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Article Title: Will the Real Progressive Stand Up? William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt to 1909

Full Citation: Paolo E Coletta, "Will the Real Progressive Stand Up? William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt to 1909," *Nebraska History* 65 (1984): 15-57

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1984Progressive.pdf>

Date: 12/16/2013

Article Summary: Bryan did not win high political office, but he served as an effective opposition leader during the Roosevelt years. He diagnosed social ills that he was not able to cure. He deserves credit for having demanded years earlier every reform that Roosevelt obtained.

Cataloging Information:

Names: William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, William McKinley, Alton B Parker, William Randolph Hearst, Thomas Fortune Ryan, George Brinton McClellan Jr, Grover Cleveland, Robert LaFollette, William Howard Taft, Joseph Pulitzer, Charles Wayland Bryan, Charles N Haskell, Samuel Gompers

Place Names: Havana, Cuba; the Philippines

Reforms Supported by Bryan: tariff, trusts, currency, railroad regulation, banking, income tax, labor, direct elections

Keywords: William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, free silver, Democrats, Populists, Silver Republicans, Nebraska National Guard, Treaty of Paris, Thomas Platt, Richard Croker, *The Commoner*, Social Gospel, "Square Deal," Civil Service, gold standard, Charles N Haskell, Standard Oil

Photographs / Images: Bryan feeding a press to begin publication of *The Commoner*, published in Lincoln 1901-1923; Theodore Roosevelt reviewing the Atlantic fleet in 1903; Roosevelt and other Rough Riders at Santiago de Cuba during the Spanish American War; Senator John W Kern of Indiana; *Spokane* (Washington) *Spokesman-Review* cartoon about the presidential election of 1908

Will the Real Progressive Stand Up? William Jennings Bryan and Theodore Roosevelt to 1909

By Paolo E. Coletta

A congenital Democrat experienced with agricultural depression in Illinois in the 1870s and Nebraska in the 1890s, William Jennings Bryan understood the bucolic character but had no knowledge of business, labor or finance. Mellifluous of voice, pure in speech, robust as an ox yet pacific in temperament, he incessantly sought converts to his belief that government should eschew laissez faire and insure economic as well as political equality for all and depended upon his beloved common man to obtain reforms by collective action. A precocious weakling who overcame his physical frailty, an omnivorously curious Harvard product, Theodore Roosevelt ascribed to the "strenuous life" and the "soldierly and . . . heroic virtues," and at first supported a conservative Republicanism representing the industrial and financial world of the Eastern seaboard. He feared the mob and distrusted "sentimental humanitarians" and "the idiot variety of 'Goo-Goos.' "

Bryan became a politician because he would serve the people, Roosevelt because he "intended to be one of the governing class." ¹ Bryan failed to win political office in the Republican town of Jacksonville, Illinois, where he practiced law during the years 1884-1887. Roosevelt, however, in 1881 was elected assemblyman from one of the few Republican districts in Tammany's Manhattan and became the minority leader in 1884. He had no ideological program, no real sympathy for labor, dropped his membership in the New York Free Trade Club after two years, and believed that social justice should be provided "from above." Nevertheless, he promised to carry "private morality into public office" and almost broke with his party because of the nomination as presidential candidate of

James G. Blaine.² After an interval of ranch life in South Dakota following the death of his wife and mother on the same day, he returned to politics by running unsuccessfully in 1886 for mayor of New York City against Henry George and Abram S. Hewitt. He supported Benjamin Harrison in 1888 and condemned Grover Cleveland and his low tariff. Weary of private life, he grasped eagerly at an appointment to the Civil Service Commission. After serving for six years, 1889-1895, the last two years under Cleveland, he retired to become head of the police board of New York City, 1895-1897. In both posts he made headlines in the nation's press and gained invaluable administrative experience. More important, in New York he became keenly aware of social problems and by seeking social reforms earned a larger measure of ill will than heretofore from the Thomas Platt machine.

From 1887 to 1890 in Nebraska, Bryan campaigned for others. Bread cast upon the waters returned in the form of a nomination for Congress in 1890. Unlike Roosevelt, he had an ideology and a specific program: he sympathized with the debt-ridden farmer; was friendly toward labor; distrusted big business; and sought social justice through direct elections, an income tax, tariff, banking, and currency reforms, and a more democratic and less costly government at Washington.³

Bryan and Roosevelt lived in Washington, 1891-1895, and knew of each other. Had they met, they would have argued interminably, for Roosevelt championed civil service and Bryan the Jacksonian policy of rotation in office; Roosevelt supported a protective tariff while Bryan won his first national headlines with speeches on a tariff for revenue only and for a graduated income tax; Roosevelt favored gold, Bryan silver.

With an uncommon ability to sense the aspirations, mirror the mind, and articulate the emotions of the common man, Bryan uniquely voiced the suspiciousness and hostility of the "producing" classes toward the capitalistic East which "conspired" with Europe against them. Nominated by the Democrats in 1896 in what Roosevelt called the "Witches' Sabbath" at Chicago, and endorsed by the Populists, the silver Republicans, the National Silver Party, and many splinter groups, he posed a mighty challenge to the mercantile, manufacturing, and financial community by daringly inviting voters to use the ballot box to obtain economic as well as political reforms.

Bryan was defeated by Mark Hanna rather than by William McKinley, but Roosevelt played a part. The Democrats had done well to make free silver the issue, Roosevelt asserted, for "there is not a crook or criminal in the entire country who ought not to support them." ⁴ He thought it fit that "with the demand for free silver should go the demand for free riot." The Chicago platform's criticism of the Supreme Court's decision adverse to the income tax was "an attack upon the main defense of our liberties." ⁵ When the dread hour came, the leaders plotting a social revolution and the subversion of the American Republic would find him "at the head of my regiment." ⁶ Sweeping charges, irresponsible assertions, and extremism in speech remained Rooseveltian characteristics throughout life. While Bryan was heard by about three million persons, Roosevelt hammered home the theme that men should not vote for the "preposterous farrago of sinister nonsense" emitted by an "amiable and windy demagogue," and his letters teemed with references to "Bryanism" as "ugly," "criminal," "vicious," "a real and ugly danger," "a genuine and dangerous fanaticism," "a semi-socialistic, agrarian movement." ⁷ He later asserted that, by frightening capital too much, Bryan drove those who feared him into the arms of his opponents, thereby "immensely strengthening the position of the beneficiaries of reaction." ⁸

Bryan was by nature a preacher and exhorter rather than a statesman, a missionary who sought to change men, a political evangelist who sincerely believed that progress could be achieved with the aid of the very masses conservatives despised. He differed from most progressives, who enjoyed no feeling of mystical religion, by valuing Christianity because it gave to life the possibility of "an unending struggle upward, with no limit to human advancement or development." ⁹ Although Hanna pitted cold cash against him and won, he had captured the leadership of a great political party, revitalized it, and used it to challenge the recipients of special legislative privilege and their political agents who had ruled the country since the Civil War.

II

McKinley's administration pleased neither Bryan nor Roosevelt. Bryan was unhappy because McKinley raised the

tariff schedules, blessed the rapid growth of gigantic industrial and financial consolidations, declined to prosecute trusts or end the use of labor injunctions, turned deaf ears to demands that nominations and elections be made more directly responsive to the popular will, and adopted the gold standard. Though he preferred McKinley to Bryan, Roosevelt believed McKinley too weak to be relied upon in a "serious crisis, whether it took the form of a soft-money craze, a gigantic labor riot, or danger of a foreign conflict,"¹⁰ and indicated that he was "personally realizing all of Brooks Adams' gloomiest anticipations of our gold-ridden, capitalist-beastridden, usurer-mastered future."¹¹ For the next decade, however, times were fairly prosperous. The tariff ceased to be a public issue and, except to Bryan and a few friends, so did free silver.

Unwilling to accept new issues lest he admit that those of 1896 were "wrong," Bryan concentrated on silver even after the Cuban issue began to force itself upon him.¹² He directed the leaders of the three reform parties—Democratic, Populist, and silver Republican—to adopt common principles and in their name, on February 15, 1898, issued a call for a renewed charge that would sweep them to victory in 1900. A few hours later news arrived that the *Maine* had been sunk in Havana Harbor.

"The truth is," McKinley had complained to William Howard Taft after election day in 1896, "Roosevelt is always in such a state of mind."¹³ Yet he bowed before pressure applied by important friends of Roosevelt and appointed him Assistant Secretary of the Navy. While Roosevelt concluded that "the *Maine* was sunk by an act of dirty treachery on the part of the Spaniards,"¹⁴ both Bryan and McKinley asked the public to suspend judgment until the truth was known about her sinking. Roosevelt told McKinley in person that war alone was "compatible with national honor"¹⁵ and Bryan suddenly did an about face and called for the support of "any action necessary for the protection of the honor and welfare of the nation."¹⁶ Although McKinley's war message in effect suppressed data on Spain's capitulation to his demands for a settlement with Cuba, Bryan had let himself be swept away in demanding war.

In offering his services, Bryan became as much a problem to

McKinley as Roosevelt would be to Woodrow Wilson in 1917. Suspecting that McKinley was stalling him, Bryan joined the Nebraska National Guard as a private, and when Nebraska's governor authorized the raising of three volunteer regiments he was elected colonel of the Third amidst speculation that McKinley would maroon him so that he could gain no military glory that would be useful to him politically. However, in a speech on "Imperialism" he set forth policies to follow in ending the war. Rather than seek the dubious splendor of empire by acquiring the Philippines, he advised the maintenance of a democratic government at home and asserted that he would resign from the Volunteers if ordered to extend American sovereignty to overseas territory. Critics hailed his announcement as portending an "anti-imperialism" campaign in 1900,¹⁷ and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, major exponent of the "large policy," wrote Roosevelt: "Bryan has announced that he is against colonization. . . . We shall sweep the country on that issue in my judgment. Republican conventions are all declaring that where the flag goes up it must never come down."¹⁸ Lodge was right. Thrilled with visions of a New Destiny, the American people derided Bryan's warnings of the dangers to democracy involved in imperialism.

