



The Morning Star of the Reformation: William Jennings Bryan’s First Congressional Campaign

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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THE MORNING STAR OF THE REFORMATION: WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN'S FIRST CONGRESSIONAL CAMPAIGN

BY PAOLO E. COLETTA

WHEN Bryan moved from Illinois to Nebraska in 1887 he found history being rewritten, with the same problems besetting the farmers of Nebraska that had faced him and his father in the Seventies and early Eighties. With the end of free land, ranching became a highly capitalized and scientific industry beyond the scope of the ordinary Nebraska farmer. Moreover, Nebraska depended heavily upon corn and wheat, prices for which had fallen steadily since the beginning of the depression of 1873. While mortgage indebtedness increased, railroad rates and interest charges failed to come down. The question of railroad regulation became a burning issue, as did that of checking the abusive practices of middlemen. Lack of sufficient currency and sources of credit also placed such heavy burdens upon farmers that the ancient greenback song which once had thrilled Illinois came to possess new charm, this time telling of the benefits obtainable through an increased supply of money per capita and free silver.

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In addition, demands were heard for relief from a tariff which protected industry but not agriculture.

Bryan's meteoric rise in western politics occurred at a time when conditions called for a new agrarian crusade. Bryan found lacking in American life that democracy for which, ostensibly, the nation had been established and the Civil War had been fought, and he believed that Big Business, the trusts, the protective tariff, the "money power," and the inequitable distribution of the national wealth were bulwarks to be surmounted if the common man were to enjoy an honest, economical, and just government and an equitable share of the national income. His program of reform was so similar to that of the Alliance men and Populists that he has often been mistaken for a Populist, but he remained a staunch Democrat throughout the Populist period. He was not above joining forces with the Populists, however, when the result would advance a common principle or his own political fortunes. He appeared visionary to some because he prophesied such reforms as the income tax, the direct election of senators, and governmental regulation of railroads, corporations, banking, and currency—reforms which to contemporary easterners appeared as importations of European socialism. Bryan merely sought to canalize the reform movement into the Democratic party. By avoiding socialism and unpromising Utopian panaceas and by espousing certain radical tendencies he would revitalize the Democracy by the admission of progressive ideologies. In so doing he became one of the fathers of the Progressive Movement which swept the nation during the first two decades of the twentieth century and justly deserves being called "the Jefferson of the new dispensation"¹ and "the last great democratic liberal of the school of Jefferson."²

¹ Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (New York, 1942), II, 240.

² Charles M. Wiltse, *The Jeffersonian Tradition in American Democracy* (Durham, N. C., 1935), p. 235.

The three major parties in Nebraska promised reforms which would bring the millenium, but despite the efforts of various progressives, the Republican party remained conservative. Said Bryan: "The Democratic party has always claimed to represent the mass of the people. The Republican party has long since ceased to do so. It stands nearer to the corporations and to the special interests than the Democratic party could ever get if it wished to, and when we desert the cause of the people we have nowhere to go but to the grave."³ The Republicans named for governor a railroad right-of-way man and renominated for the First Congressional District its incumbent, William J. Connell.

Deeming sufficient support to be at hand to give them the balance of power between the major parties, the leaders of the State Alliance organized the People's Independent Party on July 29, 1890 and went far beyond the older parties in their demands for relief from economic distress. For governor they chose the presiding genius of the State Alliance, John H. Powers. The leading contender for the nomination in the First Congressional District was Charles H. Van Wyck, former state and national senator who demanded tariff reform, corporation reform, and the direct election of senators.⁴ Bryan might beat Connell but could he beat an experienced reformer, the candidate of a reform party?

