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# William Jennings Bryan and the Presidential Election of 1916

BY PHILIP A. GRANT JR.

On June 14, 1916, the Democratic National Convention assembling at St. Louis was called to order. The Democrats at this historic gathering were destined to renominate President Woodrow Wilson and adopt a platform completely endorsing the domestic and foreign policies of the Wilson Administration. The convention delegates were also to hear one of the most famous keynote addresses in the annals of American politics. This speech, forcefully delivered by former Governor Martin H. Glynn of New York, was most noteworthy for his statement: "He kept us out of war." Indeed, those fateful words not only became the dominant theme of the convention but also emerged as perhaps the central issue in the presidential campaign of 1916.<sup>1</sup>

Among those attending the 1916 convention was William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska. Bryan, who for two decades had been one of the nation's illustrious political figures, had been the Democratic presidential nominee in 1896, 1900, and 1908. Appointed secretary of state in March, 1913, the Nebraskan had served in that capacity until his dramatic resignation on June 8, 1915. The departure of Bryan from the Cabinet had been precipitated by his refusal to sign the second "Lusitania" note.<sup>2</sup> Bryan's abrupt resignation and his long-standing espousal of pacifism had certainly upset the President and had infuriated many prominent Democrats. Because of sharp differences between Bryan and Wilson on fundamental foreign policy questions, there was considerable speculation whether Bryan would actively support the Democratic national ticket in 1916.

Although Bryan was not an official delegate to the 1916 convention, he attracted enormous attention as a reporter in the

press gallery. Hoping to effect a genuine reconciliation between Bryan and Wilson, a number of leading Democrats insisted that Bryan be invited to address the delegates. After happily accepting the opportunity to speak before the convention, Bryan strongly urged the reelection of President Wilson and lavishly praised the overall record of the Democratic Party.<sup>3</sup> The mere fact that Bryan had expressed such emphatic sentiments in St. Louis encouraged many Democrats to assume the likelihood that he would consent to play a significant role in the 1916 presidential campaign itself.

In early August Bryan indicated his willingness to campaign vigorously in behalf of Wilson and several Democratic gubernatorial and congressional candidates. At that time Bryan pledged to devote approximately six weeks to campaign appearances. It was mutually understood by the Nebraskan and Democratic campaign officials that the bulk of his political activities would be in the West and Midwest, two regions in which his personal popularity was ostensibly high.<sup>4</sup>

Although Bryan's formal campaign did not begin until September, on August 11 in Kansas City he was harshly critical of Charles Evans Hughes, the Republican presidential candidate. Assailing Hughes' performance as governor of New York several years earlier, Bryan charged that the Republican nominee had been overly sympathetic to the interests of the railroads and clearly hostile to the proposed federal income tax. Bryan, disparaging Hughes in a variety of ways, commented:

He is supported by the trust magnates and expects to pay them back by shielding them from punishment for the extortion which they desire to practice. He is supported by Wall Street and expects to pay them back by spending American blood and squandering money raised by taxation in order to guarantee profits on speculative investments.<sup>5</sup>

A few days prior to commencing his extensive campaign schedule Bryan voiced optimism over Wilson's electoral prospects. Bryan maintained that the President had compiled a record "without parallel in matters of domestic reform" and was deserving of the "gratitude of the country" for having kept the United States out of war in Europe. Believing that Hughes had inadvertently contributed to the momentum of the Democratic campaign, Bryan declared that the Republican nominee had failed "to find any fault in the great measures

enacted during this Administration, to prove conclusively that the record of the President and Congress cannot be successfully attacked.”<sup>6</sup>

Bryan opened his campaign for Wilson and the Democrats on September 18 at Reno, Nevada. An appreciable amount of his time during the following four weeks was spent in the Rocky Mountain states. Bryan was addressing consistently large and generally enthusiastic audiences in Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, and Colorado.

