen wearing suits of cotton bagging during the long war against the jute trust in the South; of the great lecturing campaigns to organize the South in 1887-89 and the nation in 1890-91; of mile-long Alliance wagon trains and sprigs of evergreen symbolizing the "living issues" in Kansas; of the formation of the "Alliance Aid" association to bring the Dakota plan of self-help insurance to the full agrarian movement; of Leonidas Polk, the Southern Unionist, announcing the end of American sectionalism to the cheers of Michigan farmers; of a day in Florida, "under the orange and banana trees," when the National Reform Press Association was created; of the time in South Carolina, so brief in that state, when impoverished farmers rebuked Ben Tillman to his face and tried to set a course different from his; of boys carrying torches in country parades for Tom Watson and girls knitting socks for "Sockless" Jerry Simpson; of the sprawling summer encampments that somehow seemed to give substance to the strange, inspiring, ethical vision of Tom Nugent; of John Rayner's lieutenants speaking quietly and earnestly in the houses of black tenants in the piney woods of East Texas; and, perhaps most symbolic of all, of men and women "who stood on chairs and marched back and forth cheering and crying" in response to the initial public reading of the "Second Declaration of American Independence" on a summer day in 1892 in the city of Omaha. It was this spirit—a collective hope for a better future, it seems—that animated American Populism, and it was these vibrant moments of shared effort that provided the evidence of its vitality, its aspirations, and its defeats.

And finding no coherent way to express itself in fusion, it was this spirit that expired in the autumn of 1896. Following his fiery speeches in Texas and his confrontations with the Kansans, Tom Watson sojourned briefly in the citadel of fusion in Nebraska and then, utterly demoralized, went home to Georgia for the remainder of the campaign. As the sole surviving symbol of a national Populist presence, he had become an anachronism. No one knew this more deeply than Watson or understood more fully what it meant for the future of the third party. The 1896 campaign had to do with the mobilization of new customs that were to live much more securely in American politics than the dreams of the Populists. That many of those customs were precisely the ones that so deeply disturbed the agrarian reformers constituted one of the more enduring ironies of the Populist experience.

7

The most visible difference in the efforts of the three parties in 1896 turned on money—not as a function of currency, but rather as the essential ingredient of modern electioneering. The Populist national treasurer wrote despairingly to Marion Butler that he was receiving less than a dozen letters a day containing “twenty-five cents to a dollar” from the demoralized Populist faithful throughout the nation. The Populist national campaign was literally almost penniless, and Butler found it necessary to establish his Washington headquarters in a building housing the political arm of the silver lobby, the National Silver Party. Only a belated, if humiliating, subsidy of \$1000 from the Democratic national committee enabled the Populists to keep going until election day.

The Democratic campaign, although elaborately financed by Populist standards, was also run on a shoestring. The Republican press made great capital out of a supposed massive flow of funds from Western silver mineowners cascading into Democratic coffers. But the relatively modest sums that actually materialized went to the lobbying institutions previously created by the mineowners. Democrats worked desperately to place speakers

in the field, but the shortage of money gradually channeled this effort toward the recruiting of self-supporting volunteers. The best educational force for the Democratic cause was Bryan himself. Through the early part of the campaign Bryan was forced to travel by commercial carrier, a circumstance that placed the entire presidential campaign at the mercy of local railroad timetables and earned the “boy orator” considerable ridicule in the goldbug press. The Democratic national committee was ultimately able to provide Bryan with a special train for the closing weeks of the campaign, but the silver crusade never quite lost the ad hoc character that had marked its inception.

In contrast, the massive national campaign for “honest money” engineered by Mark Hanna set a model for twentieth-century American politics. While the Democrats struggled to find volunteer speakers to tour the crucial states of the Midwest, the Republican campaign placed hundreds of paid speakers in the field. Individual contributions from wealthy partisans sometimes exceeded the entire amount the Democrats raised in their national subscription drive. Offerings from corporations, especially railroad corporations, reached even larger sums. Receipts and expenditures soared into the millions.