In February 1890, the Democratic state managers told Bryan that he could have the congressional nomination. Bryan accepted because he wished to be the Moses to lead the Democratic hosts out of the wilderness. From one side he was told to espouse fusion tactics and attach both Democrats and Independents to himself. If he were the choice of both parties he would be elected; if not, a three-cornered

³ Letter, Bryan to A. B. Farquar, October 3, 1891. All letters cited in this article are to be found in the Bryan Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

⁴ John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt* (Minneapolis, 1931), pp. 80-81; Frieda C. Kuester, "The Farmers' Alliance in Nebraska," (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1927), pp. 70-74; Helen E. Storms, "A Study of the Nebraska State Election of 1890," (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1924), p. 46.

race would result in a Republican victory.⁵ From another side he was told to avoid fusion and play the Democracy straight, to show the Democrats who had gone over to the Alliance that the Democrats were determined to win.⁶ Bryan saw that he had more to gain than to lose by a kindly disposition toward the Independents and proceeded secretly to scout the prospects of getting them to nominate him. It was not generally known that Constantine J. Smyth of Omaha was his go-between in negotiations with Joseph A. Edgerton. Edgerton proved favorably disposed and promised to consult other Independents and report to Smyth shortly before the Democratic Convention. As soon as Bryan's nomination therein appeared probable, Smyth would tell Edgerton because, as Smyth told Bryan, he would not want to accept the Independent nomination until certain of the Democratic. (The Independent would precede the Democratic Convention by one day.) Smyth also told Bryan confidentially that he would be opposed by those in his own party who followed the conservative leadership of Andrew Jackson Sawyer and Albert Watkins.⁷

Bryan's leading contender within the Democracy, Charles W. Brown of Omaha, could expect the heavy city vote and perhaps draw more votes from Connell than Bryan. By late June, however, Bryan appeared a better prospect than Brown to most Democrats and even to the Republicans because he was favored by the Democratic progressives, appealed to Republicans more than any other Democratic hopeful, was unidentified with either of the old Democratic factions which had been at war for so long, and commanded the largest following in Omaha.⁸ Bryan put the issue squarely before Brown. Brown might be more available than J. Sterling Morton, but Morton's long service to the party deserved reward. Neither the party nor Morton owed him anything for his work in the campaign of 1888 because he had worked for the success of the principle of

⁵ Letter, W. T. H. McClanahan to Bryan, May 10; letter, J. W. Barnhart to Bryan, July 22, 1890.

⁶ Letters, Edwin Faloon to Bryan, September 2, 27, 1890.

⁷ Letter, Smyth to Bryan, July 25, 1890.

⁸ *Lincoln (Nebraska) Daily Call*, June 24, 1890.

tariff reform rather than for any person. Then, in the spring of 1890, he had been promised aid from many quarters if he himself became a candidate. A campaign would earn him many business contacts, perhaps reduce Connell's majority of 1888, possibly result in his own election. He would not seek the nomination, however, if either Brown or Morton wanted it. The question at hand was who could carry the largest vote. The interest of the party came above his own, he concluded, and if that interest included his nomination he would make as good a race as he could. He would pay his own expenses and make a complete canvass but could not furnish a dollar beyond that. This was his position. Brown replied, swearing friendship and offering to help him get the nomination.⁹

The preamble of Bryan's platform reaffirmed his faith in Democratic principles and invited all those who believed in "free citizens, just laws, and economical government" to flock to the Democratic standard. The first plank arraigned the Republicans for the "reckless extravagance" of the Fifty-first Congress and for their tyrannical rule and efforts to retain supremacy by fraud and force. The next four planks dealt with various aspects of the tariff. Five planks dealt with economic questions besides those of governmental economy and the tariff. One condemned subsidies and bounties; another favored liberal pensions. The trust, in all its forms, should be prevented and suppressed. Congress should prohibit holding of land by non-residents and reserve the public domain for actual settlers. Finally, "We demand the free coinage of silver on equal terms with gold, and denounce the efforts of Wall Street as against the rights of the people." Four planks concerned changes in governmental processes. The first demanded the direct election of senators; the second denounced caucus dictation; the third castigated the federal election bill; and the last denounced the Reed rules of the House.¹⁰

⁹ Letter, Bryan to Brown, June 30; letter, Brown to Bryan, July 8, 1890.

¹⁰ Copy in Bryan Papers, Library of Congress.

It has been said that Bryan never changed his views as expressed in this platform. Nevertheless, he did refine his interpretation of some of them. In the light of subsequent events the plank most subject to misinterpretation is that on silver. To say that he favored free silver is not enough, for in 1890 he had not yet concluded just how "free" silver should be. In 1896 he said that his money plank of 1890 expressed his views "at that time," and that when he spoke on the money question at all it was to say that the use of two metals instead of one would provide more money than one alone. Only *after* the election of 1890 did he make a study of the money question.