In volunteering for war, Bryan had brushed aside friends who feared for his life, who believed that the Democratic Party would flounder without his leadership, or who predicted that a Republican military hero would emerge to oppose him in 1900. Roosevelt also had volunteered, but in his case "his going into the army led straight to the Presidency."¹⁹ If Roosevelt revealed bravery and recklessness in battle in Cuba, Bryan, in camps in the South, was no less brave or reckless in tending to men ill from typhoid fever and other diseases and in seeking discharges for them. When action in Cuba ended with the fall of Santiago, Roosevelt asked to be sent to Puerto Rico.²⁰ However, by August 15 he had returned to the United States; on September 4 he left his Rough Riders.²¹ On September 23, in a personal meeting in Washington, Bryan told McKinley that his sick men should be mustered out because the issues of the war had changed. "They did not volunteer to attempt to subjugate other peoples, or establish United States sovereignty elsewhere," he said.²² McKinley took his plea under advisement but on October 8 alerted him

for garrison duty in Cuba. Bryan pondered whether he could be more useful in the army or out of it, his uncertainty compounded by ignorance of McKinley's Philippine policy. When friends urged him to drop free silver as an issue for 1900 he replied "No!" with an ardor that appeared insolent to some of them and denied that the war had introduced new issues.²³ He believed that the elections of 1898 did not constitute an endorsement of imperialism,²⁴ but McKinley revealed better political sense than he in detecting that the issue held great promise for victory in 1900.

On December 10, the very day the Treaty of Paris was signed, Bryan forwarded his resignation. His "military lock-jaw" cured, he delivered a long-rehearsed speech in opposition to imperialism. The Senate should approve the treaty, he said, and thereby end the war. Then Congress should decide what the policy of the nation should be on expansion. He believed that the Philippines were too far away and their people too different from ours to be annexed even if the natives so desired.²⁵ Newspaper headlines of the following morning told about "Mr. Bryan's Return to Politics."

Bryan failed to see the incongruity of his helping McKinley ratify the Treaty of Paris and blessed the Augustus Bacon resolution introduced January 24, 1899, that the United States would transfer sovereignty to the Filipinos when they had established a stable and independent government worthy of recognition. Meanwhile, Lodge gathered votes for the treaty without thought of going beyond it to grant the Filipinos independence, and Roosevelt characterized opponents of the treaty as perpetrating "an outrage upon the country."²⁶ Much as he sympathized with the Filipinos, Bryan stated upon learning of the Filipino insurrection begun on February 4, that American soldiers must of course defend American interests until a Philippine policy was determined. The vote on the treaty, taken on February 6, was 57 to 27, just one more than the necessary two thirds. Bryan probably influenced the votes of two senators, not of 17, as so often alleged. Roosevelt gave credit for passage of the treaty "partly to the Senate, partly to Providence, and partly to the Filipinos." Neither he, McKinley, nor Lodge gave Bryan any credit, even though Bryan had in effect crowned their success, for the treaty, as they desired, was ratified, but the Congress refused to free the Philippines.²⁷

Bryan had hoped that ratification would bury the question of imperialism and free him to campaign in 1900 on the issues left unsettled since 1896. Meanwhile Roosevelt made his peace with the Platt machine and then won the governorship of New York by playing up his war record and by charging that a vote for a Democrat was tantamount to treason or at least friendly to Spain and un-American, thereby diverting attention from Republican mismanagement of the war and from canal frauds in the Republican administration of his own state. There was no doubt that the "respectables" were behind him nor that the financial interests of the East contributed to his campaign fund.²⁸

III

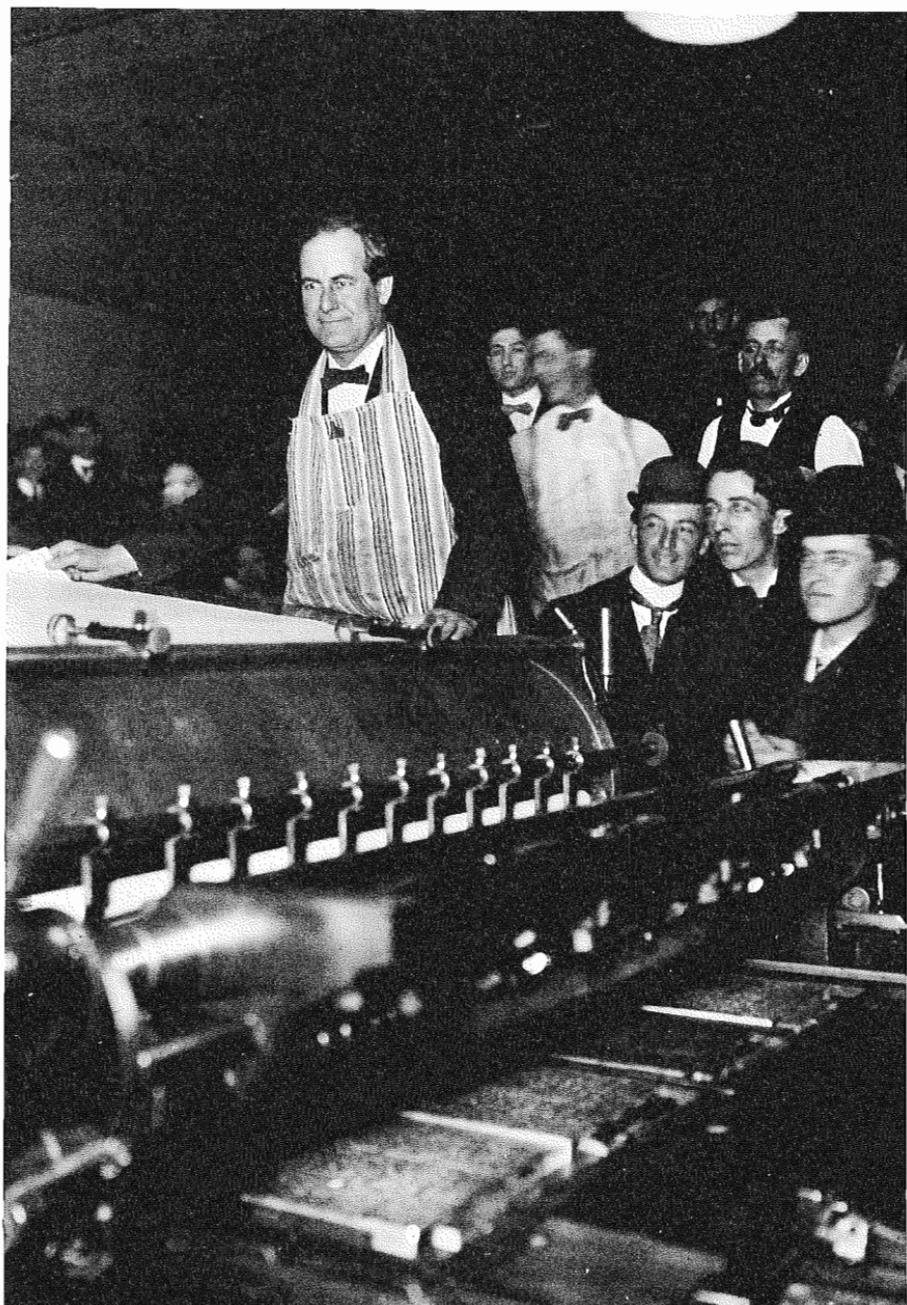
Roosevelt appeared to be radical because he was loud, but as governor he took the middle-of-the-road between the right and left. By compromising with expediency without completely nullifying his principles, he avoided alienating important supporters. He preferred a second term to the vice presidency, but Boss Platt thought otherwise, as did Matthew Quay and Boies Penrose, who overrode national chairman Hanna's foreboding that there would be "only one life between that madman and the White House."²⁹

When Hanna informed Roosevelt that he must bear the oratorical burden of the campaign of 1900, he replied that he did not wish to appear as a "second-class Bryan" by making too many speeches.³⁰ At first he worried about defeating Bryan, who was renominated in July by all the anti-McKinley parties worth mentioning and whom he thought stronger than in 1896. However, Bryan could not arouse the people by reciting the wrongs being committed in the Philippines. Roosevelt complained to Lodge that "there is not the slightest enthusiasm for Bryan but there is no enthusiasm for us and there seems to be no fear of Bryan" and predicted a falling off of the Republican vote in the East, an increase in the West, and "very much the same fight in the Middle West we had in '96, with much the same result."³¹ Bryan concentrated on anti-imperialism and the Republican full dinner pail argument. However, Boss Richard Croker burdened him with a deadweight gubernatorial candidate in New York. Moreover, by aligning himself with one of the most infamous figures in

American society he lost support among the moral-minded. Roosevelt waxed sarcastic, saying, "Bryan has just moved into my own state to try to help that apostle of political purity . . . Croker, to get control of the state government and bring it down to the level of infamy to which he has reduced the government of New York City." ³²

As in the last month of the campaign of 1896, both sides now increased their mudslinging. Bryan charged that the Republicans "will buy every vote that can be bought . . . coerce every laboring man who can be intimidated . . . bribe every election judge who can be bribed . . . corrupt every court that can be corrupted." ³³ His opponents spoke of his sinister agitation to excite class hatred, his appeals to the envy and passion of the ignorant, and his stirring up of discontent and resentment on the part of the laboring man and the farmer against the employer and the well-to-do. "What a thorough paced hypocrite and demagogue he is, and what a small man," Roosevelt wrote Lodge. ³⁴ Nevertheless, Roosevelt's fear of Bryan drove him to campaign even more strenuously than the Commoner. Bryan lacked Roosevelt's inexhaustible vocabulary of vilification, and Roosevelt attracted thousands who wanted to see "Teddy of San Juan Hill," the man who had been "alone in Cuba" and "single-handed whipped Spain to a frazzle." Roosevelt thus greatly aided McKinley in winning the largest electoral vote given a Republican since 1872 and also a Republican-controlled Congress. Yet Bryan's party, not himself, was defeated. His call for income and inheritance taxes, abolition of government by injunction, approval of the labor boycott, sharp reduction in the tariff, strict control of banks, railroads, and industrial corporations attempting or exercising monopoly control, changes in the currency and banking systems that benefited the agrarian community, sweeping changes in the order of procedure of the House, the direct election of senators, direct primaries and direct legislation, pure food and drug laws, and modifications of the Supreme Court's powers were all accomplished within his lifetime, some of them under President Roosevelt.

