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Article Title: Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan

Full Citation: Kendrick A Clements, "Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan," *Nebraska History* 77 (1996): 167-176

URL of article: http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1996Bryan_SecState.pdf

Date: 4/23/2013

Article Summary: Bryan's foreign policy alternated between rash interventionism and timid isolationism. He proved to be too idealistic to serve successfully as secretary of state in a time of revolution and world war.

Cataloging Information:

Names: William Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, William McKinley, William Howard Taft, Edward M House, Roger Farnham

Place Names: Philippines, Panama Canal, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Mexico, China, Japan

Keywords: William Jennings Bryan, Woodrow Wilson, tariffs, income tax, Federal Reserve, Clayton Antitrust Act, Federal Trade Commission, Edward M House, treaties, German submarine warfare, League of Nations

Photographs / Images: Bryan at his desk in the State Department, 1913; President Wilson and his cabinet, 1913; Bryan confirming ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment (direct election of US senators); paperweights that Bryan had had made out of old swords



Secretary of State

William Jennings Bryan

By Kendrick A. Clements

William Jennings Bryan looked as little like a secretary of state as anyone who has ever occupied the office. His baggy, countrified clothes were always rumpled, his hair a long, untidy fringe around his bald dome. His pockets were stuffed with official dispatches, letters and memoranda scribbled on the backs of old envelopes, and with radishes, his favorite snack. He preached economy, but sometimes signed vouchers for large sums without being sure what he was authorizing and went unprepared to testify before congressional appropriations committees. American diplomats overseas complained that he often ignored their dispatches. Informal and gregarious, the secretary preferred farmers to foreign dignitaries. Each summer he left Washington to deliver inspirational speeches before rural audiences who gathered by thousands to hear his rolling baritone voice. To urban critics, his appearances on those Chautauqua stages, along with magicians, comedians and ventriloquists, were proof that he was unfit to be secretary of state. When he refused to serve wine at official functions, many people derided his "grape juice diplomacy."¹

That Woodrow Wilson chose such a seemingly inappropriate person to be secretary of state was, of course, a result of time-honored tradition. Bryan was appointed because he was the most prominent figure in the Democratic Party, and Wilson asked him to serve in

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Bryan at his desk in the state department, 1913. NSHS-B915-49x

order to have him "in Washington and in harmony with the administration rather than outside and possibly in a critical attitude."²

Bryan's influence on Wilson administration policy resulted from his personal relationship with the president. Although Wilson had earlier opposed Bryan politically, and the two had hardly met before 1912, their agreement that Christian principles ought to guide foreign policy gave them common ground upon which to stand while they discovered that they liked each other. "My father. . .," Bryan recalled, "saw no necessary conflict—and I have never been able to see any—between the principles of our government and the principles of Christian faith."³ Wilson

might well have said the same thing. Moreover, Wilson's adherence to reforms that Bryan had long championed and Bryan's loyal support of the president's domestic policy drew them together. Had they not disagreed in 1915 over the proper response to German submarine warfare, Bryan might well have served eight years in the cabinet rather than a little more than two. A few days after Bryan's resignation, Wilson told a friend that the secretary had always been "singularly loyal."⁴

Aside from two terms in Congress in the 1890s, Bryan's period as secretary of state was the only public office ever held by the man who exercised a dominant influence over American politics in the early twentieth century. Born in Sa-

lem, Illinois, on March 19, 1860, Bryan was the son of strongly religious parents who taught him that God expected Christians to serve Him by serving their fellow men. After completing college and law school in 1883, Bryan married and moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, where he set out to put his convictions into practice by entering politics. During two terms in the House, as a senatorial aspirant in 1894, and in 1896 as a presidential candidate, he defended farmers' values and expressed their conviction that their troubles were the result of urban influences over the tariff and the monetary system. When he proclaimed to the Democratic convention in 1896, "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold," it was no accident that he used religious imagery.⁵ He was defending a way of life as well as advocating political policies.

Nominated for the presidency in 1896 by both the Democrats and the Populists, Bryan campaigned vigorously but was narrowly defeated by William McKinley. Declaring that the election had been only "the first battle," the Nebraskan vowed to renew the fight four years later.⁶ Before he could do so, however, the United States recovered from depression and plunged happily into a "splendid little war" with Spain in 1898. Together, prosperity and war transformed the nation beyond anything Bryan had imagined in 1896 and made his old issues irrelevant. Opposed to the war, Bryan nevertheless volunteered loyally and served as a colonel in Nebraska's Third Regiment, a unit that never saw battle. When the conflict ended, he resigned his commission and raced to Washington to urge the Senate to approve the treaty annexing the Philippines—not because he favored expansion, but because he believed the United States should take the islands in order to liberate them and guide them toward self-government. His strange position spread confusion among anti-imperialists and, by influencing one or

two silverite senators, may have contributed to the narrow margin by which the treaty was approved. Renominated for the presidency in 1900, Bryan tried to combine the old and new by opposing both the gold standard and imperialism. Americans, prosperous and self-confident, found his message negative and outdated, and he was defeated by McKinley more soundly than in 1896.

In the long run, even imperialists like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson came to believe that taking the Philippines had been a mistake, but that conversion was several years in the future. Meanwhile, Bryan's influence in the national party diminished between 1900 and 1904, until Democrats realized that they could not win the White House with a conservative. After the defeat of Alton Parker in 1904, it was clear that the country was in a reform mood, and in 1908 the Democrats turned to Bryan for the third time. Now plumper and balder than in 1896 or 1900, he challenged William Howard Taft enthusiastically, but never found an effective campaign issue, and the Ohioan, endorsed by the popular Theodore Roosevelt, rolled over him.