Whether Bryan was consciously influenced by the Independent platform when he wrote his own cannot be answered definitely. It differed from his only in its demand for government ownership of railroads and telegraphs and for an eight hour day. He stressed the tariff more and the money question less; otherwise the appeal of his platform was as great to an Independent as to a Democrat. It was adopted unanimously in convention.

Bryan received eighty-six votes on the first ballot, with seventy-three scattering among four opponents. After the second ballot his nomination was made unanimous.¹¹ He stood ready, he told the delegates, "to meet in joint debate, in every county in my district, the champion of high taxes, whoever he may be, and I shall go forth to the conflict as David went to meet the giant of the Philistines, not relying upon my own strength but trusting to the righteousness of my cause."

Many letters of congratulation contained advice. "Give them plenty of low tariff thunder and you will get there," predicted one.¹² "Get a hump on you," suggested another. "Speak everywhere—kiss all the babies—you can do it—you have mouth enough for both."¹³ Another hoped that "among the sturdy bullrushes of Democratic faith a Moses

¹¹ Bryan Scrapbook No. 2, Library, Nebraska State Historical Society.

¹² Letter, George W. Davy to Bryan, July 31, 1890.

¹³ Letter, Edward L. McDonald to Bryan, August 5, 1890.

has been discovered to lead the chosen people out of their bondage to trusts, tariff abuses, and irrational taxation."¹⁴ The most interesting letter came from an Illinoisan recently removed from Lincoln:

In the great tidal wave we can hear approaching . . . I hope Nebraska will also wheel into line. . . .

I believe it to be her interest to shake off the enormous burdens she has hitherto carried, and which have adhered to her as closely as the fabled "Old Man of the Sea." It appears to me that the dawn is approaching and that you are the morning star of the reformation which is moving fast upon your State.¹⁵

Despite the fact that his nomination was generally regarded as an empty gesture, Bryan set out to do his best. In a Chautauqua lecture many years later he said he entered politics by accident and remained by design. He was nominated for Congress because no one thought it possible for a Democrat to be elected. He was young and new in the state; had his district been Democratic the nomination would have gone to someone older, of longer residence, and of greater merit. In fact he was characterized as the sacrifice upon the party altar, one who had not been in the state long enough to learn its political complexion, one upon whom a confidence game had been played.¹⁶ But his fight was not altogether hopeless. The major objections to his candidacy were two—his youth, for he was only thirty years old, and the shortness of his residence in Nebraska. On the other hand, the two largest cities of the state, Omaha and Lincoln, lay in his district and should return large Democratic majorities. He was campaigning on a platform which denounced every sort of special privilege and should

¹⁴ Letter, Eli H. Doud to Bryan, July 31, 1890.

¹⁵ Letter, J. J. Kelley to Bryan, August 29, 1890.

¹⁶ *Omaha Bee*, August 1, 1890. The First District included the counties of Cass, Douglas, Gage, Johnson, Lancaster, Nemaha, Otoe, Pawnee, Richardson, Sarpy, and Saunders, with a voting population estimated at about 70,000.

appeal to the downtrodden. Since Connell had voted for free silver in Congress he could avoid the money question and concentrate on the tariff, on which he was very well informed.

In more than eighty tariff speeches Bryan asked for reform rather than for free trade. He arraigned the existing system as unrighteous and unconstitutional because it took property from one and gave it to another; because the benefits of the system went to the manufacturers and not to the consumers; because it tended to centralize wealth, corrupt legislators, and produce trusts; and because it hurt agriculture. He demanded that all raw materials and necessities of life be placed on the free list. The Democratic and Independent press gave his speeches good coverage, and many persons took fresh interest in the tariff question as a consequence of his campaign.