Roosevelt presided over the Senate for four days, March 5-9, 1901. When the Senate met again he was President. Bryan, meanwhile, in his small weekly journal of opinion, *The Commoner*, on the stump, and on the lecture platform con-



William Jennings Bryan feeds a press to begin publication of the Commoner, published in Lincoln from 1901 to 1923.

tinued in agitation the economic and political issues left unsettled since 1896. In addition he confessed that he had been slack in serving God and began trying to win skeptics to Christ, or at least to his concept of Christian ethics. To this end he prepared "The Prince of Peace" and inserted a defense of Christianity into other lectures, as in "The Value of an Ideal," and various men have gladly admitted that hearing him determined them to enter into full time Christian work.³⁵

To a degree, Roosevelt believed in the Social Gospel. He disdained the vulgar rich and would have the state control them if they failed to understand the responsibilities of their power. Bryan agreed with the leaders of the moderate wing of the Social Gospel movement in opposing "tainted money."³⁶ Money-making itself could not be made holy because the money would be spent for good causes, he asserted. Indeed, the amassing of riches through special governmental privileges and private monopoly was "a menace to government and civilization." The rich were merely stewards of their wealth and should use it for social purposes, and he decried the "commercial spirit" of the age that resolved every question into "Will it pay?" His cure lay in "an appeal to the moral sense of the country, an awakening of the public conscience," and in the rejection by schools and churches of gifts from men like John D. Rockefeller who had acquired their riches illegally or immorally.

Thus Bryan offered more than mere political leadership. If, as the masses believed, the government was slipping away from them into the hands of powerful commercial interests, if imperialism was a costly crusade for political and financial spoil, if the tariff was the mother of trusts, if commercialism debauched municipal, state, and national governments and tainted money corrupted education and religion, then Bryan peculiarly represented the forces that sought to overthrow those who would turn government into a commercial asset.

Leon Czolgosz's assassination of President McKinley in 1901 opened the Roosevelt era, one of profound change for the presidency, for the United States, and for Bryan. In 1901 Roosevelt's economic philosophy lagged behind that of Hanna, even that of McKinley, and his announcement that he would follow McKinley's policies reassured businessmen who recalled his reformist action as assemblyman and governor. He

originally busied himself with means rather than ends, for he must answer the reform demands of the Middle Western agrarians and of Eastern urban progressives and yet administer the government in such a way that dissident elements within his party would not be offended and, above all, would support him for a full term. "Political expediency draws the line," he once said.³⁷

Bryan saw the democratic process as an end in itself, Roosevelt as merely a means of obtaining good government. Bryan presented a graphic reform program; Roosevelt sold the voters the idea that he would be fair, would give them a "Square Deal." Bryan relied mainly upon himself for judgments and was suspicious not only of "the plutocracy of wealth" but of the intelligentsia, of the "aristocracy of learning" whom he labeled "the scientific soviet," and thanked God "for the democracy of the heart."³⁸ Roosevelt sought and valued expert opinion, hence was the more intelligent and realistic. Both spoke much of righteousness, with Roosevelt, who found the White House a "bully pulpit," priding himself somewhat boorishly on the fact that "my problems are moral problems, and my teaching has been plain morality."³⁹ Since Bryan stuck to principle and Roosevelt compromised without being unethical, Roosevelt proved to be the better politician, a "skillful broker of the possible."⁴⁰

As energetic as Roosevelt, Bryan was nevertheless the more serene spirit. Roosevelt had a deep social consciousness and quick sense of obligation for the unfortunate but had no sense of divine purpose. Although he read his Bible and stood perpetually at Armageddon, he attended church only to "set an example." As a follower of Darwin and Huxley he saw life as perpetual strife and once confessed that his religion was encompassed in the line from St. James, "I will show my faith by my works."⁴¹ Bryan believed strongly in a guiding and protecting power and in the efficacy of prayer; he had such a firm faith in the inspiration of the Bible that its miracles did not perplex him.

Moreover, Bryan was an Atomist and Roosevelt a Regulationist. Bryan would smash all business monopolies; Roosevelt distinguished between "good" and "bad" trusts and would forbid only the latter. Roosevelt would draw capital and labor together by dealing justly with each; Bryan favored the in-

dividual entrepreneur and the labor union over the corporation. Roosevelt would make the presidency the vital branch of the government, Bryan the Congress. Bryan wanted the Supreme Court to reflect the convictions of the people; Roosevelt wanted it to reflect, as far as possible, the convictions of the president. Roosevelt wanted judges who knew the law; Bryan wanted judges who understood the failings of men. Roosevelt avoided controversial questions like tariff revision and currency and banking reforms, for he was not only ignorant of but was intellectually snobbish toward economics; whereas Bryan, although no economist, insisted that political equality could not be achieved without an egalitarian economic base. Bryan was more optimistic than Roosevelt in believing that altruism was a more potent motivating force than self-interest, that education and moral training could improve human character, and that the average man was a moral political agent capable of providing adequate self-government.⁴²

Bryan demanded reform "now" and dared Roosevelt to be a progressive. Both were at a disadvantage, however. Bryan had the "reorganizers," or conservative Democrats, against him and could not speak for a united party. The Democratic minority in Congress lacked both cohesion and effective leadership. After 1900, radical western representatives tended to be Republicans, southern Democrats largely remained conservative, and northern and eastern Democrats split and fought for office rather than for principles. Roosevelt in turn was caught between a group of Republican reform governors and mayors and the Republican insurgents in Congress on the one hand, and the powerful, conservative Big Four cabal and, after December, 1902, Speaker Joseph G. Cannon on the other. Moreover, if Roosevelt became a reformer, Bryan would have to become increasingly radical. Bryan later asserted that Roosevelt stole the lance with which he had twice campaigned; more bluntly, Vachel Lindsay declared that Roosevelt "cursed Bryan and then aped his ways." It is paradoxical that Bryan, who had gone twice to defeat leading a liberal Democratic-Populist coalition, should find his reforms adopted by a patrician turned progressive and that a Republican should provide the leadership that welded sectionally impotent agrarian and urban reform groups into a nationally powerful Progressive Movement.

Never has a twice-defeated candidate so ably and conscientiously performed the task of leader of the opposition as Bryan. He stated that he had no disposition to prejudge—but in his next breath he said that Roosevelt's inviting of Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House was "unfortunate," for it would give "depth and acrimony to a race feeling already strained to the uttermost,"⁴³ and he soon began to offer advice. Roosevelt should devote his "strenuous life" to making his administration honest and efficient rather than waste effort in seeking the nomination in 1904. If he ran he would antagonize the great corporations whose contributions were so helpful in campaigns and also have to placate the financiers who insisted upon controlling the financial policy of his Administration. He had to decide between himself and the people. Which road would he take?⁴⁴

Perhaps with Hanna's advice to "Go slow" in mind, Roosevelt rode the fence in his first message on matters of greatest concern to Bryan. Organized labor was entitled to protection but must not be allowed to abuse its privileges. Perhaps the tariff should be lowered, but not at the expense of industry. The granting of rebates by railroads must be halted, but instead of real trust control he recommended compulsory publicity of corporate activity and the creation of a Department of Commerce with a Bureau of Corporations that would merely investigate corporate earnings. Moreover, he demanded a merchant marine subsidy program and supported Nelson A. Aldrich's "flexible currency" bill. Bryan was dissatisfied with Roosevelt's negative and defensive attitude toward reform. Given two considerations, one of which could do more political damage than the other, Roosevelt chose to reform the lesser evil rather than to eradicate the causes of the evils.⁴⁵ However, like many others Bryan failed to see the sincerity of Roosevelt's demand for national control of corporations too powerful for the states to regulate.

Bryan charged that Roosevelt's justice and treasury departments would "be run according to the wishes of Wall Street" and that he was playing politics by appointing to office some men he had declared unfit for public service while he had been a Civil Service commissioner. Unhappy with the "Morganization of America," he was not silenced even by Roosevelt's suit against the Northern Securities Company, saying that the

President should attack other trusts too, especially the Beef Trust (which Roosevelt soon did) and institute criminal as well as civil proceedings against them.⁴⁶ He also perceived some truth in the rumor that a Senate cabal had offered Roosevelt a free hand in everything else if he would leave economic and financial policy to Senator Aldrich. But Roosevelt was not so naive as to institute criminal proceedings against corporation directors on the eve of his national convention, and he awaited his election before taking real action against the trusts.

Bryan was also disgusted with Roosevelt's straddling of the tariff issue, but as with the trusts Roosevelt beat a strategic retreat from a question he knew contained dynamite. The year before the presidential election would be "a most unwise one in which to enter upon a general upsetting of the tariff," he wrote Lodge on April 27, 1903.⁴⁷ If he finally heeded Bryan's advice to intervene in the coal strike of 1902 and settle it by arbitration, his attitude on currency reform was marked by extreme circumspection rather than mere caution, for he well knew that neither Aldrich nor Speaker Cannon was disposed to obtain real monetary reform.