Mark Hanna presided over both the Chicago and New York campaign operations, coordinating an elaborate system of printing and distribution that involved many millions of pamphlets, broadsides, and booklets. So controlled and centralized was the Republican effort that the Chicago managers also took it upon themselves to assist in the supervision of state and local campaigns. To add a certain heft to their admonitions, the Chicago office dispatched almost a million dollars to various state organizations. The New York headquarters, focusing on the safe Eastern states, reported expenses of an additional \$1,600,000.

The nation's new business combinations headquartered in New York largely financed the effort. Standard Oil contributed \$250,000, a figure matched by J. P. Morgan. Hanna and railroad king James J. Hill were seen in a carriage “day after day,” going from Wall Street to the office of the New York Central and the Pennsylvania railroads. Hanna repeatedly importuned the pres-

ident of New York Life, who just as frequently responded. The corporate contributions mobilized in behalf of the 1896 Republican campaign for McKinley financed America's first concentrated mass advertising campaign aimed at organizing the minds of the American people on the subject of political power, who should have it, and why.

So supported logistically, the cultural politics of 1896 soon unfolded in behalf of the "progressive society." Republican references to the national honor extended to the party's role in the Civil War. The "bloody shirt" waved in 1896; the fading rhythms of Civil War loyalty were evoked with a measure of subtlety, but evoked nevertheless. From his front porch in Canton, William McKinley framed the larger issues in cultural terms that looked to the past.

Let us settle once for all that this government is one of honor and of law and that neither the seeds of repudiation nor lawlessness can find root in our soil or live beneath our flag. That represents all our aims, all our policies, all our purposes. It is the banner of every patriot, it is, thank God, today the flag of every section of our common country. No flag ever triumphed over it. It was never degraded or defeated and will not now be when more patriotic men are guarding it than ever before in our history.

In such a manner, the Republican Party first and foremost moved to guard its basic constituency—one that had been created by the war and had been solidified by repeated reminders of the patriotism implicit in that initial allegiance. The politics of sectionalism had always served this primary objective—to ensure the party's organic constituency against anything that might hint at wholesale apostasy. But in 1896, with the war receding in time and with elections more and more depending on the votes of people who had grown to maturity since Appomattox, the appeal of the "bloody shirt" was boldly employed toward an even more lasting objective—to merge the Republican Party's past defense of the nation with contemporary emotions of patriotism itself. Such an approach promised to elevate sectional memories to national ones, forging a blend of the American flag and the Grand Old Party that might conceivably cement a bond of enduring vitality.

While William Jennings Bryan talked with passion and imprecision about the free coinage of silver, American flags—literally millions of them—became the symbols of the struggle to preserve the gold standard. McKinley himself became the nation's "patriotic leader." The Republican campaign committee purchased and distributed carloads of flags throughout the country and Hanna conceived the idea of a public "flag day" in the nation's leading cities—a day specifically in honor of William McKinley. "Sound Money clubs" of New York and San Francisco were put in charge of enormous flag day spectacles and supporting organizational work was carried forward with unprecedented attention to detail. When no less than 750,000 people paraded in New York City, the *New-York Tribune* soberly reported—thirty-one years after Appomattox—that "many of those who marched yesterday have known what it is to march in war under the same flag that covered the city in its folds yesterday all day long." In the critical Midwestern states, Civil War veterans known as the "Patriotic Heroes" toured with buglers and a cannon mounted on a flatcar. Slogans on the train proclaimed that "1896 is as vitally important as 1861." So effective was the Republican campaign that frustrated Democrats found it difficult to show proper respect for the national emblem without participating in some kind of public endorsement of McKinley. Inevitably, some Democrats tore down Republican banners—the American flag. Such actions did not hurt the Republican cause.