Bryan was given a place of honor when the Democratic State Convention met in Omaha on August 14. Calls for "Hercules Scomp Bryan"¹⁷ were followed by an ovation accorded to few and never before to one so young. In a speech which proved to be the best in the Convention he reiterated what he considered solid Democratic dogma and renewed his challenge to debate any Republican. He favored an equal treatment of silver and gold, he said, and the direct election of senators. He condemned the federal election law. While he considered these issues important, he would make his fight primarily on the tariff, and in closing, he thundered that the mass of the Republicans were as earnest in seeking tariff reform as the Democrats. "They had deluded themselves with the belief that the republican party was only flirting with organized wealth, and that it would finally wed the poor man, but the marriage between the grand old party and monopoly has been consummated, and 'what God has joined together let no man put asunder.'" The major issue at the Convention, namely, the liquor question, was settled by the acceptance of a plank

¹⁷ Henry Anselm Scomp was a college professor, who in 1888 published *King Alcohol in the Realm of King Cotton*, a history of the liquor traffic and temperance movement in Georgia.

favoring high licenses and local option. This settlement reflected the sentiment of the majority but was subject to the charge that because it opposed a proposed prohibition amendment to the state constitution it was an emphatic bid for the wet vote, a charge corroborated by the nomination for governor of James E. Boyd, whose wet leanings were well known.¹⁸

Having flung down his gauntlet, Bryan took to the stump. On the platform once, twice, or three times a day, he visited almost every village, town, and crossroads in his large district. At one place he attacked the trusts, at another the tariff, at another the money power. By speaking with what appeared artless simplicity he was reported invincible. Reports of his efforts spread beyond Nebraska into Iowa and Kansas and even into Kentucky, whence Henry Watterson sent his compliments.¹⁹

In mid-September, with the campaign half gone, Van Wyck declined the Independent nomination, and a much weaker candidate hurriedly accepted "the honor." Republican editors had already been poking fun at "the young Mr. Bryan," as they persisted in calling him. Charles H. Gere, editor of the *Nebraska State Journal*, vented his spleen with envenomed barbs. Edward Rosewater of the *Omaha Bee*, at first disturbed, became angered. When Van Wyck dropped out, Rosewater counselled Bryan to retire and make the election of Connell unanimous. He also asked Bryan to define "in a manly way his prohibition proclivities and his aristocratic tendencies."

When the Republicans formally opened their campaign, on September 20, Bryan concluded his still hunt of the countryside and invaded Rosewater's territory. His favorite approach was to set wet audiences at ease with respect to his stand on prohibition and then deplore the silence of some of the Republican candidates, especially the guber-

¹⁸ *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), August 15, 1890; Arthur Mullen, *Western Democrat* (New York, 1940), p. 66.

¹⁹ *Omaha Bee*, August 18, 1890; *Omaha World-Herald*, August 17, 22, 24, 31; September 3, 6; October 2, 1890; William Jennings Bryan, *The First Battle* (Chicago, 1897), pp. 50, 603.

natorial candidate, on the same question, saying that it was only proper for the man who went before the public to tell his views on matters of vital interest to the people. His attacks upon the purveyors of patronage and the pampered monopolies and his defense of the common people won him the support of Gilbert M. Hitchcock of the Omaha *World-Herald*.

The outstanding event of the campaign was the series of debates between Bryan and Connell. The people and the press followed these debates intently, and men old enough to remember the days of '58 said that Bryan's speeches reminded them of the "intellectual treats" they had enjoyed when listening to Lincoln and Douglas. In the first debate, in Lincoln, Bryan came forward to answer Connell with a pale face but determined look in his eyes. He was suffering from stage fright and feeling a bit nauseated, but he quickly won control of himself. The overflowing crowd applauded him as he swept away Connell's conclusions. It was evident to all that Bryan was by far the better speaker and debater. At Omaha, where two of the debates were held, Bryan greatly increased his lead. When the audience insisted upon applauding him he told them to applaud Connell—he wanted his time to convince them that the tariff was a tax.²⁰

Frantic Republican editors resorted to sneers and innuendoes. "Mr. Bryan went to church, leaving his mouth in the back yard practising on a new tariff speech," said Gere, who suggested that Bryan buy a newly invented automatic regulator for windmills. Talbot and Bryan, it was said, were attorneys for railroads. (Bryan's law partner, Adolphus Talbot, accepted railroad work. Bryan refused it.) The *World-Herald*, too, was criticized for supporting Bryan and for shifting its editorial weight to the Democratic from the Independent side. The Republicans made political capital out of the one good case they had against Bryan. On October 18 Bryan had stated that "I am tired of hearing about laws made for the benefit of the men who