Having undertaken the most strenuous stumping tours ever attempted by a President, having won business to his side by slowing down his trust-busting, having routed Hanna's organization by the astute use of patronage, and having more delegates pledged to his support than he needed, Roosevelt left his national convention only the task of nominating him and his choice for vice president. Corporate contributions comprised almost 75 per cent of all gifts to his campaign chest, but he was wise enough to order the return of Standard Oil's \$100,000. Oliver Wendell Holmes once characterized him as a "pretty unscrupulous politician,"⁴⁸ and a recent biographer has stated that his success in winning the nomination for himself "revealed that ruthlessness and low cunning that made him the master politician of his age and one of the masters of all ages."⁴⁹

As Roosevelt's power approached its zenith in the years 1901-1904, Bryan's shrank to a low point. Bryan had announced immediately after the election of 1900 that he would not be a candidate in 1904⁵⁰ but insisted that "we must continue to do our duty as we see it, regardless of temporary reverses" and that the contest between plutocracy and

democracy would continue until one or the other triumphed.⁵¹ It was morally certain that a conservative would be named at St. Louis; it was equally certain that his own oratory and parliamentary skill would make him a formidable foe. The most repugnant aspirant to him was Judge Alton B. Parker, to whom he objected because he lacked political record, refused to state his convictions on current public issues, had spent 20 years on the bench but revealed no qualifications as an executive, and was supported by Cleveland and by the trusts and corporations. Hence he was "the muzzled candidate of Wall Street."⁵² He failed to see, as Parker did, that his objecting to so many aspirants forced state leaders to concentrate on the only two he had not eliminated, Parker and William Randolph Hearst. But the reorganizers were also troubled, for they appeared to be the pro-corporation party and the "square dealing" Republicans the anti-trust party. Paradoxically, they sought to repudiate Bryan's tariff, trust, and money issues and simultaneously condemn Roosevelt's Administration.

At Chicago on June 21 the Republicans named Roosevelt and Charles W. Fairbanks. According to Bryan, Roosevelt's platform contained only one emphatic plank, that which rebuked the tariff revisionists, and he found no encouragement for the laboring man or for the Filipino in the Republican pronouncements.⁵³

At St. Louis on July 4, when Bryan offered a platform that demanded a volume of standard money equal to the people's needs and paper money issued by the government without the intervention of national banks, reorganizers countered that the gold standard was not an issue of the campaign and that the convention should accept the "double verdict" of his defeats in 1896 and 1900. Leaders from all sections who tried to convince him to drop currency reform were driven to despair by his obduracy even if they admired his consistency as a reformer.

Bryan fought two wars, one against Roosevelt, one against the reorganizers. "Roosevelt's imperialistic ideas and his imperialistic methods, his refusal to enforce the law against men of great wealth who conspire against their country and its statutes, his subserviency to Wall Street, and his willingness to mortgage his administration to the great corporations in order to secure a second term—these ought to lead to his defeat in-

the coming election," he asserted.⁵⁴ But he refused to heal the split in his party, saying that the reorganizers could produce neither a satisfactory statement of principles nor an acceptable candidate.

Hearst alone competed with Parker, but Bryan declined to endorse Hearst because he had purchased or intimidated delegates, was not part of the progressive movement, and his personal life was "a sewer laid open." Nevertheless, because of his personal feud with the John P. Hopkins-Roger Sullivan machine in Illinois, Bryan offered to support his contesting delegation at St. Louis. While he said that he must do so to block the naming of a conservative candidate, it is possible that he hoped to create a deadlock from which he would emerge as a compromise candidate. In any event, to obtain a platform that would not sacrifice what he had fought for since 1896 and a candidate acceptable to those who had supported him twice, he fought an historic fight and stemmed the serious attempt by the conservatives to dominate the progressive Democrats. He thereby "kept the faith."

By overturning the majority against him in St. Louis Bryan proved his continuing political vitality. He kept a gold plank out of the platform and obtained a concensus which both he and David Bennett Hill, Parker's manager, could accept without too much grimacing and which was accepted unanimously by the convention. But the delegates refused his demand to reject Parker, and Parker created a frenetic uproar by telegraphing that he would not run on a platform that did not assert that "the gold standard is irrevocably established by law. . . ." Since the money question was not an issue, replied his friends, there was no reason why he could not run on the platform as written, and the delegates voted down Bryan's amendments to the money plank that would have caused Parker to go on record on various aspects of the currency question.

Although reviled and despised by the reorganizers,⁵⁵ Bryan was the towering figure in the convention. Another was the candidate, but he had recaptured the popular imagination and could re-establish his primacy under more favorable circumstances. Cleveland and his friends cheered the elimination of "Bryan and Bryanism . . . as influential factors in Democratic councils, " ⁵⁶ yet there was really little popular

enthusiasm for Parker. No Democrat, let alone Parker, could have been elected in 1904, for the country had "gone Rooseveltian," and Bryan appeared to be aiding Roosevelt by characterizing Parker as a plutocrat undeserving of the support of regenerated Democrats. Nevertheless, he said that he would vote for Parker rather than Roosevelt because the President was injecting the race issue into politics, stood for the spirit of war, was an imperialist, and favored a large army.

Within a week of Parker's nomination Bryan sought supporters in 1908 of "a radical and progressive policy to make the Democratic party an efficient means in the hands of the people for securing relief from the plutocratic element that controls the Republican party, and for the time being is in control of the Democratic party."⁵⁷ The need for bimetallism had passed, he admitted; his "radical changes" included the government ownership of railroads and control of telegraphs, the income tax, the election of federal judges by the people, and the public ownership of municipal franchises. The reorganizers, of course, deemed his new departure socialistic and dangerous and charged him with treachery by seeking to keep the South and West as his personal political preserve. Not until September, long after he had recuperated from pneumonia contracted in St. Louis, did he stump, and then to attack Roosevelt rather than laud Parker. Only at the end of the campaign, when Parker charged Roosevelt with tapping corporations for campaign funds and Roosevelt branded him a liar, did sparks fly between the candidates. It was evident that Bryan wished Parker to win only because he might remove those issues, like militarism and imperialism, that blocked the way to economic reforms. He rather than Parker drew the crowds, and many wondered whether the applause for him was stimulated by his support for Parker or by his bold new program for 1908.

Roosevelt won the largest victory in Republican history. He admitted that he had been fortunate in having had Parker as his opponent because Bryanites had refused to vote for him.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the protest vote was prophetically large: five states that went for Roosevelt elected Democratic governors, and Eugene Debs' vote quadrupled that of 1900. By refusing to support Thomas Watson, Bryan killed Populism, thereby proving that he was not the Populist he had been painted since

1896. However, the election buried the silver question as an issue too deeply for even Bryan to revive it and proved a political watershed, for many former Bryanites and Populists supported Roosevelt, thus ending a decade of flirting with Democratic-Populist fusion.

Within 24 hours of Parker's defeat Bryan renewed his offer to reorganize the Democracy and make it a positive, aggressive, and progressive reform party. It mattered little who the nominee might be in 1908; circumstances would produce a man especially fitted to carry the banner.⁵⁹ When Parker stated that he would not run again, a widespread demand arose from both reorganizers and Bryanites for Bryan to again exercise party leadership. Thus he rather than Parker became the titular chief of the party, logical candidate for 1908, and leader of the opposition to Roosevelt.

V

Roosevelt's statement that he would not seek re-election led Bryan naively to believe that he would divorce himself from partisan objectives during his "elective" term. He therefore told Roosevelt that he had a "great opportunity" to be a real reformer. Excluding tariff and currency revision, the rest of the reforms demanded in his own bold new program were within reach. He also placed heavy emphasis on a moral creed based upon the principle of "equal rights to all and special privileges to none" and demanded that the Democracy forsake its traditional policy of governmental noninterference and accept a central government strong enough to exorcize special privilege. He was not advocating socialism, he insisted; he favored legislation that would restore, not reduce, competition. The agency to provide "equal rights" was the Congress, which should use its delegated powers to the fullest extent necessary for the protection of human rights and the public welfare.⁶⁰

Roosevelt's December message demanded workmen's compensation laws, the elimination of child labor abuses, the supervision of insurance companies, and laws against corruption in federal elections—enough for those gifted with hindsight to see the germs of the "New Nationalism." Speaker Cannon's saying that "Congress will pass the appropriations bills and mark time" sums up the success of Roosevelt's program.