Convinced that he “never will be able to present a stronger message in support of a Democratic ticket,” Bryan in Reno extolled the Democratic Party for having “more than fulfilled its promises” and hailed its record of achievement as “greater than we dared expect.” Notwithstanding his past disagreements with Wilson on foreign policy questions, Bryan lauded the President for having prevented American involvement in World War I. Bryan climaxed his remarks in Nevada’s principal city as follows:

I thank God for a Woodrow Wilson who did not think we should go to war. Are you going to defeat the man who has borne all the burdens of the war? Will you deny him the triumph of having a large part in the bringing about of peace?<sup>7</sup>

A few days later at Cheyenne, Bryan asserted that the American people owed their votes to the President for having kept the nation out of war. Moreover, the Nebraskan pointed with pride to “the record which has been attained in the past four years.” After emphasizing the accomplishments of the Wilson Administration, Bryan was to condemn the Republican Party. Alleging that the Republicans were “dangerous to the cause of American freedom and liberty,” Bryan reminded his audience that the Republican Party had been so “odious” in 1912 that many of its members had deserted it and claimed that the same Republican leaders of 1912 had been directly responsible for the nomination of Hughes in 1916.<sup>8</sup>

While addressing residents of the Montana cities of Butte and Billings, Bryan concentrated primarily on the domestic initiatives of the Wilson Administration. Bryan applauded the President and the Democrats for having introduced the income tax, lowered tariff rates, reformed the currency system, strengthened anti-trust legislation, provided credit facilities

for farmers, and enacted a federal child labor law. Bryan was particularly elated with the Wilson Administration's commitment to promoting meaningful competition. Stressing that he "despised" monopolies, the Nebraskan explained that the establishment of the Federal Trade Commission in 1914 had vested the government with much greater authority to challenge the practices of monopolistic corporations. Finally, in a brief reference to the international situation, Bryan praised Wilson for having preserved peace and warned that a vote for Hughes would constitute a rebuke to the President's efforts to avoid American involvement in the European conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Bryan's final campaign appearance in the western states was in Denver. Portraying Hughes as a reactionary, Bryan reiterated his earlier charge that Hughes' nomination had been dictated by the most negative forces in the Republican Party. Bryan continued to offer his unqualified support of the domestic policies of the Democratic Party. Totally satisfied with the "progressive, constructive legislation" produced jointly by the President and Democrats in Congress, Bryan stated:

"I give to Woodrow Wilson my unstinted admiration and praise for that work." Thanking Wilson for having "seen us safely and in honor thru one of the greatest and most tragic cataclysms in all history," Bryan implored his Denver audience to "keep him at the wheel until peace comes to the world."<sup>10</sup>

Bryan's October campaign itinerary was confined almost exclusively to the Midwest. As a native of Illinois and a citizen of Nebraska, Bryan, well acquainted with all the midwestern states, was ultimately to speak in Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Illinois, and according to most contemporary newspaper accounts, his appearances were well received in almost every community.

At Des Moines Bryan recalled that he had been a candidate for the presidency on three separate occasions. Claiming that he had never mustered stronger arguments in any previous campaign, Bryan appraised the four years of Wilson's presidency as follows: "It is an argument of performance, not of promise." Bryan rejoiced in the successful endeavors of the Democratic Party to reduce tariff rates and contrasted Wilson's firm support of the federal income tax with Hughes'

steadfast opposition to that measure. The Nebraskan terminated his comments by enumerating a long list of Democratic legislative innovations, including the Federal Reserve Act, the Federal Farm Loan Act, the Adamson Railroad Act, and the Federal Child Labor (Keating-Owen) Act.<sup>11</sup>

While in Missouri, Bryan granted an interview to reporters in St. Louis and delivered an address at Cape Girardeau. At St. Louis he observed that the "largest issue is keeping out of war" and emphasized that the recent legislative record of the Democratic Party was of such high quality that the Republicans were "at a loss for something to say." At Cape Girardeau Bryan defined the two paramount issues of the campaign as preventing the government from being turned over to extreme conservatives and approving the President's efforts to guarantee the maintenance of peace. While acclaiming the merits of the numerous domestic policies of the Wilson Administration, Bryan identified Hughes and the Republicans with the forces of reaction and privilege.<sup>12</sup>

At Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo, Michigan, Bryan accused Hughes and the Republican Party of collaborating with monopolies. He insisted that the Republicans wanted trusts to continue functioning although they realized that trusts existed "for no other reason than to plunder the public." Unequivocally defending the domestic and foreign policies of the Wilson Administration, Bryan declared:

