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Article Summary: Chaos prevailed in the Democratic Party in the 1890s when Bryan's revolutionary leadership threatened Cleveland's long-accepted ways. Even Bryan's opponents recognized his courage when he fought Cleveland's gold policies and his support for the privileged.

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BRYAN, CLEVELAND, AND THE DISRUPTED DEMOCRACY, 1890-1896

BY PAOLO E. COLETTA

IN 1890 there was one Democratic party; in 1896 there were two snarling, brawling factions. The reasons for the disruption of the Democracy were mainly the rise of the Alliance-Populist movement, the catalytic action of the free silver issue, the meteoric rise of William Jennings Bryan as a Democrat with fusionist leanings,¹ and the grim determination of conservative Democrats to fight Bryan, the Populists,² and silver even at the cost of having a Republican president. The division in Nebraska is of particu-

¹ For Bryan's background in Illinois and his early career in Nebraska see the writer's "The Youth of William Jennings Bryan—The Beginnings of a Christian Statesman," *Nebraska History*, XXXI (March 1950), 1-24, and "William Jennings Bryan's First Nebraska Years," *ibid.*, XXXIII (June 1952), 71-94.

² A People's Independent Party was established in Nebraska in July 1890. Although the national Populist party was not formally launched until 1892, organized Alliancemen will be called "Populists" in this paper.

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lar interest because in it Bryan established the pattern that resulted in the repudiation of Cleveland by the Democracy in 1896.

Bryan gladly joined forces with his ideological cousins, the Populists, whenever the union would advance a common principle or his own political fortunes. He realized that he needed their votes to be elected to Congress and that his mastering of the Nebraska Democracy would be impossible without their aid. Bryan's acceptance of Populist support, however, proved one of the reasons for the division of the Nebraska and national Democracy into fusion and anti-fusion as well as gold and silver schools.

His free silver ideas helped connect Bryan with the Populists. After his election to Congress, in 1890, Bryan's studies led him to conclude that free silver was a good thing and that the only just ratio was sixteen to one. To him, free silver and its advocates were just and right, opposition to it unjust and wrong.³ Thus he translated an economic question which might be compromised in the political arena into a moral question to which there was only one possible answer, right or wrong.

In the Democratic state convention of 1891 the silver issue became the weapon Bryan used to snatch the leadership of the Nebraska Democracy away from J. Sterling Morton and Dr. George L. Miller, who had guided it since territorial days. Shortly afterwards, at a state committee meeting called to decide upon a replacement for a nominee who had declined a nomination to the state supreme court, Miller led the straight Democrats and Bryan the fusionists, with Bryan contending that Democrats be instructed to vote for the Populist candidate. A Democratic nomination, he argued, would insure Republican victory while Democratic success could come only by an alliance with the Populists. He called the Democratic and Populist platforms "twin sisters" and characterized the Populist candidate as

³ Bryan to T. Kilpatrick, July 20, 1891, William Jennings Bryan Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

"substantially a Democrat."⁴ With his close victory, fusion promised to be the order of a new day, with the result that Morton, Miller, and other conservatives strengthened their determination to resist him.⁵ Thus the stage was set for a fight for the leadership of the state Democratic organization between Bryan and what he termed his "progressive" following and the Bourbon Democrats.

Shortly thereafter, by calling for currency reform in addition to tariff reform in the Fifty-second Congress (1891-1893), Bryan forced a fight within the national Democratic organization between the free silverites and the followers of Grover Cleveland, who demanded the gold standard. Bryan's battle in Congress will be considered first.

Despite herculean efforts, Bryan, Richard Parks "Silver Dick" Bland, and others failed to obtain free silver legislation in the first session of the Fifty-second Congress, which sat from December, 1891, to early August, 1892, under President Benjamin Harrison, and Bryan made a special note of the fact that future antisilver tactics would be based upon an attempt to repeal unconditionally the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890. Bryan expected that Cleveland, as President-elect, would spur the second session of the Fifty-second Congress (December, 1892-March, 1893) to undertake tariff reform, which it did. However, the rapid deterioration of the national finances after his election caused Cleveland to decide that tariff reform was less important than the repeal of the Sherman Act, and to repeal that Act he called the Fifty-third Congress into extraordinary session, on August 7, 1893. Bryan, wholeheartedly in support of Cleveland on tariff reform, delivered in its behalf a speech often considered the best he ever made, on any subject, and Cleveland was grateful.

⁴ Bryan to Frank Ireland, October 3, 1891; to Edgar Howard, October 3, 1891, *ibid.*; *Omaha Daily Bee*, *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), September 18-October 8, 1891.

⁵ Morton to Bryan, September 28, 1891, Bryan Papers; Morton, "Arbor Lodge Journal," March 21, April 27, 1891, Morton Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society.