However, on January 5, 1905, Roosevelt electrified the country with a Bryanesque demand for increasing national power to the point that it could prevent any railroad, industry, or corporation from abusing the interests of the people as a whole. After a personal call upon Roosevelt, Bryan told reporters that he had seen so many "symptoms of reform" in Roosevelt that he wished the Democracy to "forget itself and to help the President carry out whatever is good." It was not only "right" but expedient to support Roosevelt, for remedial legislation would benefit the country and redound to the credit of the Democracy.⁶¹

Since Bryan maintained a cast-iron immobility with respect to his favored reforms, the change in attitude that permitted harmony with Roosevelt must have occurred in Roosevelt. But Roosevelt refused to follow Bryan's advice to support reform legislation at the risk of dividing his party.⁶² However, the revelations of the muckrakers, the growing popularity of the socialist movement, the rise of militant Republican reformers like Robert La Follette, and the persistent influence of Bryan made their mark on Roosevelt, and by mid-1905 Bryan saw that "the light was breaking" upon him.⁶³ Their difference in temperament was revealed at the Gridiron Dinner of 1905. Roosevelt unkindly said that the good things in the Democratic platform were absolutely useless in Bryan's hands because he would never be in position to put them into operation. Bryan replied good naturedly that the Republicans could emerge from the Valley of the Shadow of Death they had entered only if they made their party the champion of human rights and popular government rather than the tool of corporate greed and predatory wealth. "When Republicans can build up a following by adopting Democratic ideas," he concluded, "let no Democrat falter in the fight."⁶⁴

For four more years, while Bryan exhorted his Democratic followers to remain pure in the progressive faith and constant in their demands for a moral awakening that would lead to reforms in all phases of American life,⁶⁵ he also acted as Roosevelt's conscience. Roosevelt must learn to live with his Republican opponents and Bryanite supporters. Moreover, having developed a reform element in the Republican Party, he must lead it or see leadership pass to someone else. He could never go wrong in an "appeal to the people."⁶⁶

While abroad in 1905-1906, Bryan sought new issues that might aid him and feigned surprise that various states had endorsed him for president, for he well knew that his progressive followers were steadily gaining strength. George Harvey's boom for Woodrow Wilson failed either to create popular excitement or to entice Wilson, and Hearst's "radicalism" so shocked old reorganizers that they began to turn toward Bryan. Indeed, were Roosevelt to run again, he would be the "radical" and Bryan the "conservative" candidate.

Bryan played coy about the nomination. When Harvey called and insisted that he discuss matters with Thomas Fortune Ryan, he demurred, fearing that a rumor would spread that he had been Ryanized or that Ryan had been Bryanized. Ryan was so rich that he could not fight for popular supremacy unless he transferred his vast financial interests into government bonds. Were Ryan to do so, Bryan promised that he would support him for president, for his example would be followed by others and a wave of patriotism would sweep the land. If "circumstances" pointed to himself, of course he would respond, but he "honestly hoped" that conditions would make someone else available.⁶⁷

Bryan also played coy with John Sharp Williams and Croker, who begged him to adopt a conservative program in contrast to Roosevelt's "radicalism" and particularly to avoid the issue of nationalizing the railroads.⁶⁸ But he sang a different tune to George Brinton McClellan Jr., who had recently visited Princeton and learned that Cleveland was "not as bitter" as formerly. Bryan spoke for an hour with a conservatism and reasonableness worthy of Cleveland himself, and McClellan left impressed but not taken in by his attempt to win Cleveland over through him.⁶⁹

Bryan's interest in government ownership increased after his witnessing of municipal and state traction and utility systems on the continent and in England and Scotland, but so long as he remained in Europe he kept quiet and appeared to be conservative. He well may have had government ownership in mind when he wrote his brother, Charles Wayland Bryan, that he planned to write while on his return voyage a speech which "I think will not disappoint you."⁷⁰

By the time of Bryan's return to the United States the battle against state and city bosses was in full swing and the



Theodore Roosevelt (seated, center) reviewed the Atlantic Fleet in 1903 with Secretary of the Navy George von L. Meyer (seated at left), yachtsman Sir Thomas Lipton (standing at left), Admiral George Dewey, yacht builder C. O. Iselin, and General Adna R. Chaffee. . . . (Below) Roosevelt (center), a lieutenant colonel of volunteers, and two other Rough Riders at Santiago de Cuba during the Spanish American War. Courtesy of US Naval Institute.



muckrakers and insurgents had begun to unnerve Roosevelt, who confessed that there "had been an era of over-confidence and speculation" that would provoke "reaction"⁷¹ and that "the corruption in business and politics . . . have tended to produce a very unhealthy condition of excitement in the popular mind, which shows itself in the socialistic propaganda."⁷² He realized that Bryan's reforms had large popular backing, yet he refused to admit spiritual kinship with him and never acknowledged that he could not have effected his reforms without the aid of Bryanite congressmen. Asked whether it was true that Roosevelt had caught him in swimming and stolen his clothes, Bryan replied that Roosevelt had not gotten all of them; moreover, he could not quite fill them, as evidenced by his compromising on vital features on important reform measures. Indeed, could he have had his way, the Republican reformer he would most like to see named in 1908 was not Roosevelt but Robert La Follette.⁷³ La Follette had a passionate interest in the humane goals of reform and also a mastery of practical details. Like Bryan, he attacked abuses head on, whereas Roosevelt undertook just enough reform to hush popular complaint yet not enough to drive off the "very rich men" he assumed to despise. Nevertheless, his vociferous language created an image of himself as a reformer and also contributed heavily to the sentiment for reform.⁷⁴

Conservative Democrats who detested Hearst and recalled their miserable failure with Parker in 1904 were ready to hand Bryan the nomination, and the rank and file saw no other acceptable candidate. Strangely enough, much of the recrudescence of Bryan's popularity stemmed from the fact that Roosevelt had taken over his policies but had no adequate progressive successor to offer. Hence Bryan must be chosen because he was his logical heir.⁷⁵ The only strong voice to oppose this logic was that of Joseph Pulitzer, who asserted that Bryan could not be elected and that support for him revealed great devotion but extremely poor sense.⁷⁶

Upon his return to New York amid a huge outpouring of prominent Democrats from all parts of the country, Bryan included a statement on the public ownership of railroads in his Madison Square Garden speech. His thesis was that government ownership would follow if Roosevelt could not obtain railroad rate control and place the Interstate Commerce Com-

mission beyond the pale of political influence. His exact words were that "railroads partake so much of the nature of a monopoly that they must ultimately become public property and be managed by public officials in the interest of the whole community in accordance with the well defined theory that public ownership is necessary where competition is impossible." Fearing overcentralization of the national government, however, he would have only the trunk lines operated by the federal government and local lines by the states. The long speech mentioned a host of progressive reforms, but the opposition press caused readers to believe that he had spoken on government ownership alone and that his suggestion of "ultimate" meant "immediate" nationalization. As with his 16 to 1, he had again split his party. He also smashed the impression that he had grown conservative. Cleveland, for example, spoke of "the recent symptoms of Bryan insanity," and the reorganizers began seeking another candidate, one with special appeal to the states rights South. Roosevelt's attitude toward the railroad question at the time was that "the government ought not to conduct the business of the country; but it ought to regulate it so that it shall be conducted in the interests of the public." "I drew a sigh of relief after reading Bryan's speech," he wrote Lodge on September 24. "I think he has helped us immensely. Down at bottom Bryan is a cheap soul. He felt that he had to take an attitude that would show that he was really a great deal more radical than I was. He did it." ⁷⁷ The Madison Square Garden speech had "dumped him from the heights," he wrote Ambassador Whitelaw Reid in England, "but I don't believe we have heard the last of him. His party is dreadfully hard up for presidential timber, and in reaction from Hearst may come back to him again." ⁷⁸

The most singular occurrence of the years 1904-1906 was not the reacceptance of Bryan as the leader of the Democracy but Roosevelt's pilfering of Bryan's progressive proposals. In 1904 Roosevelt would have denied his affinity with Bryan. In 1906 he said that "we want no more Wall Street civilization" and stopped sneering at his advice on certain matters.⁷⁹ However, Bryan's supporting of Roosevelt whenever he thought him "right" placed him in an anomalous and ambivalent position, for it is the traditional task of the opposition

to offer alternative proposals, not to support administration policy. But he asserted the right of criticism offered the leader of the opposition when he spoke bitterly against a bill providing for asset currency and when he indicated that Roosevelt could avoid government ownership only by obtaining adequate railroad legislation.

Complaining that "I sometimes wish I was not in the White House and could be on the stump and speak frankly," Roosevelt let favorites like William Howard Taft, Elihu Root, and Leonard Wood "set forth the case of the administration" in the campaign of 1906. He was particularly anxious that Taft's speeches be well received, for with what history calls poor judgment he had chosen him as his heir, and Taft began taking Bryan's measure as his most likely opponent in 1908. "Bryan has great crowds, as he always does," Taft wrote Roosevelt late in October, "but it is always a doubtful question whether he does not do more good for the major party than the minority by his trips, for if he puts excitement into the campaign at all, he is likely to bring out the Republicans." ⁸⁰

The elections of 1906 showed a trend toward progressivism in both major parties on both the state and national level, and Roosevelt's annual message agreed so closely with Bryan's progressive program that the press spoke of the "Roosevelt-Bryan Merger." Agreeing with Bryan that the federal government must intervene to solve economic and social problems beyond the scope of state action, Roosevelt adopted Bryan's demand for the federal licensing of all interstate businesses, the federal control of railroads, the physical valuation of railroad property, prohibiting corporations from contributing to political campaigns, the arbitration of industrial disputes, regulating the procedures by which the courts issued injunctions, the federal regulation of corporate securities, an inheritance tax, and pure food and drug legislation. Bryan cheered those items he said Roosevelt had taken from him and criticized him for not going farther with others, as on railroad and trust regulation and tariff and currency reform.