Bryan's three electoral defeats never made him bitter or self-doubting. Issues, he believed, were more important than personal victories, and by 1912, when he relinquished party leadership to Woodrow Wilson, he knew both parties had adopted ideas he had been among the first to support, and the Democrats, with majorities in both houses of Congress, had become "the party of reform." Some proposals he had championed, such as the direct election of senators and the income tax, had already been enacted into law, and others would soon follow.⁷ Imperialism, which he had denounced since 1898, was being questioned in both parties, and his idea, first offered in 1905, that the nations abolish war by agreeing to international investigation of all disputes, was winning international support. When Wilson offered Bryan the appointment as secretary of state in December 1912, plans were al-

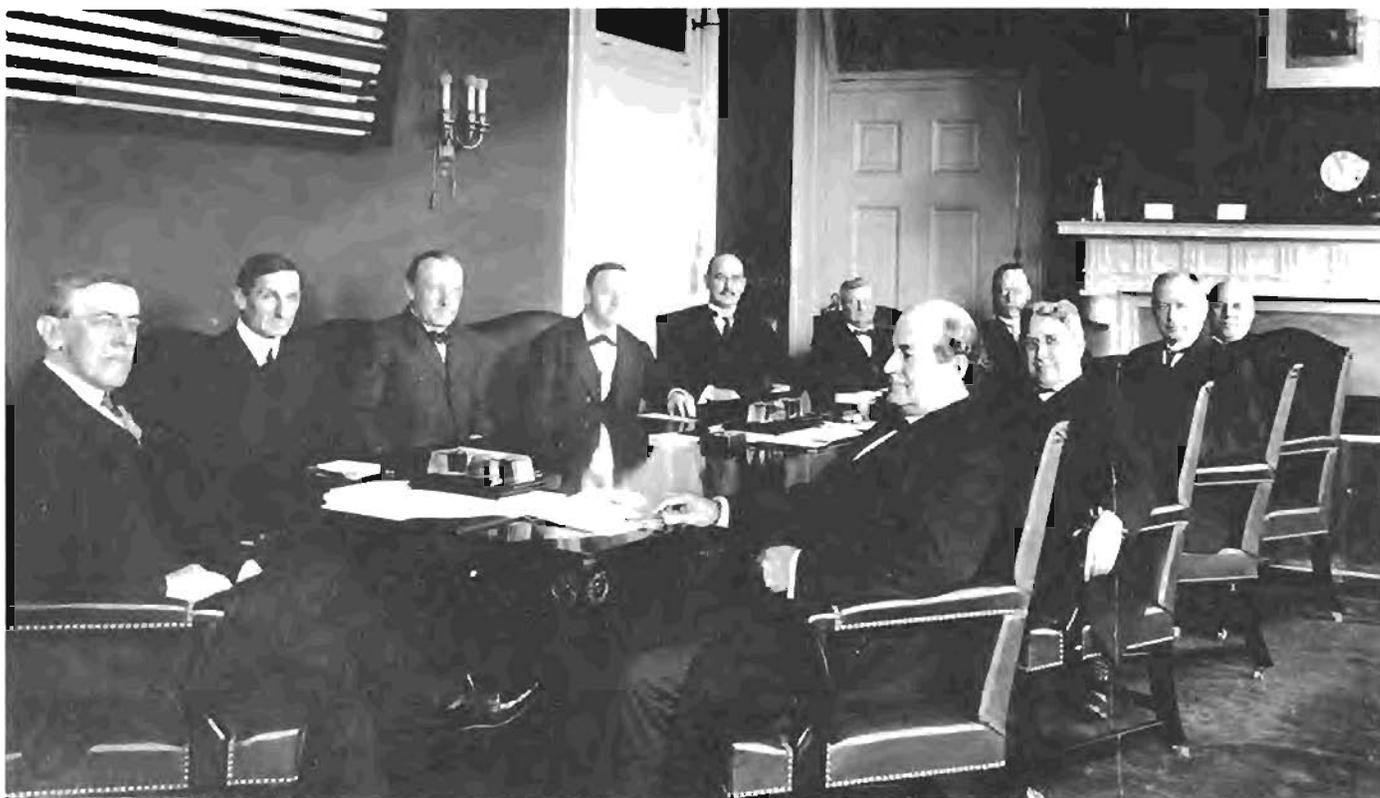
ready being laid for a great international exposition to be held in 1914 to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal and a century of peace in Europe. To the Commoner the moment seemed opportune to bring to fruition his dreams both of domestic reform and of international peace.

Bryan's first and probably greatest value to the Wilson administration was in the domestic sphere. A longtime advocate of tariff reduction, he called the president's speech asking for a substantial lowering of duties "a great state paper" and also applauded the inclusion in the bill of a progressive income tax authorized under the Sixteenth Amendment to the Constitution. In the House a large Democratic majority assured easy passage of the Underwood tariff bill, but in the Senate Bryan's personal influence with southern Democrats helped to maintain party discipline and assure the administration's success.⁸

He played an even more crucial role in the drafting of the Federal Reserve Act, insisting that the government, not private bankers, must exercise ultimate control and responsibility over the banking system and the currency. His announcement that he supported the administration's bill "in all details" helped to arouse public demands for passage of the legislation and contributed significantly to its passage in December 1913.⁹

In regard to the third great element of New Freedom reform legislation, control of big business, Bryan played a quiet but important part, supporting the passage of the Clayton Antitrust Act which proscribed certain anticompetitive corporate practices, urging the passage of an amendment to the act exempting organized labor from antitrust actions, and also supporting Wilson's experiment with administrative regulation of business in the creation of the Federal Trade Commission.¹⁰ Although he was only one of the reasons for the success of the administration, Bryan's role in domestic affairs fully justified Wilson's decision to appoint him to the cabinet.

Secretary of State Bryan



President Woodrow Wilson and his cabinet, 1913. From left around table: Wilson, Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo, Attorney General James C. McReynolds, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, Secretary of Agriculture David F. Houston, Secretary of Labor William B. Wilson, Secretary of

Commerce William C. Redfield, Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane, Postmaster General Albert S. Bursleson, Secretary of War Lindley M. Garrison, and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan. NSHS-8915-309

Bryan's principal foreign policy goals were to create an international structure of trust and order that would make war obsolete, to liquidate the vestiges of American imperialism and to encourage other nations to do likewise, and to establish international relations on a basis of morality and integrity.¹¹ These were ambitious hopes, and the outbreak of World War I made them ludicrous, yet in the atmosphere of 1913 they did not seem absurd to the members of the new administration or to outsiders. Western society was permeated with confidence in material and moral progress, and Americans, bursting with the certainty of adolescence, never doubted they could reshape the world. As Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations plan showed, not even the shock of war

could shatter this benevolent arrogance.