But Cleveland soon realized that Bryan's imagination was afire for free silver, which he himself had opposed strenuously ever since his entry into national politics. He knew that Bryan's support of Charles F. Crisp in the speakership contest had helped assure that silver would be considered by the Congress, that Bryan had preferred Horace Boies, an Iowa silverite, to him as the Democratic presidential nominee, and that he had refused to stump Nebraska for him in the campaign of 1892. He knew also that Bryan ably seconded Bland's perennial attempts to push free silver bills through the House; that he had spoken in many Western and Southern states on the silver issue; that he courted such free silver senators as Colorado's Henry M. Teller; that he favored the coining of the seigniorage; and that he opposed both the repeal of the 10 per cent state bank tax demanded by the national platform and the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. Moreover, in the Fifty-third Congress, which sat until March 3, 1895, Bryan headed a Ways and Means subcommittee on the public debt that pigeonholed all bills providing for the issue of bonds, which Cleveland believed were necessary to maintain the gold standard.

In addition to opposing Bryan on silver, Cleveland resented his fusion tactics, which won his re-election in 1892, and his opposition to the issue of bonds. Therefore when Bryan delivered his impassioned speech against the unconditional repeal of the Sherman Act, on August 16, 1893, he ordered that he be denied patronage and that he be kept off the Ways and Means Committee. Bryan remained on the Committee only because Speaker Crisp said that he was needed in the fight for tariff reform. Bryan continued to co-operate with Cleveland on tariff reform, but he declared the President wrong in pressing for the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. Cleveland's success in repealing the Act, he said, would injure his prestige and drive a broad wedge deeply into the party. Popular enthusiasm for Cleveland and the Democracy had been high in March 1893. In November, as Bryan predicted, it sank to a new low, overshadowed only by that of 1894, when the tolerance

of the American people for the Democracy almost disappeared and Bryan believed his chances of re-election so poor that he refused to run.

A week after the elections of 1894 Bryan called upon the Lame Duck Session of the Fifty-third Congress to pass a free coinage bill and send it to Cleveland for his signature. If he signed it, bimetallism would be established; if not, bimetallism would become the paramount issue in 1896.⁶ Meanwhile he sat upon all bills asking for the issue of bonds.

Bryan took the currency reform plan Cleveland sent the Congress in December, 1894, as a declaration of war, for the President would divorce government from banking, increase the note issuing powers of the national banks, and repeal the tax on state banks.⁷ The issue of money, asserted Bryan, was an attribute of sovereignty that could not be delegated to private organizations. Since the President had apparently joined himself to the East and to the Republican states, he asked the Democrats of the South and West to fuse and to repudiate his financial policies.

When William M. Springer introduced a bill giving effect to Cleveland's recommendations, Bryan prepared for a showdown. Now recognized as the "orator laureate of the silver men,"⁸ he pounded Cleveland unmercifully in a blistering speech in which he first used the phrases "crown of thorns" and "cross of gold." Characterizing Springer's bill as part of the gold conspiracy dating from 1873, he flayed the President for his failure to implement the party's pledge "to help in the restoration of the gold and silver coinage of the Constitution" and declared that time for harmony had passed. Those who made gold their god should follow it; those who favored bimetallism and other progressive measures should follow him rather than Cleve-

⁶ Omaha *Morning World-Herald*, November 4, 1894.

⁷ *Congressional Record*, 53d Congress, 3 Session, 27: 10-11.

⁸ James A. Barnes, *John G. Carlisle, Financial Statesman* (New York, 1931), 370.

land. Compromise? No! "Principles cannot be compromised."⁹

After the defeat of the Springer bill, early in 1895, Cleveland sent the Congress a special message. To avert disaster he now demanded "radical remedial legislation," including the issue of long term bonds at low interest rates and the cancellation of greenbacks and Treasury notes upon their presentation.¹⁰

Bryan was well aware that previous bond issues had helped the Government little. The issue of January 1894 had lasted ten months, that of November 1894 less than ten weeks. In Congress and on the stump Bryan asserted that Cleveland was not a bimetalist but a gold bimetalist; his arrangements with J. P. Morgan for the sale of the third issue of bonds proved him in league with the plutocracy that had seized practical control of the government, and the defeat of his propositions in the House was "glorious news," a result due to "the voice of the people, and therefore the voice of God."¹¹

Within eighteen hours a resourceful Cleveland had Morgan draw up the bond contract. Then he sent to Congress merely a curt announcement of that fact, explaining not a plan but his action in one of the boldest moves in American financial history,¹² and various Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee prepared a report favorable to bonds.

Upon reading the bond bill, on February 14, 1895, Bryan charged that harsh and imperious terms had been offered the government by associates of foreign financiers, the latter seeking "for a sum stated" to purchase a change

⁹ *Cong. Rec.*, 53d Cong., 3 Sess., 27: Appendix, 144-154.