Now, these are the two questions that will be decided by your votes—the two supreme issues of this campaign—for you cannot defeat Woodrow Wilson without putting this government back into the hands, not of the Republican party merely, but of the reactionary members of the Republican party; and you cannot defeat Woodrow Wilson without rebuking the man who has succeeded in keeping this country at peace while war rages throughout Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Bryan in Milwaukee warned that citizens could not cast their votes against Wilson without automatically surrendering the government to a reactionary clique and without tacitly disavowing the individual who had strove to keep the country out of the tragic European war. Convinced that the world was expecting the United States "to lead the way from the blood-stained precedents of the past out into the larger and brighter day," Bryan prophesied that the American people would reward Wilson "for having preserved peace in the western

hemisphere, while the old world is drenched in human blood."<sup>14</sup>

Bryan also traveled to Springfield, the capitol city of Illinois. There he cited the taxation and rural credits laws enacted by the Democratic majority in Congress. Asking that the people of Illinois "not forget that the Democrats had led the fight for this income tax amendment," Bryan asserted that the Democratic Party had "taken \$150,000,000 from the backs of the struggling poor and put it on the incomes of the rich." Bryan, describing the Federal Farm Loan Act as the "greatest piece of legislation ever enacted for the benefit of the farmers of the United States," contended that it marked the "first time this government has ever attempted in a large way to relieve the farmer's financial needs."<sup>15</sup>

Bryan's sole appearance in the Northeast occurred in western Pennsylvania on October 20. On that date Bryan and President Wilson conferred in Pittsburgh for one hour. After the President's departure, Bryan stated: "I want to put it as strongly as possible that Mr. Wilson will win." Believing that Wilson had advanced an "effective argument for every class of voters," Bryan hailed the "successful and humble manner in which he has preserved the nation's peace." Bryan also predicted that the projected Wilson victory would be largely attributable to a Democratic sweep of the western states.<sup>16</sup>

An analysis of the 1916 election returns seemed to warrant the conclusion that Bryan's intensive campaigning proved helpful to Wilson in the western states of Nevada, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah. In Nevada and Colorado, carried by Bryan in all three of his campaigns for the presidency, it is noteworthy that Wilson's 1912 majorities of 2,366 in Nevada and 42,160 in Colorado were increased in 1916 to 5,649 and 76,108 respectively.<sup>17</sup> Bryan had won Montana in 1896 and 1900, and Wilson's 1912 margin of 5,320 votes in that state grew to an impressive 34,171 in 1916.<sup>18</sup> Wyoming and Utah, states included in the Bryan column only in 1896, were also distinctly favorable to Wilson in 1916. The President's 1912 victory in Wyoming had been by a mere 740 votes, while in 1916 the comparative figure was 4,678.<sup>19</sup> In Utah Wilson transformed a 1912 deficit of 5,437 into a 1916 surplus of 30,008.<sup>20</sup> Between 1912 and 1916 the aggregate Wilson vote in these states escalated from 201,913 to 405,797.<sup>21</sup> While it

would be erroneous to suggest that Bryan's presence in these states in September and October, 1916, was the key factor enhancing Wilson's electoral performance, it was more than a coincidence that all 50 counties carried by Bryan in these states in 1908 were won by Wilson in 1916.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it should be emphasized that in four of these states the Nebraskan worked diligently in behalf of successful Democratic candidates for the United States Senate.<sup>23</sup> Finally, all five of these states had accepted woman suffrage and were about to embrace prohibition,<sup>24</sup> two major issues with which Bryan was closely identified both before and after 1916.