But if Bryan sought to reshape the world, he was also a practical politician who had been a party leader for sixteen years. Democrats all over the country looked to him for the rewards of victory, and he was eager to oblige. "I am glad to have the public know that I appreciate the services of those who work in politics and feel an interest in seeing them rewarded," he said frankly and set out to find as many federal jobs as possible for "deserving Democrats."¹² The common notion of Bryan as a spoilsman determined to flood the State Department with party hacks is, however, inaccurate. In 1913 the total staff of the department in Washington numbered just over two hundred and was mostly made up of clerks already under civil service

rules. Overseas, the eleven American ambassadors and thirty-two ministers were largely chosen by the president; lesser diplomats and consuls were almost all under civil service. Although Bryan was tireless in seeking jobs for his supporters in his own and other departments, he had relatively few appointments at his command, and most of his diplomatic appointees were about as competent as their Republican predecessors. All had the virtue of being more sympathetic to the new administration's policies than the old hands would have been. His appointees did include a few misfits and at least one whose incompetence shaded toward outright crookedness, but on the whole, Democratic diplomats measured up reasonably well to the challenges of representing their

country amid war and revolution.¹³

Often complicating Bryan's task and undermining state department morale were Wilson's tendencies to direct foreign policy personally and to bypass the department by using special agents appointed from outside the diplomatic service. The president had not studied foreign policy closely before entering office, but he had very clear ideas of what he wanted to achieve, and he often took more personal interest in foreign issues than in details of domestic administration. His best friend, Edward M. House, fancied himself a shrewd and subtle diplomat, and when crisis erupted in Europe, Wilson often relied on House rather than Bryan. For the most part the secretary accepted this situation with astonishing good humor, and his basic agreement with the president on principles enabled him to maintain a constant influence, but there were times when his policies were abruptly and embarrassingly reversed, or when House was given some assignment the secretary particularly wanted, such as a peace mission to Europe in 1915.

At the outset, however, Bryan was not much interested in conventional diplomacy. The moment was right, he believed, for America to seize the lead in the international peace movement through the implementation of his novel peace plan. In April 1913 he secured the approval of the president and the cabinet to pursue the plan and quickly drafted a model treaty providing that "all questions of whatever character and nature" in dispute between signatories would be "submitted for investigation and report to an international commission" and that "the contracting parties agree not to declare war or begin hostilities until such investigation is made and report submitted." By the beginning of July he had won approval in principle of the plan from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and over the next year he urged the idea tirelessly on every nation with which the United States had diplomatic relations. In July 1914 he submitted twenty completed treaties

to the Senate and rejoiced when eighteen were overwhelmingly approved on August 13, 1914 (the Senate did not act on treaties with Panama and the Dominican Republic). Twenty more nations, including Britain, France, and Russia, later signed treaties.¹⁴ After the beginning of World War I, Bryan regretted bitterly that no treaty had been signed with Germany and urged the president to follow the investigation principle anyway. Wilson's refusal to submit what he considered issues of national honor and morality to investigation contributed to the breach between president and secretary of state and revealed the ultimate futility of Bryan's beloved treaties. None of them was ever used to settle a dispute.

Although Wilson kept some policies in his own hands and Bryan pursued his peace program on his own, in many areas the president and secretary collaborated. Latin American policy typified the normal relationship between the two men. They concurred on broad goals which were to free the region from European domination, to promote the peaceful settlement of conflicts, to enlarge legitimate American trade and investment opportunities, and to encourage democracy and constitutionalism. The two collaborated in drafting a press release outlining these principles in March 1913, and Wilson reiterated them and renounced imperialism in a speech at Mobile that autumn. Then the president usually left the daily routine of relations to Bryan, just as he entrusted the administration's programs to promote foreign trade and investment to Secretary of the Treasury William G. McAdoo and Secretary of Commerce William C. Redfield.¹⁵

The distance Bryan was willing to go to assure harmonious relations with the president was well exemplified by the issue of tolls in the Panama Canal that was to open in 1914. In 1912 Congress exempted American coastwise shippers from paying tolls in the canal, and the Democrats endorsed the exemption in their 1912 platform. After taking office,

however, Wilson found that the British regarded it as a violation of the 1901 Hay-Pauncefote Treaty, which promised equality of treatment to all users. At a cabinet meeting in April 1913 the president said that he was sure the British position was correct, but he agreed to delay asking Congress for repeal of the law until Bryan could study the matter. Since westerners hoped the canal would provide low-cost competition for the transcontinental railroads, Bryan found it difficult to back down from his public support of the exemption, but in April 1914 he announced his support for Wilson's policy. The repeal bill passed in June 1914.¹⁶

The president usually gave Bryan a free hand in other matters having to do with Latin America, including: the negotiation of his investigation treaties; the signing of a treaty with Colombia expressing regret for American involvement in the 1903 rebellion of Panama (ratified years later in a diluted form); the negotiation of a Western Hemisphere nonaggression treaty (never signed); and a scheme to reduce the risk of European intervention in the region by replacing private European loans with loans made by the U.S. government (ultimately rejected by Wilson).¹⁷ All of these initiatives were benevolently intended, but none amounted to much, and all were overshadowed by other actions that, whatever their intentions, are difficult to defend on the basis of results.

The besetting weakness of both Wilson's and Bryan's approach to Latin America was paternalism. Confident that the world's nations were evolving toward constitutional democracy, and aware that America had acquired vast new military and economic strength, they could not resist the temptation to push the evolutionary process. In Mexico, where Wilson interfered militarily and politically, an indigenous revolutionary movement with definite goals blunted the impact of American meddling, but elsewhere in the Caribbean intervention produced more damage.

Secretary of State Bryan



As secretary of state, Bryan confirmed ratification of the Seventeenth Amendment to the Constitution providing for direct election of U.S. senators. NSHS-8915-376

The most striking examples of these problems were in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Both countries were heavily indebted to foreigners and politically unstable. When this combination seemed likely to provoke foreign intervention, Theodore Roosevelt had moved to impose an American customs collectorship on the Dominican Republic in the hope that economic order would beget political stability. The hope proved futile, and by the time Wilson and Bryan entered office, both the Dominican Republic and Haiti were sliding toward chaos.