Late in 1906 knowledgeable treasury and Wall Street men predicted a panic, and Roosevelt offered Congress a plan for a more elastic currency—temporary currency issued by the national banks that could be taxed out of existence after the emergency passed. Bryan charged that Roosevelt was "afraid"

to take up real currency reform, but he budged neither Roosevelt nor his conservative congressional leaders, who feared that reform "tinkering" might provoke a panic disastrous to their party.⁸¹ On the other hand, opposition by Aldrich and the rest of the Senate cabal to the Esch-Townshend and Hepburn bills proved the correctness of Bryan's telling Republican Senator William E. Chandler that "your party is entering upon a struggle by the side of which our contest [since 1900] will seem a love feast."⁸² The conservative reaction reached its boiling point when Roosevelt paraphrased Bryan and asserted that he must prevent the growth "of the least attractive and most sordid of all aristocracies," a plutocracy "which regarded power as expressed only by its basest and most brutal form, that of mere money."⁸³

During the 18 months before the national conventions of 1908 Bryan simultaneously engaged in lucrative lecturing, edited his newspaper, organized the Democracy for a national campaign and provided its doctrine, and insured his third nomination. With progressivism permeating the small-town middle classes as well as the farmers of the South and West, he happily noted that "the Chicago platform [of 1896], denounced and laughed at by many, is so grown in favor that a Republican president is winning his greatest popularity by the adoption of the principles described in that platform."⁸⁴ To the issues of the tariff, trusts, railroad regulation, campaign publicity, direct elections, and labor issues, he added another—the guarantee of bank deposits—and dropped silver and government ownership. And he meant to persist in his demand for a "moral awakening" that would result in a more equitable distribution of wealth and an affirmative reply to the basic question, "Shall the People Rule?"⁸⁵

Still remaining coy, Bryan offered George Gray, Woodrow Wilson, Governor John A. Johnson of Minnesota, and Governor Joseph Folk of Missouri as presidential possibilities and correctly predicted that the members of Hearst's Independence League, later Party, would see through Hearst's bid to scuttle the Democracy and in the end vote Democratic. As for Roosevelt's successor, he still preferred La Follette, a proved reformer, to Taft, for Taft could furnish no proof that he would oppose predatory wealth and monopoly.⁸⁶

During the stock market panic beginning in August, 1907, millions in government funds made available to the business community found their way into the stock market and provided only temporary relief. On October 20 Roosevelt echoed Bryan in urging criminal prosecution of businessmen lawbreakers. Then, probably deceived by assurances received, he promised immunity from prosecution under the Sherman Act and blessed United States Steel's acquisition of the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company.⁸⁷

Although aware that the inflexible currency system had helped cause the Panic of 1907, Roosevelt did not fight for the "elastic" currency plan he presented to the last session of the 59th Congress. However, his annual message contained so many distinctly Bryanite suggestions that the resentment of the Republican as well as the Democratic business community almost equalled that against Bryan in 1896. When Congress failed to act on his reforms, which in sum propounded a positivist-regulationist program—he loosed a Bryanesque charge, in a lengthy special message of January 31, 1908, against the "rotteness" of the American business structure and called the federal courts barriers to economic and social reform. Bryan Democrats in Congress applauded while Republicans sat glumly, and Bryan again urged his support, saying that his "brave message" was a "call to arms" to which his followers should respond.⁸⁸

Except for tariff reform and currency reform, Roosevelt was now restating demands Bryan had been making for 18 years. Despite all his hue and cry and illusion of great activity, however, Roosevelt's measurable domestic achievements included only the Newlands Reclamation Act (1902); the Elkins Act (1903); Hepburn, Pure Food and Drugs, Meat Inspection, and Employers Liability acts (1906); the 1907 act prohibiting corporation contributions to campaign funds; and the 1908 law limiting trainmen's hours. He prosecuted the trusts, but they were more numerous and powerful at the end than at the beginning of his term. His distinction between "good" and "bad" trusts enabled business consolidations, directed mainly by investment bankers, to reach a climax toward the end of his incumbency, and he did not indict criminally a single corporation director. He could show no step taken on one single issue that Bryan had not already advocated, and he confessed that,

with respect to action against railroads and trusts, he had "let up in every case where I have had any possible excuse for so doing." ⁸⁹ Roosevelt was potent, nevertheless, just where Bryan was impotent—in his ability to be practical, to compromise, rather than like Bryan to be relentless on principles, to annihilate the enemy rather than merely defeat him. His legislative achievements, although few, were greater than those of any President, possibly barring Cleveland, since Lincoln. For the first time in American history, in the coal strike of 1902, the federal government had intervened in the struggle between capital and labor without automatically siding with business. ⁹⁰ The civil service was definitely advanced. The Panama Railroad Company, which built the Panama Canal, ushered the government corporation into history. And without his energy and drive, Roosevelt would not have won his victory over Congress in the field of conservation. He dared to make the government control of business a "political" issue, violated his own Darwinian view of the inevitability of big business growth by seeking to impose a larger power, that of government, over business, and accepted big labor as part of the economic development of his age. However, by using federal power to regulate railroads and corporate abuses beyond the power of the states to counteract, he ran afoul of the supporters of states' rights, now including businessmen fearing federal control, and earned criticism from those who believed that federal control was but a few steps ahead of government ownership. ⁹¹

Much of Roosevelt's alarming radicalism in 1907 and 1908 was really blustering, for he was nearing the end of his official power and Congress, increasingly opposed to him, took his apostrophes to progressivism with a grain of salt. Nevertheless, the continuing exposures by muckrakers of the "rottenness" of the business world he had condemned and the fateful juncture of agrarian and urban middle class reform pressure shook the Old Guard into realizing that their refusal to submit to some control might split their party or, as Bryan predicted, provoke Roosevelt from moderately positive action to an explosive assault upon their iniquities and the imposition of federal supervision as the only alternative to socialism if not popular violence.

As Bryan had foretold, the Republicans fought each other in

Congress, particularly over the currency issue. Aldrich's plan to increase the circulation of national banks by permitting them to deposit with the Treasury the bonds of states, cities, and railroads provoked La Follette and other Westerners to rabid insurgency. Albert Beveridge's suggestion of a commission to study the entire monetary system, as provided in the Aldrich-Vreeland bill, was a face-saving compromise which enabled the Republicans to meet in national convention and claim to be currency reformers. Pending the results of the commission's study, they could also laugh at Bryan's proposals that mutual support for banks and assurance to depositors be achieved by a guarantee fund raised by a tax on deposits and by separating speculation in securities from the legitimate part of the banking business.

Roosevelt invited Bryan to the Conference of Governors and other representatives from the states held in Washington on May 13-14, 1908, to discuss the conservation of natural resources. While he criticized Roosevelt's "centralizing tendencies," as revealed in his usurping of congressional authority, he urged him to wipe out the "twilight zone" between federal and state regulatory powers in which trusts basked with impunity and supported him on the need of irrigation, forest preservation, and expenditures for similar works of "permanent improvement."⁹²

In the spring of 1908 some reorganizers boomed the young and able John A. Johnson of Minnesota. In his state convention, however, a Bryan steamroller crushed him. A similar fate attended other opponents as Bryan "happened" to visit state after state just as their plans were being formulated. He was as popular with the Democratic masses as Roosevelt with the Republican, and to be suspected of disloyalty to him was "almost like buying a ticket to private life."⁹³ As a result, convention after convention endorsed him.

The major eastern newspapers again opposed Bryan: the *New York Times* resurrected the platform of 1896, and the *New York World* practically went over to Taft, with Pulitzer adamant in opposition because in 12 years Bryan had not won power for the Democracy for "a single day, a single hour, a single minute."⁹⁴ Since Bryan had the support of more than two thirds of the instructed delegates and a Committee on Resolutions that would give him whatever he wanted, he need

heed neither Pulitzer, Tammany, nor anyone else. In his desire to bring the reorganized and regenerated wings of the party together, however, he asserted that he would agree to an Eastern vice presidential candidate and Western national chairman or vice versa, and left the vice presidential nomination open to all comers.

Bryan declined to attend the Denver convention and depended upon his brother, Charles, and Governor Charles N. Haskell of Oklahoma, chairman of the subcommittee on Resolutions, to represent his progressive leadership. The platform was a combination of the Oklahoma constitution, the Nebraska state platform, and the program of the American Federation of Labor which the Republicans had rejected at Chicago. He went over each plank as it was telephoned or telegraphed to him and believed that the moderately radical platform cemented a Western farmer-Eastern labor coalition. His control over the convention machinery was as strong as that over the platform committee, and he was nominated on the first ballot. He then declared that if defeated he would not run again.

In his acceptance speech Bryan blamed the Republicans for all abuses existing in government and charged them with being impotent as reformers.⁹⁵ No single issue predominated in his campaign, and for a time the contest was dull, for Taft refused to speak and stole his thunder on the income tax by supporting it and on the direct election of senators by deeming it a nonpartisan issue. Differences between them on Philippine policy were not aired extensively, and both sought to down an incipient wave of religious controversy raised by Taft's Unitarianism and by his and Roosevelt's earlier friendliness to the Catholic Church in the Philippines. Since either he or Taft would support Roosevelt's policies, the real question for popular decision was the difference between men, not issues.

Plainly worried at Bryan's oratorical progress, as his correspondence with Roosevelt reveals, Taft asked Roosevelt for a letter he could use against Bryan. Roosevelt wrote the letter and then practically took charge of Taft's campaign. He directed Taft to take to the stump and fed him such advice as "speak only *once or twice in each state you visit. Do not answer Bryan; attack him.*"⁹⁶ Bryan charged that "GOP panic" provoked Taft to speak and that his greatest sin of 1896,

his "demagogic" running around after votes, was now being made a virtue by imitation.⁹⁷

In 1896 and 1900 Bryan had fought Hanna rather than McKinley; in 1908 he fought Roosevelt rather than Taft. With curious lack of understanding of a president's political functions, he said that Roosevelt was the president of *all* the people and should not degrade his great office to support a particular candidate. In fact his endorsement was valueless unless he stayed on in Washington to see that Taft made good. Could Taft prevent a panic when Roosevelt already had one on his hands? he asked, and then dared Taft to define his position on the great questions at issue and to explain his granting of franchises in the Philippines, while he had been secretary of the Department of War.