²⁰ *Nebraska State Journal*, October 14; *Omaha Bee*, October 16, 18; *Omaha World-Herald*, September 25, 1890.

work in shops." "Well," retorted Gere, "there are several thousand men who work in shops in this district who are very tired of Mr. Bryan." Bryan may have made the statement in order to put himself "in solid" with the farmers who composed the bulk of his constituents, but the harm had been done, and until election day both Gere and Rosewater printed his "I am tired" statement daily on their editorial pages. The State Master Workman of the Knights of Labor advised the Knights of the First District to vote for Connell.²¹ Bryan erred by waiting two weeks before explaining. He then admitted that he was correctly quoted but had meant to say that he was opposed to class legislation. He could have put it better had he said that he was tired of hearing of the protective tariff as a benefit to labor.

Thousands were turned away from the halls in which the last debates were held. The Republicans boldly pulled out all the stops. They attacked Bryan's stand on prohibition, accused him of having used a railroad pass, of standing down on Nebraska instead of standing up for her, and they called Bryan a "calamity howler," described his "tired feeling" as a "Burchardism," and charged him with being "as effervescent as a bottle of soda pop."²²

During the last few weeks of the campaign Republican criticism became particularly strident and abusive. The leaders of the Republican party were men who had fought in the Civil War; the Democracy was being led by a man only thirty years old. As Dr. Jekyll, the versatile Bryan ran a Sunday School in Lincoln, filled the pulpit acceptably in various churches, and lectured on morality at the Y. M. C. A. As Mr. Hyde he favored anything that would bring him votes. He objected to statutory prohibition but killed a proposal for a banquet of the Lincoln Bar Association by introducing a resolution forbidding the use of wine and had delivered a "red hot" prohibition speech in the chapel of the state penitentiary. Most startlingly he frequented saloons with "the boys" and was "hail fellow well

²¹ *Nebraska State Journal*, October 31, 1890.

²² *Omaha Bee*, October 12, 26, 29, 31; November 2, 1890.

met" with the heelers of the Bloody Third Ward in Omaha. Bryan replied to these charges by saying that while he hobbnobbed with those who drank, he himself never touched liquor; he spoke against liquor from the pulpit, but he was campaigning against prohibition not because he approved of liquor consumption by others but because prohibition meant legislation on an eminently moral rather than political question. He did not insist that others accept him as a model, and he proved adamant in refusing to interfere with the moral habits of others. In that day, political decisions were often reached near the bar of the Paxton Hotel and in Ed Rothery's saloon on lower Harney Street. Bryan frequented these places but invariably drank sarsaparilla; in several instances men stopped drinking because of the unostentatious example he set. Once a fine old Democrat who was so constituted that he should never have taken a drink, asked Bryan how to break the habit. "When you get all the liquor you want," said Bryan, "why don't you call for sarsaparilla?" "But Mr. Bryan," replied the old gentleman, "when I get all the liquor I want I can't say sarsaparilla."²³ For the rest Bryan denied that he was either antilabor or a member of the A. P. A.²⁴ He said, too, that he had given up his railroad pass as soon as he had been nominated. Until the last minute the Republicans stressed his slighting of all issues in the campaign except the tariff and warned the prohibitionists that a vote for the Prohibition ticket meant half a vote for Boyd, the Democratic gubernatorial candidate, who was pledged to vote against prohibition legislation.

The year 1890 was the year of the big drouth and the big farmers' uprising. Those who participated in the campaign agreed that there had never been such a campaign before and thought that there could never be another like "the sublime energy of the human tornado which swept the prairies from August to November in 1890." The campaign

²³ *Omaha Bee-News*, November 28, 1927.