In the Dominican Republic Bryan found a provisional president facing an incipient revolt. Warning the rebels that the United States felt "profound displeasure" at their "pernicious" activities, the secretary secured a cease-fire by promising that the United States would supervise elections to the Dominican congress.¹⁸ The following year, 1914, the United States also supervised a presidential election, and Bryan believed that all problems had been solved. "The election having been held and a Government chosen by the people having been established," he instructed the American minister, "no more revolutions will be permitted."¹⁹

Dominicans did not share his confidence, and bitter conflicts between the legislature and the president led to a breakdown of order in 1915 and 1916. A year after Bryan left office American troops landed and began an eight-year military occupation of the nation. Although Bryan was not immediately responsible for that event, his belief that the United States could and should organize the Dominicans' affairs for them led directly to intervention and occupation.²⁰

Likewise, in dealing with Haiti, benevolent motives moved Bryan toward intervention. Hoping that Latin America would be stabilized if its economic problems were solved, the secretary listened sympathetically to arguments advanced by Roger Farnham, a New York banker with large interests in Haiti. Farnham insisted that American control over the Haitian customs service would solve all problems and would avert threatened intervention by Haiti's French and German creditors.²¹ By the time the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914 obviated the danger of Franco-German intervention, the administration was committed to straightening out Haiti's affairs. In the spring of 1915, as revolution followed revolution, Bryan began to consider "forcible interfer-

ence" to impose political and economic order on Haiti.²² At the end of July, not long after Bryan left office, American Marines landed and imposed a military government that lasted almost twenty years. Ironically, in his desire to promote democracy, Bryan ended up teaching lessons in military dictatorship.²³

If Bryan showed remarkably few doubts about using force to teach democracy in the Caribbean nations, he was much more cautious about American intervention in Mexico. The Mexican Revolution, beginning in 1911, was one of the great upheavals of the twentieth century. Wilson exercised close personal control over American responses to the ensuing civil war, but the secretary of state was never shy about offering advice on the subject. When democratic leaders of the revolution were overthrown by a military coup, Bryan, like Wilson, was appalled and applauded the president's refusal to recognize the dictator Victoriano Huerta.²⁴ In subsequent months, as the confusion in Mexico turned into civil war, the secretary counseled nonintervention, but in the spring of 1914 loyally supported the president's decisions to lift an embargo on the sale of arms to the rebels and to seize the port of Veracruz to cut off an arms shipment to Huerta's forces.²⁵ He was, however, delighted when full-scale intervention was averted and thereafter consistently urged the president to negotiate with whichever rebel leaders seemed most likely to emerge on top of the civil conflict. By Christmas 1914 Bryan hoped that a stable, democratic government would be established in Mexico without further American intervention. Peace did not come during the spring of 1915 as the secretary had hoped, but at the time of his resignation in June he remained optimistic.²⁶ Thereafter, although he publicly defended Wilson's sending of the Pershing expedition in pursuit of Pancho Villa in 1916, Bryan did everything he could to influence the administration to avoid war with Mexico.²⁷

Although Bryan may have counseled

restraint in dealing with Mexico, partly because he feared the probable cost of large scale intervention, he also had confidence that in the long run the revolution would benefit the Mexican people. Rebel leaders, he believed, genuinely had the people's interests at heart, while American interventionists represented only "a few men interested in ranches, and a few interested in mines, who would use the blood of American soldiers to guarantee profits on their investments. . . ." ²⁸ Just as the administration saw itself as battling on behalf of ordinary Americans against the abuses of great corporations at home, so it believed that resistance to corporate exploitation of other peoples was a basic duty of American foreign policy.

In addition to his influence on administration policy in the Caribbean, Bryan also played an important part in shaping its policy in Asia. His most notable success was in persuading Wilson to promise independence to the Philippines. As it turned out, that was not difficult, for the president, like many other Americans, had come to believe that the islands were "part of the domain of public conscience and of serviceable and enlightened statesmanship," and that holding them was dangerous because they were vulnerable in the event of war between the United States and Japan. ²⁹ Passage of the Jones Act officially promising independence came after Bryan left office, but soon after becoming secretary he had the great satisfaction of assuring the Filipinos that everything the administration did would be directed, as the new governor announced upon his arrival in Manila in October 1913, toward "the ultimate independence of the islands." ³⁰

In regard to China, Bryan and Wilson shared a confidence prevalent among American Protestants that the Asian nation was becoming democratic and Christian. The Taft administration had labored mightily to have the United States included in international development schemes for China, seeking

thereby to safeguard American economic interests while China's development proceeded. Bryan and Wilson viewed these multilateral projects as imperialistic, however, and over the objections of Republican experts in the state department, withdrew the United States from the international loan consortium and extended unilateral diplomatic recognition to the new Chinese Republic. They hoped that in so doing they would encourage others to follow the American lead and stimulate desirable tendencies within China. ³¹ Instead, their policy exposed American businessmen to ruinous foreign competition; while American influence on events within China declined. ³² The situation worsened after the beginning of World War I, because whatever moderating effect the European nations had had on each other and on Japan was then removed, and the United States found itself facing Japanese expansionism alone.

Bryan was especially worried about the Japanese threat in the spring of 1915, because he was keenly aware of how bad Japanese-American relations already were. Indeed, one of the first problems to face him after he became secretary of state was a crisis with Japan over California's efforts to ban land ownership by Asian aliens. The Japanese resented this discrimination bitterly, and there was a war scare in the spring of 1913. Bryan did everything in his power to defuse the issue, making a trip to California to plead unsuccessfully with the legislature not to pass discriminatory legislation, and spending endless hours with the Japanese ambassador seeking a formula that might solve the problem. But the issue proved intractable, largely because there was little the federal government could do about a state law, and because Democratic leaders were reluctant to interfere with a state's rights, especially on a racial question. ³³ When World War I began, therefore, relations between Japan and the United States were already strained.