The character of the campaign suddenly changed from a Bryan talkathon to a real scrap involving Roosevelt as well as Taft. In exposing the John D. Archbold letters to Senators Joseph Bailey and Joseph Foraker, Joseph Sibley, and others, Hearst created a national sensation, for they contained checks and referred to the killing of "objectionable legislation" and defeating "dangerous men" in behalf of Standard Oil. But the letters also implicated Governor Haskell, who had stopped an anti-trust suit in Oklahoma. Haskell vehemently denied Hearst's charges and called him a willful liar.⁹⁸ But Foraker was through, and telegrams and letters flew between Roosevelt and Taft. Roosevelt publicly attacked Bryan through Haskell and warned Taft not to accept contributions from Standard Oil. He also sent him copies of his letters of October, 1904, directing the return of \$100,000 and told him to concentrate on that "unspeakable scoundrel," Haskell. Parker had said that he had not collected much money in 1904, but when Norman Mack had become national chairman he had announced that \$300,000 had been left over. It shows that Mr. Haskell's appointment means Standard Oil money for Mr. Bryan. Bring this out and smash and cut Bryan about it."⁹⁹

Bryan had been told about Haskell's connection with Standard Oil in the fall of 1907 but disbelieved it. Apparently oblivious of the implications of Hearst's exposure, he said nothing about Haskell. But Roosevelt, enraged by his criticism for his help to Taft, defended himself and Taft by attacking Haskell. The campaign had been dull thus far, he told

reporters, and he would "put some ginger in it." Bryan meanwhile telegraphed a demand that he produce proof that Haskell had ever been connected with Standard Oil. He had aided Roosevelt, he added, by offering remedial measures for the public good and by urging Democrats to support such measures, but he would not permit the attitude of the Democracy "to be misrepresented by Republicans."¹⁰⁰ The spectacle of Bryan's rebuking Roosevelt electrified the nation and provided the most sensational development of the campaign to date. More important for history, the ensuing debate is unique in exposing in their own words the variant philosophies of the antagonists. Roosevelt said nothing for the moment, but Taft decided that he must attack. In his first speech, at Columbus, Ohio, he said that Bryan was merely an eloquent and adroit public critic who had never given practical demonstration of his ability to meet and solve problems and whose "election would mean a paralysis of business and . . . a recurrence of disastrous conditions of the last Democratic administration." The real issue of the campaign, he added, was William Jennings Bryan.¹⁰¹

So too thought Roosevelt, who with his cabinet on September 23 prepared a reply to Bryan's telegram that covered half a newspaper page. Haskell's alliance with Standard Oil, he said, was a matter of "common notoriety" in Ohio and of court record in Oklahoma. Taft's dissolving of all connections with Foraker contrasted mightily with Bryan's support of Haskell; Bryan's retention of Haskell as a manager of his campaign was "a scandal and disgrace." Haskell, "a representative leader of the Bryan Democracy," was "unworthy of any position in our public life." With respect to Bryan's charge that the Republicans were "misrepresenting" the attitude of the Democratic Party, Roosevelt retorted vigorously and flatly:

You say that you have advocated more radical measures against private monopolies than either I or my party associates have been willing to undertake. You have indeed advocated measures that sound radical, but they have the prime defect that in practice they would not work. . . . [I]n my judgment the measures you advocate would be wholly ineffective in curing a single evil, and so far as they have an effect at all, would merely throw the entire business of the country into hopeless and utter confusion. I put Mr. Taft's deeds against your words.¹⁰²

On the 25th in Chicago, whence he had peremptorily been called by Bryan, Haskell denied all charges of wrongdoing and shouted that he would sue his detractors. Then he was taken in hand by Josephus Daniels and others and before Bryan arrived had handed his resignation to Mack. Bryan chose a successor and then replied to Roosevelt. Until Haskell was tried in a court free of partisan bias he would stand by him. He would dismiss the entire matter were not Roosevelt trying to make political capital out of it and, by suggesting him inconsistent in supporting Haskell and opposing trusts, questioning his sincerity. Roosevelt could search his eighteen year record and find "not an act, not a word or a thought of mine to justify your partisan charge." Why did Taft, whom he had sent into Oklahoma to speak against Haskell as governor, not charge Haskell then with being connected with Standard Oil? Bryan also charged that Roosevelt had permitted US Steel to acquire the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company and thus obtain control of more than 50 percent of the country's steel production. In so doing, Roosevelt had shown particular favor to a monopolistic corporation. Moreover, Roosevelt must know of the contributions made by "Jupiter" Morgan, H. H. Rodgers, John D. Archbold, and other trust magnates to his campaign fund in 1904. Finally, Roosevelt was not an expert on panic preventatives, for he had a panic on his hands.¹⁰³

On Sunday, September 27, Roosevelt filled half a newspaper page in nailing down Bryan's "main fallacies." Cleveland's attorney general, Richard Olney, he said, had used the antitrust law only against labor; he himself had instituted at least nine anti-trust cases and also 75 cases against railroads granting secret rebates. He knew of the acquisition of Tennessee Coal and Iron by U.S. Steel. "But there was no violation of law," and the action had served to prevent the spread of financial panic. "You would understand the principles on which I acted if you would rid yourself of the idea that I am trying to discriminate for or against any man or corporation because he or it is either wealthy or not wealthy. I regard such discrimination as utterly contemptible with a spirit of honesty and fair dealing. I base my distinctions on conduct, not on relative wealth." As for the trust magnates, he implied that those whose interests were those of the business community and of the wageworkers would support Taft, those

of special interests, like the silver barons in '96, would support Bryan. "Your success . . . now would be a calamity to the country both from the standpoint of business (and especially of the interest of the wageworker) and from the standpoint of morals." Roosevelt denied that those who had contributed to his campaign fund in 1904 had influenced his attitude toward the trusts. It was clearly understood that "every man shall receive a square deal," that men would be treated similarly whether they gave or gave not. Taft had refused to support Foraker for Senator, but Bryan overlooked Haskell's "gross offenses against public decency and honesty" and "protested against any condemnation of him except as may come in a court." Roosevelt promised that Haskell would obtain "justice" in the courts and concluded that Bryan's refusal to condemn "Haskellism" rested with his "moral obliquity rather than mental obtuseness." ¹⁰⁴

In replying to Roosevelt on the 29th, Bryan dared him to match his publishing of the contributors to their parties in 1896 and to publicize *before* the current election the contributors to Taft's campaign chest. Roosevelt paid more attention to the mote in the Democratic than the beam in the Republican eye when he criticized Democratic finances and should be well aware that "officials of the . . . favor-seeking corporations do not put up large sums of money for purely patriotic purposes." He did not assert that the President or Taft were directly influenced by funds contributed by trust magnates, but he believed the American people should know what contributions were being made "so that they may judge for themselves the motive of the givers and the obligation imposed upon those who receive," and he hoped that the "honest sentiment of the country will rebuke the party whose convention refused to endorse any kind of publicity, and whose candidates are not willing that the people should know until after the polls are closed what predatory interests have been active in support of the Republican party." ¹⁰⁵

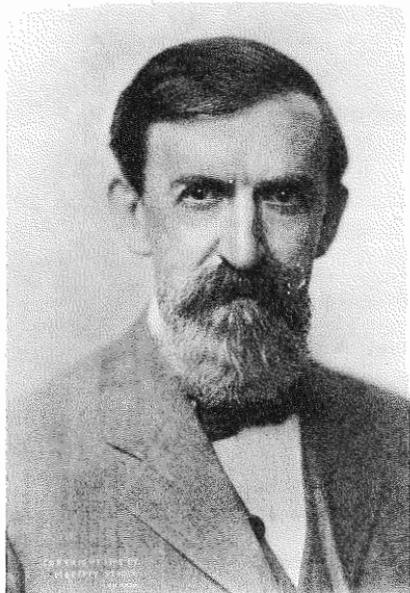
Roosevelt declined to pursue the public debate further.

Although Bryan continued to draw large crowds, Taft began to sense victory. "Bryan's lack of wisdom in inviting you into a discussion is shown over the West, and his claim to be the heir of your policies is now the subject of laughter and ridicule rather than of serious weight with those who might

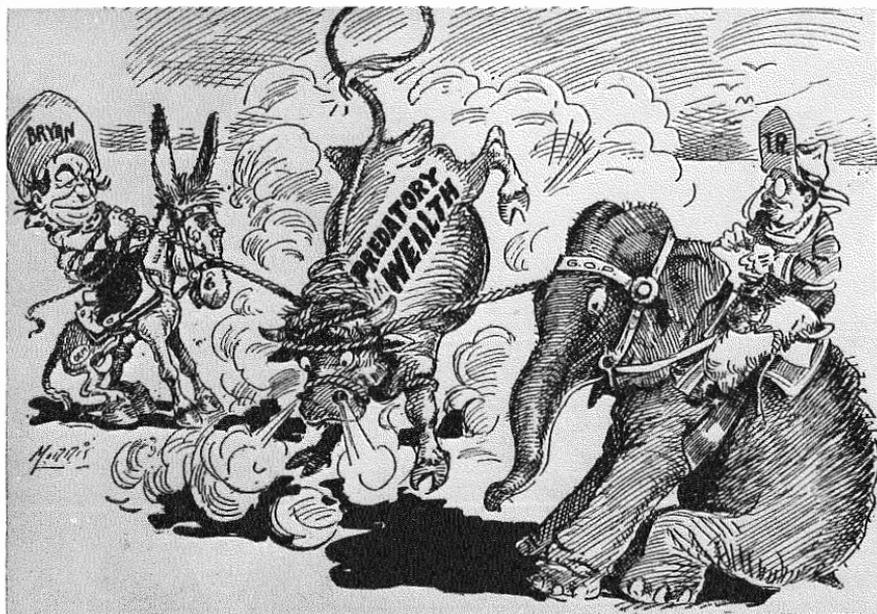
have been influenced had you not hit him between the eyes as you did upon his invitation," he wrote Roosevelt on October 3. Roosevelt urged him on. "You are making a great campaign," he stated,¹⁰⁶ and further aided him by making public a letter he had written Senator Philander C. Knox which contained a sweeping attack on Samuel Gompers and a defense of the Republican plank on injunctions.