McKinley adroitly yoked "free trade" to "free silver" as twin fallacies threatening the orderly foundations of commerce as well as the morality of the Republic. These threats were all "Bryanisms" and collectively they added up to "anarchy." The Republican antidotes thus consisted not merely of "sound money" which protected both the sanctity of contracts and the nation's honor, but equally symbolic appeals to the hope of industrial workers for relief in the midst of a depression. To drive this thought home, only one more slogan had to be added to the litany marshaled by the Republicans. The phrase duly materialized and was affixed to McKinley himself. He became "the advance agent of prosperity." Hanna's New York money and Dawes' Chicago printing presses ensured exposure of the

slogan throughout the nation. It often appeared emblazoned on huge banners flanked by phalanxes of American flags, the entire panoply carried high in the air by uniformed Civil War veterans wearing "sound money" buttons. Such broadly gauged cultural politics completely overwhelmed the vague call for free silver carried to the country by one barnstorming presidential candidate and a few platoons of volunteer Democratic speakers. In sheer depth, the advertising campaign organized by Mark Hanna in behalf of William McKinley was without parallel in American history. It set a creative standard for the twentieth century.

8.

The election itself had an unusual continuity. Some students of the 1896 campaign have concluded that the enthusiasm for Bryan following his "Cross of Gold" speech was such that he would have swept to victory had the election been held in August. After that initial alarm the Republican organization quickly set in place the foundations for the mass campaign that followed, and by October the organizational apparatus assembled by Mark Hanna had clearly swung the balance to the Republicans. Yet the election results appeared fairly close, McKinley receiving 7,035,000 votes to Bryan's 6,467,000. But the Republicans had swept the North. While their margin in the Midwest was not overwhelming, it was a region Cleveland had carried for the Democrats four years before and one Bryan had been supremely confident of winning only a month before the election. Indeed, the results in the Midwest destroyed the party balance that had persisted since the Civil War, thus vastly changing national politics for the foreseeable future. In fact, a cataclysm had befallen the Northern Democratic Party. Its progressive symbol in the Midwest, Governor John Peter Altgeld of Illinois, had suffered a surprising defeat, and state party tickets elsewhere in the North had been thrashed. The political appeal supposedly implicit in the idea of "the people" had received a powerful defeat.

It took awhile for the full implications to become apparent. Though it was not immediately noticed, the mature and victo-

rious party of business had muted almost completely the egalitarian ideas that had fortified the party's early abolitionist impulses; the party of "peace, progress, patriotism and prosperity" had become not only anti-Irish, but anti-Catholic and anti-foreign generally. Its prior political abandonment of black Americans had quietly become internalized into a conscious white supremacy that manifested itself through a decreasing mention of the antislavery crusade as part of Republican services to the nation during the Civil War. The assertive party of business that consolidated itself in the process of repelling "Bryanism" in 1896 was, in a cultural sense, the most self-consciously exclusive party the nation had ever experienced. It was white, Protestant, and Yankee. It solicited the votes of all non-white, non-Protestant, or non-Yankee voters who willingly acquiesced in the new cultural norms that described gentility within the emerging progressive society. The word "patriotic" had come to suggest those things that white, Protestant Yankees possessed. This intensely nationalistic and racially exclusive self-definition took specific forms in 1896. The Democratic Party was repeatedly charged with being "too friendly" to foreigners, immigrants, and "anarchists." Indeed, the enduring implications echoed beyond the given tactics of a single campaign to define the restricted range of the progressive society itself. But for many of those who spoke for "the people," and for even greater numbers of the people themselves, no amount of fidelity to the new cultural values could provide entry to that society. While black Americans were to learn this truth most profoundly, its dimensions extended to many other kinds of "ethnic" Americans as well as to a number of economic groups and to women generally. The wall erected by the progressive society against "the people" signaled more than McKinley's victory over Bryan, more even than the sanctioning of massive corporate concentration; it marked out the permissible limits of the democratic culture itself. The "bloody shirt" could at last be laid away: the party of business had created in the larger society the cultural values that were to sustain it on its own terms in the twentieth century.

As an immediate outgrowth of the Bryan campaign, those