The war rapidly worsened the situation. Japan, an ally of Great Britain, de-

clared war on Germany in order to take over German concessions in China, even though the British did not ask them to enter the conflict. "When there is a fire in a jeweller's shop," a Japanese diplomat admitted frankly, "the neighbours cannot be expected to refrain from helping themselves." ³⁴

Bryan thought there was little the United States could do about Japanese aggression in China without taking unacceptable risks. When the Japanese sent the Chinese a set of twenty-one demands that would have reduced China substantially to colonial status, Bryan protested mildly on March 13, 1915, against Japanese actions, but added the damaging concession that "territorial contiguity creates special relations between Japan and these districts" of China. ³⁵ Delighted, the Japanese seized upon the "territorial contiguity" phrase to justify their actions.

By this time in the spring of 1915 Bryan and Wilson were beginning to disagree over several issues arising from the war, with Wilson steadily taking a stronger, more assertive position than the secretary. Although in February Wilson declared that "any direct advice to China or direct intervention on her behalf . . . would really do her more harm than good," and he had approved the March 13 note, he soon decided a more vigorous stand was needed. ³⁶ "We shall have to try in every practicable way to defend China," he told the secretary, and on May 3 Bryan loyally drafted a note protesting Japan's demands on China as violations of China's sovereignty and infringements on American treaty rights. ³⁷ The note was sent to Japan on May 5, and on May 11 another American protest declared that the United States would not "recognize any agreement or undertaking" that violated American treaty rights, China's integrity, or the Open Door policy. ³⁸

Thus at the time of Bryan's resignation it appeared that the United States might be headed for a confrontation with Japan as well as with Germany. That possibility may have contributed to

Secretary of State Bryan

Bryan's decision to step down, but he need not have worried. Nothing came of the 1915 friction, except that when the United States entered the war in 1917 the Japanese immediately sought American recognition of their Chinese acquisitions. The administration conceded as little as it could, but Wilson was forced to confront America's weakness in Asia. At the end of the war he attempted to revive the international loan consortium from which he had withdrawn in 1913. Belatedly, he came to Bryan's opinion that American hopes of influence in Asia had to yield to the realities of power.³⁹

The issue that ultimately disrupted the harmony between Wilson and Bryan was the war in Europe. When it began in the summer of 1914, Wilson's wife was dying, and he willingly left the details of American neutrality to the secretary. Prior to the beginning of the war Bryan had told a friend, "There will be no war while I am Secretary of State," and now he resolved to bend over backward to avoid any American involvement in the conflict.⁴⁰ In order to prevent the formation of economic and emotional ties to either side, he recommended that Americans be discouraged from loaning money to the belligerent governments. At the same time he urged Wilson to make repeated offers of America's services as a peacemaker.⁴¹

Bryan's hope of starving the war ran head-on into the self-interest of American manufacturers and farmers who saw war as an opportunity to escape from a recession. Over the following months the desire of Americans to sell, and the eagerness of the British and French, in particular, to buy, led to an erosion of Bryan's loan ban and to a vast increase in trade between the United States and the Allies.⁴² Inevitably, the growth of economic ties led, as Bryan had feared, to a sense of commitment to the Allies, and it also led the Germans to the conclusion that the trade must be cut off if they were to win the war. Early in 1915 Germany moved to do just that, announcing the estab-



In the summer of 1914 Bryan had some old swords melted down and made into paperweights. He presented these souvenirs to diplomats with whom he worked on his "cooling-off" treaties. In addition to the Biblical injunction, "They Shall Beat Their Swords Into Plowshares," the paperweights included two of Bryan's own epigrams: "Nothing is Final Between Friends," and "Diplomacy is the Art of Keeping Cool." NSHS Museum Collections-7565-431

lishment of a "war zone" around the British Isles in which submarines would attack Allied ships and which neutral shippers were advised to avoid.

Bryan and Wilson agreed that the German declaration required a protest, and on February 10 they informed Berlin that the United States would hold Germany to "strict accountability" for harm to American ships or citizens.⁴³ If anyone in the administration knew what that phrase meant, or how it was to be enforced, no record of it remains. When American ships were attacked and Americans killed and injured in a series of attacks during March and April, no one knew what to do. Not until May 7, when the British passenger liner *Lusitania* was sunk with the loss of 128 American lives, did Wilson reach a clear decision. Overriding Bryan's contention that Americans who traveled in the war zone were guilty of "contributory negligence" and the secretary's plea to post-

pone demands for reparations until after the war, on May 13 Wilson sent a brusque note demanding that Germany alter or abandon practices that endangered American lives.⁴⁴

The issue between Wilson and Bryan was now clear. Wilson believed the United States must protect its trade and its rights as a neutral even at the risk of war; Bryan was willing to sacrifice some trade and postpone legal issues until after the war. Both had hoped that a peace mission to Europe by Colonel House earlier in the year might avoid the dilemma by bringing the conflict to an end, but by May that hope had disappeared. With peace prospects dark and Wilson's opinion hardening, Bryan was convinced that the nation was likely to be dragged into the war. On June 8, in a gesture rare among secretaries of state, he resigned in protest against the president's policy. By this time he was the only one of Wilson's close advisers

who was still genuinely neutral, so his resignation deprived the president of an important point of view.

Although the United States was able to avoid war for almost two years after Bryan's resignation, in the end he was right. In demanding that Germany cease submarine warfare, Wilson had surrendered to Berlin the decision on whether or when the United States would enter the war. For the next two years Bryan struggled to awaken the country to the danger and to change Wilson's course, but he failed as he had before his resignation. Nevertheless, when the United States declared war in April 1917 he volunteered his services loyally, although he continued to believe the decision a mistake. "Gladly would I have given my life to save my country from war," he said, "but now that my country has gone to war, gladly will I give my life to aid it."⁴⁵

Once America entered the war Bryan shifted his concern to the postwar settlement. "Some nation must lift the world out of the black night of war into the light of that day when peace can be made enduring by being built on love and brotherhood," he argued, hoping that Wilson might choose him to seek such a peace at the peace conference.⁴⁶ The hope was hardly realistic, especially when Wilson was determined to attend the conference himself.