²⁴ The American Protective Association was founded in 1887 for the purpose of uniting the American people against the "ever-oppressive hierarchy of Rome" and its influence over public institutions in America. In Nebraska it generally threw its strength to the Republican ticket.

was one of the most thrilling ever known in the West and has remained a tradition in western politics.²⁵

While rural areas and the country press naturally sponsored the agrarian cause, city dwellers and the metropolitan press emphasized the liquor question. The latter aroused a tremendous amount of bitter feeling and possibly played a larger part in Bryan's election than did the agrarian crusade. Neither the Republicans nor the Independents, primarily dry but fearful of antagonizing their wet contingents, mentioned prohibition in their platforms. The Democrats opposed it. The Prohibitionists knew they did not have a chance but ran anyway. The Nebraska liquor interests, representing an investment of almost forty millions, were a well organized force and worked mightily against amending the constitution. They controlled Omaha and supported Boyd for governor. The Omaha Business Men's Association was antiprohibition. Either defeat the amendment, said these forces, or elect an antiprohibition governor.

While Boyd was flatfooted against prohibition, the Republican gubernatorial candidate, L. D. Richards, although dry in personal habits and sympathies, proved noncommittal, while John C. Watson, chairman of the Republican State Committee, stated that the question was the most important of the campaign. Richards' refusal to commit himself drove Edward Rosewater to deny him the support of the *Bee*. That loss, and defections by both wet and dry Republicans, encompassed Richards' defeat. Connell, on the other hand, tried to avail himself of the wet vote.²⁶

William E. "Pussyfoot" Johnson was directed by the Prohibitionists to report on the various candidates. He disclaimed that he was ordered to watch Bryan; indeed he warned Bryan that a "trade" was being hatched in Omaha whereby the Republican "ring" votes would go to Boyd and

²⁵ Solon J. Buck, *The Agrarian Crusade* (New Haven, 1920), pp. 132-133; Storms, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-78.

²⁶ Omaha *World-Herald*, September 4, 8, and editorial page from September 9 to November 2, 1890; J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1905-1913), III, 225-230; Victor Rosewater, "Life of Edward Rosewater," Ms, Nebraska State Historical Society), p. 167.

the many liquor votes to Connell. Thus prohibition would be defeated. Bryan sounded out the Prohibitionists through C. C. Munson of Lincoln. He told Munson that he did not suppose strong Prohibitionists would vote for him but asked that they should not put anything in his way. Munson answered "that a Prohibitionist could do no better than to vote for an honest Christian man" and that Bryan would have his vote.²⁷

Connell had beaten Morton in 1888 by 3,400 votes. Bryan won over Connell by 6,713 votes, 8,000 short of a majority but a sufficiently large plurality in a normally Republican district to earn him years of favorable local publicity. Discounting fraudulent Douglas County votes, the plurality was nearer 2,500. It has been said that Nebraska did not want prohibition and that the ballot boxes were systematically stuffed to give votes to Boyd.²⁸ This may well be, but the bald conclusion reached by Paxton Hibben that "the saloon saved Bryan" is supported only by generalities and statements difficult to prove and deserves some qualification. According to Hibben, the Omaha Bankers' and Business Men's Association levied an assessment of twelve hundred dollars on Connell, who refused to pay. Boyd then offered to meet the assessment in exchange for support by the Association.²⁹ Such an agreement was not made a matter of record, and its authenticity can hardly be proved. Yet it smacks enough of reality to be given credence. According to Victor Rosewater, son of Edward

²⁷ Letter, Johnson to Bryan, October 16, 1890. Jesse E. Boell, "The Career of William Jennings Bryan to 1896," (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1929), pp. 51-52.

²⁸ The vote stood Bryan, 32,376; Connell, 25,663; Root (Independent), 13,066. Details of the election and of the ballot box stuffing are discussed in Boell, *op. cit.*, pp. 63-84; Morton and Watkins, *op. cit.* III, 230-231; Addison E. Sheldon, *History of Nebraska* (Chicago, 1931), I, 685; and Storms, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-91.

²⁹ Paxton Hibben, *The Peerless Leader: William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 1929), p. 124-125.