It was also likely that Bryan's 1916 efforts were beneficial to Wilson in Missouri and Nebraska, two states which were traditionally isolationist in their sympathies on foreign policy questions. Missouri had cast a majority of its votes for Bryan in 1896 and 1900, and in 1912 Wilson had prevailed there by 122,925 votes. Bryan had accentuated Wilson's determination to keep the nation at peace both at the St. Louis convention in June and during his Missouri campaign tour in October, and in 1916 Wilson carried Missouri by only 28,694 votes.<sup>25</sup> Nebraska, of course, was Bryan's home state and political base. In 1916 Wilson won Nebraska by a 41,056 majority, a slight improvement over his 1912 plurality of 36,217.<sup>26</sup> Since Bryan campaigned vigorously in Nebraska both for the President's reelection and the adoption of a statewide prohibition referendum, the outcome of the 1916 contest there was generally interpreted as a vindication of his political leadership. Indeed both the magnitude of the President's triumph and the favorable result of the prohibition referendum contrasted sharply with the more modest victory of Senator Gilbert M. Hitchcock, Bryan's principal rival within the ranks of Nebraska's factionalized Democratic Party.<sup>27</sup> Most significant, however, was the fact that all but seven of the 109 Missouri and Nebraska counties carried by Bryan in 1908 delivered majorities for Wilson in 1916.<sup>28</sup>

Bryan's efforts to facilitate Wilson's reelection were unproductive in Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa, four important midwestern states which the Nebraskan had lost in all three of his bids for the White House. These four states had never been partial to Bryan, and a review of the 1896, 1900, and 1908 election figures disclosed that Bryan's average pro-

portions of the votes in these states had varied from a low of 36.6 percent in Wisconsin to a high of 42.1 percent in Illinois.<sup>29</sup> Although Wilson improved somewhat over his weak 1912 showing in Michigan, he still lost that state in 1916 by 53,939 votes.<sup>30</sup> In Illinois, the President was vanquished by Hughes, polling 202,320 less votes than his Republican challenger.<sup>31</sup> Wilson's 1912 victory of 33,634 in Wisconsin was followed in 1916 by a defeat of 29,459.<sup>32</sup> In Iowa Wilson had secured a 23,503 plurality of the popular ballots in 1912, but in 1916 he experienced the humiliation of trailing Hughes by 58,740 votes.<sup>33</sup> Michigan and Illinois, as basically urban and industrial states, were simply not attuned to the populist rhetoric of Bryan, while Wisconsin and Iowa were states which had been consistently aligned with Republican presidential candidates since 1860.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, none of these states had adopted either woman suffrage or prohibition. Altogether in 1916 Wilson lost 80 of the 153 Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa counties which he had carried in 1912.<sup>35</sup> Even under more auspicious circumstances, Bryan would have faced a formidable task in reversing the enormous decline in the 1912 Wilson vote and his previous series of conspicuous electoral failures in these states hardly made the 1916 results surprising.

On November 7, 1916, Woodrow Wilson out-pollled Charles Evans Hughes narrowly, 9,127,695 to 8,553,507 (51.6 percent) in the popular vote and 277-254 in the electoral college.<sup>36</sup> The President's victory was accomplished by the fact that he carried 10 of the 11 western states, including all five in which Bryan had actually campaigned. While it would be admittedly presumptuous to credit Bryan with Wilson's popular majority, it was highly probable that the Nebraskan's energetic campaigning added tens of thousands of votes to the Wilson column. Also, Bryan certainly assisted Wilson in gaining the electoral votes of such closely contested states as Nevada, Wyoming, and Missouri, where a shift of 20,013 ballots would have provided Hughes with an additional 24 electoral votes. While Wilson undoubtedly would have won Utah, Montana, Colorado, and Nebraska without Bryan's intervention, it was reassuring for the President to know that Bryan was campaigning so effectively in these states. It was difficult to gauge whether Bryan helped or harmed Wilson in Michigan, Illinois,

Wisconsin, and Iowa, but these states almost certainly would have supported Hughes under any conditions.

Such respected scholars as Arthur S. Link, Paolo E. Coletta, and Lawrence W. Levine believed that Bryan was a definite asset to the 1916 Wilson campaign. According to these historians, many Democratic leaders in the West and Midwest were overwhelmed by Bryan's eloquent speeches as well as the enthusiasm he generated.<sup>37</sup> In a September 28 letter to Bryan Wilson asserted:

I cannot refrain from dropping you at least a line to express my admiration of the admirable campaign you are conducting. It is, of



"The Reports of His Political Death Seem to Have Been Exaggerated," December 8, 1916, by cartoonist John Tinney McCutcheon.

course, nothing novel to see you show your strength in this way, but I feel so sincerely appreciative of your efforts in the interest of what we all feel to be the people's cause that I must let you know with what deep interest I am looking on.