From the United States Bryan watched the Paris conference attentively, agreeing with Wilson that the time had come for America to give up isolationism and join the new League of Nations. "The risks we take in accepting it are less than the risks we take if we reject it and turn back to the old ways of blood and slaughter," he declared, urging senators to accept the Treaty of Versailles without amendments.⁴⁷ Later, when it became obvious that the Senate would not approve the treaty without changes, he urged Democrats to ignore Wilson's stubborn insistence on unqualified ratification and to accept whatever reservations were necessary to secure a favorable vote.⁴⁸

Diabetic and aging, Bryan concen-

trated in the 1920s on such issues as prohibition and the struggle against the teaching of evolution rather than on politics or international affairs. He applauded the Washington Naval Conference of 1921-22 and supported the movement to make war illegal, but such issues did not occupy the center of his attention. On July 26, 1925, five days after helping to convict John T. Scopes of illegally teaching the theory of evolution at Dayton, Tennessee, he died peacefully in his sleep during an afternoon nap.⁴⁹

Little fitted by background, training, or temperament to be secretary of state, Bryan often aroused the ridicule of critics for his personal quirks and naivete, but his attitude toward foreign policy was typical of his countrymen at the time. Much impressed by the nation's new economic and military strength, he assumed innocently that American power could reshape the world, yet at the same time he feared the possible consequences of long-term involvement. The result of these contradictory impulses was an inconsistent policy combining rash interventionism with timid isolationism. Like many Americans, Bryan wanted his nation to serve others, but he had neither a realistic understanding of the limits of national power nor much comprehension of how little most other peoples wanted to be Americanized.

Bryan's policies based on well-meaning paternalism were often unsuccessful in the Caribbean and Asia, but in some instances his warnings about the dangers of overinvolvement could be well taken. He was right to counsel restraint in Mexico, right that the United States lacked the power to protect China from Japan, and right in arguing that the only way to protect American neutrality in World War I was to give up rights of trade and travel in the war zone. His advice in these cases outraged the administration's bellicose critics and were often unpopular even in the White House, but it can be seen in retrospect to have been realistic. Bryan will never

be popular with realist analysts of American foreign policy, however, for his criticisms of an assertive foreign policy rested not on a practical appraisal of the limits of American power but on moral opposition to war and the use of force. He deluded himself in believing that isolationism would enable Americans to perfect their society and would thus enhance rather than reduce America's moral and practical authority around the world by making the nation a model others would want to emulate.

Before we are unduly critical, however, we must remember that in 1912 no one expected America to be thrust into an active role in world affairs. After a century of peace Bryan's faith that war could be abolished did not seem naive to his countrymen. In any event, Democrats, confident that an era of peace was at hand, did not think it mattered who was secretary of state. Appointed mainly for his value to the administration's domestic policy, Bryan more than fulfilled expectations, showing a loyalty and willingness to compromise that many of Wilson's advisers had not expected. He won the affection and gratitude of his colleagues for his domestic role, but in the end he was too much an idealist to lead the foreign policy of a great power in a period of revolution and world war. "You are the most real Christian I know," exclaimed a fellow cabinet member when his resignation was announced; Bryan's inability to reconcile his Christian values with the demands of international diplomacy might have been an omen for the president and Americans in general had they had the vision to see it.⁵⁰

Notes

¹ For an excellent description of Bryan's appearance and habits as he took over the state department, see Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan: vol. 2, Progressive Politician and Moral Statesman, 1909-1915* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 97-100, and Katharine Crane, *Mr. Carr of State: Forty-Seven Years in the Department of State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1960), 158-59. Coletta's three-volume biography is the standard work on Bryan. Also important for under-

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standing his role in foreign policy are LeRoy Ashby, *William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1987); Richard Challener, "William Jennings Bryan (1913-1915)" in *An Uncertain Tradition: American Secretaries of State in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Norman A. Graebner (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961); Robert W. Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985); Kendrick A. Clements, *William Jennings Bryan: Missionary Isolationist* (Knoxville University of Tennessee Press, 1982); Merle Curti, "Bryan and World Peace," *Smith College Studies in History* 16 (Apr.-July 1931); and Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971).

¹ Edward M. House Diary, Sept. 25, 1912, *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, ed. Arthur S. Link, et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 25-234 [hereafter cited as *PWW* with subtitle, volume number, and publication date].

² *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan by Himself and His Wife Mary Baird Bryan* (Philadelphia: Chicago: John C. Winston, 1925), 34. Bryan told journalist William Bayard Hale exactly the same thing in almost the same words in 1913. See Hale, "Mr. Bryan," *The World's Work* 26 (June 1913): 162-63.

³ Wilson to Cleveland H. Dodge, June 14, 1915, *PWW* 33, April 17-July 21, 1915 (1980), 395. For the similarity between Wilson's and Bryan's basic ideas about foreign policy, see Harley Nutter, *The Origins of the Foreign Policy of Woodrow Wilson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1937), 228. Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1956), 95-97, stresses the warm personal relationship between president and secretary.

⁴ For a full account of Bryan's career up to 1896, see Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, vol. 1, *Political Evangelist, 1860-1908* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 1-160.

⁵ William Jennings Bryan, *The First Battle: A Story of the Campaign of 1896* (Chicago: W. B. Conkey, 1896).

⁶ Cherny, *A Righteous Cause*, 190-94. See also David Sarason, *The Party of Reform: Democrats in the Progressive Era* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1989), *passim*.

⁷ Coletta, *Bryan*, 2:122-26; Edward G. Lowry, *Washington Close-Ups: Intimate Views of Some Public Figures* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921), 46.

⁸ Coletta, *Bryan*, 2:126-39. See also Carter Glass to Bryan, Sept. 25, 1913, Box 29, Folder "1913 Sept. Oct.," William Jennings Bryan Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress (hereafter cited as Bryan Papers); Rixey Smith and Norman Beasley, *Carter Smith: A Biography* (New York: Books for Libraries, 1970 [1939]), 127.

⁹ Coletta, *Bryan*, 2:139-43; Dewey W. Grantham, Jr., "Southern Congressional Leaders and the New Freedom, 1913-1917," *Journal of Southern History* 13 (Nov. 1947):448.