As in 1890 and 1900 Bryan appeared to be winning throughout the first two months of the campaign. As in his earlier canvasses, so again in 1908, he began late in October to level charges of evil-doing against the Republicans, as in asserting that they would again use money to "purchase this election," that Taft had made peace with the interests by promising not to hamper them by restrictive legislation or executive action, and that railroad workers were being coerced against him. Roosevelt had himself interviewed in order to praise Taft, wrote union leaders that Taft was truly a friend of labor, and ordered all cabinet members to the stump for the last week of the campaign. Although he privately conceded that "the labor people have just cause of complaint with the Republican party taken as a whole, because Congress under the lead of Joseph G. Cannon treated them badly, as did the courts," Roosevelt continued his attack on both Bryan and Gompers.¹⁰⁷

Both Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller announced their support of Taft on October 30. While hardly news, Rockefeller's pronouncement drew cries of anguish from Republicans, for it seemed to uphold Bryan's contention that their party was the haven of trusts and that Taft would have ample money. Nevertheless, Bryan's anti-trust program drove big business away from him. His plan to restrict corporations to less than 50 percent of the national market would compel companies like U.S. Steel and Standard Oil to dissolve or to sell some of their plants. This plan, his stand on labor and the tariff, and such skeletons in his closet as free silver and his having favored the government ownership of railroads won him the hearty hostility of most business interests. The National Association of Manufacturers, whose president Gompers swore had attempted to bribe him with a \$50,000 annuity to leave the labor movement, attacked him bitterly and strongly urged businessmen to bury him on election day.¹⁰⁸



Senator John W. Kern (left) of Indiana was William Jennings Bryan's running mate in 1908. . . . (Below) The Spokane (Washington) Spokesman-Review published this cartoon on the presidential election of 1908.



And bury him they did, to such a degree that Bryan wrote various letters expressing incredulity¹⁰⁹ and used his *Commoner* to ask its readers to help him explain "The Mystery of 1908," a mystery he never quite solved. Roosevelt's support of Taft was a mighty factor in his defeat, and it irked him to be bested by proxy, for he believed that he had had much to do with the making of Roosevelt. But Taft's opposition had also counted, particularly when he charged that Bryan professed to be Roosevelt's heir but never made Roosevelt's policies his paramount issues and that what was good in his program had already been translated into law by the Republicans. Most of the letters Bryan received dealt with the themes that he had been beaten by "Rum, Romanism, and capitalism," "Ryan, Romanism, Roosevelt, and Rockefeller," and "Catholicism, Commercialism, and Coercion." Written largely by zealously loyal disciples, their value may be discounted to a degree. Both he and Taft had sought to allay the religious issue, and it probably played a small part in his defeat.

Eastern Democrats doubted that their party had ever been in a more hopeless condition and bade Bryan good riddance.¹¹⁰ Some editors, like Pulitzer, called for a candidate in 1912 who had a chance to win, and specifically mentioned Woodrow Wilson.¹¹¹ However, even such outstanding Republicans as Root acknowledged that "It was a vote more against Bryan than for Taft."¹¹² The Congress remained safely in Republican hands but by reduced majorities, a great strengthening of the insurgent bloc occurred in the Senate, and Democrats won Ohio, Indiana, Minnesota, and North Dakota even though Taft carried these states. Democrats also increased their strength in almost every state legislature, and it was acknowledged that Bryan had helped elect many Democratic governors in the Western and Southern states and had been particularly effective in the new state, Oklahoma. Bryan was defeated, but not his party. By increasing the Democratic vote by a million and a half over that of 1904, while Taft's popular vote was only half of Roosevelt's in 1904, and by strengthening his party in state and local offices Bryan had revealed himself an effective opposition leader and convinced the country that the GOP did not have a monopoly on reform.

Especially in the South and West, Bryan was credited with

the rising tide of progressive reform. "It is a well known fact," a minister wrote Bryan, "that Mr. Roosevelt, in the last four years, has followed along the lines which you advocated in the campaign in which he was elected." ¹¹³ Various others believed that he would exert greater influence on legislation during the next administration than Taft himself. Though defeated again, "he remained unquestionably the authentic voice of the party speaking for governmental regulation of industry and finance in order to protect agriculture and common labor. Albeit unnoticed at the time, and due to suffer some recessions, there was a distinct new trend of labor to affiliate with the Democracy, a trend that continued until it gave the party its invincible strength in the 1930's." ¹¹⁴ On the tariff, currency and banking reform, income tax, the labor question, direct elections, and on certain aspects of the trust question, such as the prohibition of interlocking directorates, he rather than Roosevelt or Taft had foreshadowed reforms acceptable to the Democratic-insurgent Republican coalition that would bedevil Taft and were implemented under Wilson.

VI

Bryan was an isolationist, anti-imperialist, anti-militarist, and Anglophobe, Roosevelt a martial chauvinist and imperialist who grew to like Britain and undertook a vigorous foreign policy that advanced the United States to a position of world prominence. Roosevelt respected military power perhaps unduly and believed that war was sometimes necessary. Bryan put increased emphasis upon the power of love as an agent for maintaining world peace. Roosevelt would keep the United States strong, hence able to expand its influence and also capable of avoiding threats to its security; Bryan would have the United States live such an exemplary life that its model would be followed by other nations. Roosevelt believed that a strong balance of power would avoid war; Bryan favored conciliation and collective action for maintaining peace.

A persistent thorn in Roosevelt's side in foreign as well as domestic affairs, Bryan had criticized his "giving in" to the British in the first Hay-Pauncefote treaty [1900], his Philippine policy, the jamming of the Platt Amendment down the throats of the Cubans, his "taking" of Panama, the Insular

cases, and his constant demand for "expansion." Dead American soldiers being returned from the Philippines were "mute protests against a war of conquest," Bryan had averred during the Philippine insurrection, but Roosevelt deemed his program practical and stood pat. By and large, however, the American people began to regard the Philippines as embarrassing liabilities, and Roosevelt himself came to see them as indefensible against Japan. Bryan praised Roosevelt for mediating the Russo-Japanese war and then urged him to undertake the writing of "cooling off" treaties. His military exploits would pale before leadership of a successful peace movement, he noted, but Roosevelt neither replied nor gave full support to Secretary of State Root's arbitration treaties.

The definition of a liberal as a theorist in opposition and of a conservative as a responsible government official holds for Bryan in foreign as well as in domestic affairs. Ever the nationalist and supporter of the Monroe Doctrine, he came to see the need for the strategic defense of the Panama Canal and, as Secretary of State, used Rooseveltian tactics in making the Caribbean an American lake.¹¹⁵ But a discussion of these events would take us beyond our stated goals.

If statesmanship is measured by ability to win and administer high political office, then Bryan was a failure. Hence he has been condemned in some quarters as a mere, if vociferous, theorist. By articulating the demands particularly of consumers, he had won adherents to the cause of progressive reform rather than to himself. His failure to win the presidency precluded his being a practical administrator, yet he took full advantage of the only position he could fill, that of the idealistic liberal who could offer alternative programs with impunity because no responsibility to carry them out rested upon him. It should be recalled, however, that he was capable of changing his mind, as he revealed in dropping both free silver and government ownership and in gradually admitting new issues into his platforms. Nevertheless, on election day in 1896 and 1900 he prayed that he be spared the burden of the presidency because he knew that his forte lay not in administration but in evocative oratory in support of progressive politics and ethical conduct. Conversely, Roosevelt was a realist and a conservative as president because he had a government to administer and specific problems to solve in ad-

dition to leading a party. Bryan could be optimistic that the reforms he demanded in the name of the common man would "someday" be achieved, and it was his function as leader of the opposition to be critical of both Roosevelt's means and ends, but in seeking particular reforms Roosevelt had to overcome pressure groups and congressmen motivated by self-interest and whip up popular enthusiasms, and find supporters for his policies even among those opposed to him. Later, as proponent of the New Nationalism and leader of the opposition Progressive Party, he became as much a liberal and a theorist as Bryan ever was, even if his reforms were better suited to an industrial society than Bryan's.

Bryan did serve as an effective opposition leader during the Roosevelt years. He urged his followers to support Roosevelt whenever the President was "right" not only because he put patriotism above partisan advantage but also because he himself had demanded years earlier every reform Roosevelt obtained or even suggested. Roosevelt himself deigned to admit that "about half" of Bryan's views were right.¹¹⁶ No Democrat from 1901 through 1908 did more than Bryan to prevent the Democracy from solidifying into a conservative organization responsive to the same pressures and interests as the Republicans, to keep his party vigorous on the state level, where true political strength lies, to persist in demands that the Democracy remain "progressive" so that it could provide alternative programs to those of the "conservative" Republicans. Defeated in the short run on anti-imperialism, he rather than Roosevelt represented the true feelings of the American people toward colonialism.

Bryan was a diagnostician rather than a curer of social ills, a professional agitator who daily counseled peaceful revolution, a militant idealist who created unrest as a matter of principle. By making the people angry and inquisitive, he educated them to see the alliance between politics and business that kept commoners economically and politically subdued and emotionally disturbed because unable to realize the promises of American democracy. The better politician, Roosevelt was able to nationalize the demand for many Bryanesque reforms heretofore supported only by the South and West, third parties, and splinter groups. Bryan was the tireless physical machine fired by a burning faith, the outward symbol of an internal irrita-

tion who provided the link between the agrarian progressivism of the Bryan Democrats and Populists and the more sophisticated urban progressivism of Roosevelt during and following his presidential tenure. He also foreshadowed reforms acceptable to the Democratic-Insurgent coalition that would bedevil Taft and would be implemented under Wilson with his great help while he served as Secretary of State.

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