The Presidential campaign of 1916 was another episode in the long and exciting political career of William Jennings Bryan. While Bryan had never experienced the thrill of victory in a national campaign, he sensed that his efforts in behalf of President Wilson had been salutary both to his own image as a dynamic American political leader and the overall welfare of the Democratic Party.

## NOTES

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2. Patrick Devlin, *Too Proud to Fight: Woodrow Wilson's Neutrality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 287-298; Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Struggle for Neutrality, 1914-1915* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 410-423; Ernest R. May, *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 148-155; Charles C. Tansill, *America Goes to War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1938), 322-339.
3. *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1916* (Saint Louis: 1916); *St. Louis (Missouri) Post-Dispatch*, June 16, 1916.
4. *New York Times*, August 4, 1916.
5. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 11, 1916; *Washington (DC) Post*, August 12, 1916; *New York Times*, August 12, 1916.
6. *New York Times*, September 9, 1916.
7. *Nevada State Journal* (Reno), September 19, 1916.
8. *Wyoming State Tribune* (Cheyenne), September 22, 1916.
9. *Butte (Montana) Miner*, September 24, 26, 1916.
10. *Denver (Colorado) Post*, October 14, 1916, 1, 3, October 15, 1916.
11. *Des Moines (Iowa) Register*, October 1, 1916.
12. *St. Louis (Missouri) Post-Dispatch*, October 17, 18, 1916.
13. *Grand Rapids (Michigan) Herald*, October 25, 1916; *Kalamazoo (Michigan) Gazette-Telegraph*, October 25, 1916.
14. *Milwaukee Journal*, October 27, 1916.
15. *Chicago Tribune*, October 27, 1916.
16. *Washington (DC) Post*, October 21, 1916, 1; *New York Times*, October 21, 1916.
17. Svend Petersen, *A Statistical History of the American Presidential Elections* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1963), 78, 81; *Denver Post*, November 8, 1916.
18. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 78, 81.

19. *Ibid.*; T. A. Larson, *History of Wyoming* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 328, 390-391.
20. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 78, 81.
21. While Wilson's aggregate vote in Nevada, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, and Utah increased by 100.9 percent between 1912 and 1916, his nation-wide total increased by only 44.9 percent.
22. Edgar E. Robinson, *The Presidential Vote, 1896-1932* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1934), 150-155, 256-261, 268-270, 350-352, 377-379.
23. Colorado did not have a Senate contest in 1916. Elected to the Senate that year were Democrats Key Pittman of Nevada, Henry L. Myers of Montana, John B. Kendrick of Wyoming, and William H. King of Utah. *Guide to U. S. Elections* (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 1975), 497, 498, 506, 509.
24. The dates for adoption of woman suffrage were: Nevada 1914, Colorado 1893, Montana 1914, Wyoming 1890, Utah 1896. The dates for state-wide prohibition were: Nevada 1918, Colorado 1916, Montana 1918, Wyoming 1919, Utah 1917.
25. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 81; Edwin C. McReynolds, *Missouri: A History of the Crossroads State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 328-329; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, November 8, 1916.
26. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 81; James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 246-247.
27. The prohibition referendum was victorious by 39,042 votes, while Hitchcock won his Senate race by 11,723 votes.
28. *Presidential Vote, 1896-1932*, 247-256, 261-268.
29. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 65, 68, 76.
30. *Ibid.*, 78, 81.
31. *Ibid.*; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 8, 1916.
32. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 78, 81; *Milwaukee Journal*, November 8, 1916, 1, 7.
33. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 78, 81; Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), 249-250.
34. Between 1860 and 1908 Iowa had voted Republican in every national election, while during the same period Wisconsin had favored the Democratic presidential candidate only in 1892. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 37, 40, 42, 43, 46, 49, 52, 55, 60, 64, 67, 70, 74.
35. *Presidential Vote, 1896-1932*, 177-185, 192-200, 228-234, 371-377.
36. *Statistical History of Presidential Elections*, 78.
37. Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 1915-1916* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 109-110; Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan, Political Puritan, 1915-1925* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 40-42; Lawrence W. Levine, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan, The Last Decade* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 79-80.