¹⁰ For Bryan's foreign policy goals, see his speech to the American Asiatic Association, Jan. 26, 1914, *The Commoner* 14 (Feb. 1914):7.

¹¹ *The New York Times*, Jan. 16, 1915, 6. The "deserving Democrats" letter was written to the American collector of customs in the Dominican Republic, W. W. Vick, on August 20, 1913. When a scandal about the American minister to the Dominican Republic broke in 1915, the letter was widely reprinted—e.g., "Secretary Bryan and the San Domingo Spoils," *The Outlook* 109 (Jan. 27, 1915):163; *North American Review* 201 (Feb. 1915):285. Bryan showed no regret about the letter. See, for example, *The Commoner* 15 (Aug. 1916):1-2.

¹² For a more detailed discussion of the "deserving Democrats" imbroglio and Bryan's diplomatic appointments, see Paolo E. Coletta, "Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan and the 'Deserving Democrats,'" *Mid-America* 48 (Apr. 1966):75-98, and Clements, *Bryan*, 60-64. A more critical assessment of his appointments is Rachel West, *The Department of State on the Eve of the First World War* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978). The consular service, and to a lesser degree the diplomatic service, began to be staffed through competitive examinations under a law signed by Wilson on February 5, 1915. See Crane, *Mr. Carr of State*, 177-78. For a breakdown of state department personnel serving overseas, see *The Commoner* 13 (Nov. 1913):9. It is worth noting that the one diplomatic appointee whose behavior caused a scandal, James M. Sullivan in the Dominican Republic, was not Bryan's choice for the post.

¹³ For the language of the model treaty, see "President Wilson's Peace Proposal: Supplementary Memorandum by the Secretary of State," Box 29, Folder "1913 April," Bryan Papers. Paolo E. Coletta offers a valuable account of the Bryan treaties in "William Jennings Bryan's Plans for World Peace," *Nebraska History* 58 (1977):193-217. See also Curti, "Bryan and World Peace," 143-51.

¹⁴ Arthur S. Link, *Wilson: The Struggle for Neutrality* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), 497-99.

¹⁵ *The Commoner* 14 (Apr. 1914): 1. The British made it understood subtly that they would find it easier to support American policy in Mexico and Bryan's peace treaty if the tolls exemption were out of the way. See Coletta, *Bryan*, 2:157; *The Letters and Friendships of Sir Cecil Spring Rice*, A Record, ed. Stephen Gwynn, 2 vols. (London: Constable, 1929), 2:201-2. Bryan tentatively rationalized his reversal by arguing that the toll exemption would amount to a subsidy for business, which he opposed.

¹⁶ Clements, *Bryan*, 78-79.

¹⁷ Bryan to Charge Curtis, Sept. 4, 1913; Minister Sullivan to Bryan, Oct. 6, 1913, U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1913* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1920), 425, 432. [hereafter cited as *FR*]

¹⁸ Bryan to Minister Sullivan, Jan. 12, 1915, *FR*, 1915 (1924), 279-80.

¹⁹ For Bryan's belief that the United States must persist in its efforts to promote democracy in the Dominican Republic, see his memorandum on pending problems left for Robert Lansing after his resignation in June 1915; Paolo E. Coletta, ed., "Bryan Briefs Lansing," *Pacific Historical Review* 27 (Nov. 1958):393. On the subsequent intervention, see Bruce J. Calder, *The Impact of Intervention: The Dominican Republic during the U.S. Occupation of 1916-1924* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

²⁰ See, for example, a memorandum, "Substance of a long distance telephone conversation between Mr. Farnham, of the National City Bank, in New York City, and Mr. Bingham in the Latin American Division on the morning of Dec. 22, 1914," File 838.51/389, State Department Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

²¹ Bryan to Wilson, Jan. 7, 1915, *PWW* 32 (1980), 28. Clements, *Bryan*, 87-89.

²² In October 1915 Bryan defended intervention as "a necessity." See *The Commoner* 15 (Oct. 1915):2. For the occupation, see David Healy, *Gunboat Diplomacy in the Wilson Era: The U.S. Navy in Haiti, 1915-1916* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), and Hans Schmidt, *The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915-1934* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1971).

²³ Bryan, *Memoirs*, 357.

²⁴ Edward M. House Diary, Oct. 30, 1913, Apr. 14, 1914, House Papers, Yale University Library, New Haven, Conn., Bryan to Wilson, Apr. 10, 1914, *FR*, 1914 (1921), 449.

²⁵ *House Diary*, Apr. 28, 1914, Bryan, *Memoirs*, 355, 356; Bryan to Wilson, Dec. 2, 1914, Box 43, Letter Books 1914-1915, Bryan Papers; Link, *Wilson: The Struggle for Neutrality*, 478.

²⁶ *The Commoner* 16 (Mar. 1916):1; *ibid.* (Dec. 1916):7; Bryan to Josephus Daniels, June 24, 1916, July 4, 1916, Josephus Daniels Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

²⁷ From Bryan's speech at the Democratic convention in St. Louis, 1916, in Democratic National Committee and Democratic Congressional Committee, *The Democratic Text Book, 1916* (New York: Democratic National Committee, 1916), 262.

²⁸ Wilson's annual message to Congress, Dec. 2, 1913, *FR*, 1913, xiii.

²⁹ Francis Burton Harrison, *The Cornerstone of Philippine Independence: A Narrative of Seven Years* (New York: Century, 1922), 50; Roy Watson Curry, "Woodrow Wilson and Philippine Policy,"

Mississippi Valley Historical Review 41 (Dec. 1954):435-52; Clements, *Bryan*, 68-70.

³¹ See the accounts of the cabinet meetings of March 12 and 28, 1913, in *The Cabinet Diaries of Josephus Daniels, 1913-1921*, E. David Cronon ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 7-8, 17; acting secretary of state to diplomatic officers in Japan and China, Mar. 19, 1913, *FR, 1913*, 170-71; Meribeth E. Cameron, "American Recognition Policy toward the Republic of China, 1912-1913," *Pacific Historical Review* 2 (June 1933):225-30.

³² See Willard Straight's speech to the American Asiatic Association, Jan. 26, 1914, *The Commoner* 14 (Feb. 1914): 6.