Rosewater of the *Bee*, Bryan owed his election not to oratory but to the drift of the antiprohibition vote to Boyd. His father's work against prohibition, he claimed, opened the door of Congress to Bryan.³⁰ It cannot be doubted that Edward Rosewater's fight against prohibition weakened the Republicans and that the direct appeal of the Democratic platform and gubernatorial candidate to the anti-prohibitionists gained Bryan some votes. Bryan never solicited the wet vote but plainly stated that he opposed prohibition. That was enough to satisfy the liquor interests and the wet vote but will never be enough to satisfy those who believe he took his stand only in order to catch votes and who claim that "he never believed in throwing away an election for a principle that was not possible of success."³¹

Democratic joy over Bryan's election was ecstatic. Dr. George L. Miller, who several months earlier had wanted to know "who the hell is Bryan" telegraphed congratulations. Others wrote about "their boy congressman" and "the Henry Clay of Nebraska, defender of the people's right." Rosewater conceded that "Mr. Bryan is not nearly as tired as he might be." Republicans as well as Democrats wished him well. He had "crossed the Rubicon," "overcome obstacles," been given a "handsome" vote, wrote happy if not too literate friends. Many praised him because he had made a "manly, brilliant and aggressive canvass" and because he was "a young man with the young men, representing the Masses of the People and not the Select Few." Morton wrote: "The fruit was ripe. You have wisely gathered it and because of Tariff Reform as well as because of my regard for you personally I rejoice and congratulate."³² Morton looked upon Bryan's election to Congress as a more hopeful result of the campaign than Boyd's election as governor.

For the first time in the history of Nebraska the Republicans lost an election. Wet Republicans scratched Richards, wrote in Boyd, and voted the rest of the ticket

³⁰ Rosewater, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

³¹ M. R. Werner, *Bryan* (New York, 1929), pp. 25-26.

³² Letter, Morton to Bryan, November 3, 1890.

straight, with the result that a thorough Republican state victory was achieved except for the governorship. The Republicans lost their majority in the legislature to the Independents and failed to elect half the number of congressmen. Of the three new Representatives, one was an Independent and the second a fusion Democratic-Independent candidate. Bryan alone claimed to be a straight Democrat.

According to the Republicans, Bryan's election resulted from the thirteen thousand "misguided patriots" who "blew in" their votes for his Independent opponent, but Bryan's success must be accounted for in other ways. His youthfulness was as much a help as a hindrance. He was well educated, was personally presentable, and possessed a marvelous speaking voice, an ingratiating personality, and a winning smile. He spoke with a sincerity akin to religious fervor and with rare ability simultaneously dramatized his causes and popularized himself. He concentrated on issues which he sensed would be fundamental, of "paramount" importance, and he possessed abundant physical strength for campaigning. It is difficult to determine whether he was a leader or a follower at this time. In either case, both the ability to sniff the political air and lead the people into new paths and the power to gauge what the people want and lead them down the road they have chosen may be termed good politics, perhaps statesmanship. His victory in 1890 came from hard work, a popular stand on the prohibition and tariff issues, and his appeal to Farmers' Alliances—symbols of the rising tide of radicalism in the West which looked upon him, although a Democrat, as almost one of them. In part, too, he was carried along by the general Democratic sweep throughout the nation.

Bryan had told his wife in "strictest confidence" fully two years earlier that he would be nominated and elected. Since the district was Republican, he argued, he would have no trouble getting the nomination. Furthermore, the growth of Independent strength would split the Republican forces and make possible his election. She had doubted his wisdom and opposed his acceptance of any nomination until he had obtained enough income from his practice to en-

able him to leave the law for politics. Now, with his prophecy realized, she came to believe him possessed of great political foresight and a keen reader of the trend of political opinion.³³ Hitchcock supported her conclusion and closed the campaign with a prophecy of his own:

Let Nebraska congratulate herself on the fact that she has an orator who possesses the physical and mental qualities to make him a remarkable man in the history of the nation. And if the *World-Herald* reads the stars aright, the time will come when William Jennings Bryan will have a reputation which will reach far beyond Nebraska—and it will be a reputation for the performance of good deeds.³⁴

³³ William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan* (Philadelphia, 1925), pp. 299-300; Wayne C. Williams, *William Jennings Bryan, A Study in Political Vindication* (New York, 1936), p. 57.

³⁴ Omaha *World-Herald*, October 16, 1890.