³³ Paolo E. Coletta, "The Most Thankless Task": Bryan and the California Alien Land Legislation," *Pacific Historical Review* 36 (1967):163-87; Link, *Wilson: The New Freedom*, 295-99.

³⁴ Paul S. Reinsch, *An American Diplomat in China* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1922), 135.

³⁵ *FR, 1915*, 105-11. For Bryan's continuing stress on conciliation, see Bryan to Wilson, Apr. 6, 1915, Box 43, Bryan Letter Books, 1914-1915, Bryan Papers.

³⁶ Wilson to Minister Paul Reinsch, Feb. 8, 1915, *PWW* 32, *January 1-April 16, 1915* (1980), 196-97; Wilson to Bryan, Mar. 12, 1915, *ibid.*, 367.

³⁷ Wilson to Bryan, Apr. 16, 1915, *PWW* 32:531, see also Wilson to Bryan, Apr. 14, 1915, State Department Records, File 793.947294 1/2, National Archives. Bryan argued that the Japanese had already made concessions to American protests and would continue to do so. See Bryan to Wilson, May 3, 1915, Box 43, Bryan Letter Books, 1914-1915, Bryan Papers.

³⁸ *FR, 1915*, 146.

³⁹ Robert Lansing's memorandum for Viscount Ishii, July 6, 1917, *PWW* 43, *June 25-August 20, 1917* (1983), 82; Wilson to Lansing, Nov. 7, 1917, *ibid.*, 44, *August 21-November 10, 1917* (1983), 530; Wilson to Lansing, *ibid.*, 48, *May 13-July 17, 1918* (1985), 382; Burton F. Beers, *Vain Endeavor: Robert Lansing's Attempts to End the American-Japanese Rivalry* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1962), 111-12.

⁴⁰ To Josephus Daniels, as quoted in Jonathan Daniels, *The End of Innocence* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1954), 49.

⁴¹ Bryan to Wilson, Aug. 10, 1914, Box 30, Folder "1914 Aug.," same in same, Aug. 19, 1914, Box 30, Folder "1914 Sept.," same in same, Dec. 17, 1914, Box 43, Bryan Letter Books, 1914-1915, Bryan Papers; Bryan to J. P. Morgan and Co., Aug. 15, 1914, *FR, 1914, Supp.* (1928), 580.

⁴² For thorough studies of the economic ties that developed between the United States and the Allies during the neutrality period, see John W. Coogan, *The End of Neutrality: The United States, Britain, and Maritime Rights, 1899-1915* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), and Kathleen Burk, *Britain, America and the Sineus of War, 1914-1918* (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1985).

⁴³ *FR, 1915, Supp.*, 98-101. The "strict accountability" phrase was Robert Lansing's. See Daniel M. Smith, "Robert Lansing and the Formulation of American Neutrality Policies, 1914-1915," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (June 1956):75-76.

⁴⁴ Bryan used the phrase earlier, but he still held the same opinion even after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. Bryan to Wilson, Apr. 2, 1915, *PWW* 32:164, Bryan to Wilson, Apr. 19, 1915, Box 30, Folder "1915 March, April," Bryan to Wilson, May 12, 1915, Box 30, Folder "1915 May-June 8," Bryan Papers.

⁴⁵ From a speech at Albany, Georgia, Apr. 6, 1917, quoted in Genevieve Forbes Herrick and John Orgien Herrick, *The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Chicago: Grover C. Buxton, 1925), 299; Paolo E. Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan: vol. 3. Political Puritan, 1915-1925* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969), 1-55; Levine, *Defender of the Faith*, 3-92.

⁴⁶ *The Commoner* 16 (Aug. 1916) 11. For Bryan's vigorous campaign to secure appointment to the peace delegation, see Bryan to Wilson, Jan. 15, 1918, and a large number of letters from various political figures to Bryan, all in Box 32, Bryan Papers, Bryan to Charles S. Hamlin, Jan. 11, 1918, Box 355, Charles S. Hamlin Papers, Library of Congress. Wilson had no intention of appointing

Bryan but brushed him off gently. See Wilson to Joseph Tumully, Jan. 15, 1918, *PWW* 45, *November 11, 1917-January 15, 1918* (1984), 600 n.1, and Wilson to Bryan, Jan. 22, 1918, *ibid.*, 46, *January 16-March 12, 1918* (1984), 67. Bryan did not give up, however. See Bryan to Josephus Daniels, Oct. 14 and 31, 1918, Box 37, Daniels Papers.

⁴⁷ *The Commoner* 19 (Apr. 1919):3. Prior to issuing this statement, Bryan had frequently suggested amendments to the proposed League Covenant that would have made the organization's main function the investigation and discussion of international disputes and would have maximized national sovereignty. See, for example, *ibid.*, (Mar. 1919):1; Charles W. Bryan to Bryan, Feb. 27, 1919, Box 32, Folder "1919 Feb. 27, 28," Bryan Papers. In mid-March Bryan claimed that "By going farther than the most extreme objector in pointing out the corrections that should be made I strengthened the force of my argument when I insisted that we must accept the league." Bryan to Charles W. Bryan, Mar. 13, 1919, W. J. Bryan Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.

⁴⁸ See draft of Bryan to Senator Gilbert Hitchcock, Nov. 24, 1919, Box 32, Folder "1919 Nov. 20-30," Bryan Papers, *The Commoner* 19 (Dec. 1919):1-2; *ibid.*, 20 (Jan. 1920):1; Cronon, *Daniels Duty* (Jan. 8, 1920), 481-82.

⁴⁹ For this period of Bryan's life, see Levine, *Defender of the Faith*. Bryan flirted briefly with the idea of running for president in 1920 but eventually decided against making the attempt. See Bryan to Charles W. Bryan, Jan. 3, 1920, W. J. Bryan Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society. In an uncharacteristically bitter postelection editorial he blamed Wilson for driving out of public life every Democrat "who dared to differ from him even in minute details." *The Commoner* 20 (Nov 1920):1.

⁵⁰ David F. Houston, *Eight Years with Wilson's Cabinet, 1913 to 1920, with a Personal Estimate of the President*, 2 vols. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Page, 1926) 1:146.