¹⁰ Grover Cleveland, *Presidential Problems* (New York, 1904), 143-147.

¹¹ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, February 5, 8, 1895.

¹² *Cong. Rec.*, 53d Cong., 3 Sess., 27: 1958-1959; *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, February 9, 1895; Barnes, *Carlisle*, 282-389; Robert McElroy, *Grover Cleveland, The Man and the Statesman* (New York, 1923), II, 85-88; Allan Nevins, *Grover Cleveland, A Study in Courage* (New York, 1933), 685-689.

in the financial policy of the country. He would willingly give up his life, he said, in order to defeat the monstrous Morgan contract.¹³ Cleveland, he added, had inoculated the Democracy with Republican virus and blood poisoning had set in. Cleveland might bargain with foreign financiers to preserve the gold standard, but Bryan declared that the American people would accept only an American currency system. Indeed, he said that party lines were no longer meaningful, for Eastern Democrats and Republicans had locked arms against the rest of the country, forcing the South and West into a defensive alliance designed to preserve their homes and welfare.¹⁴

The House gave Cleveland a stinging rebuke by refusing to authorize the issue of bonds. Clevelandites point to the \$16,000,000 that could have been saved by the adoption of the Cleveland plan as "the price of William Jennings Bryan's first victory over Cleveland."¹⁵ In contrast, Bryanites point to Cleveland's defeat as a victory "for the people and posterity," and Bryan stated that without a doubt the campaign of 1896 would be fought on the money question "between the capitalists of the northeast and the rest of the people of the country," for silver now permeated every question of public importance as much as slavery did in the antebellum period. "What the country needed," said Bryan, "was a Western president."¹⁶

On February 22, 1895, the leaders of the Populist national organization asked the support of *all* interested in sixteen to one. Bryan marked this demand as the transition in the silver crusade from mere educational work to real political effort.¹⁷ In a meeting of Western and Southern silver leaders in Washington on the same day he also urged the coalition of *all* forces that desired the success of silver

¹³ *Cong. Rec.*, 53d Cong., 3 Sess., 27: 2141-2142, 2178, 2182-2183, 2187; *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, February 13, 1895; William Jennings Bryan, *The First Battle: A Story of the Campaign of 1896* (Chicago, 1897), 131-133.

¹⁴ Bryan, *First Battle*, 135-146.

¹⁵ McElroy, *Cleveland*, II, 93.

¹⁶ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, February 15, 17, 1895.

¹⁷ Bryan, *First Battle*, 155.

above all other considerations. Southern Democrats like Joseph Bailey were not ready to abandon the Democracy, however, and Bryan realized that there was more power in the unified Democracy of the South and West than in a union of merely Western Democrats and Western Populists. Bryan compromised with Bailey, and on March 1, three days before the end of the Congress, the silver leaders issued a Democratic Manifesto. They contended that the silver reformers should either dictate terms in the national convention of 1896 or hold a separate convention. If the convention declared for anything short of free silver at sixteen to one or named anyone but a silver Democrat, the silverites would bolt. Should Republicans or Populists wish to join them, they must enroll under the Democratic flag. First to sign was Silver Dick Bland. Equally conspicuous, yet not brashly forward, was the autograph of William Jennings Bryan at the top of the second column of signatures.¹⁸

Bryan's last speech in the House, on the very last day of the Fifty-third Congress, was provoked by the call by various European nations for another international monetary conference. Convinced that creditor nations would never agree to international bimetalism, he demanded that the United States undertake independent free coinage, now, not waiting for an hour upon any other nation or group of nations. The Fifty-third Congress left behind more data and stronger arguments for silver than the people had ever had before, he said. Henceforth a great campaign of education must proceed in order that the voters might know how to mark their ballots correctly in the great battle of '96.¹⁹ Late on March 4 Bryan left Washington for Nebraska, deeply engrossed in pondering how best to engage in such a campaign for the next eighteen months.

Thus the contest of 1896 was foreshadowed by the conflict of two irreconcilable leaders, Cleveland and Bryan. While not actually fomenting the discontent of the masses,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 155-158; *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, February 23, 26, March 2, 1895; *New York Tribune*, March 2, 3, 1895.

¹⁹ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, March 3, 1895; Bryan, *First Battle*, 147-148.

Bryan tried to forge it into a formidable weapon for the realization of distributive justice. He would expunge those laws which permitted the East to drain the wealth of the West and South into its coffers. He demanded justice for debtor as well as for creditor, and true currency reform, not the gold standard, as well as a fair reward for the strivings of the nation's producers of wealth. Silver might be a "business question" to Cleveland and the East, but it was a moral question to him and the West. The Battle of Bull Run alone had been fought in 1893. In the elections of 1894 had come the Gettysburg of the goldbugs. Now he was prepared to give the "yellowbellies" their Appomattox.

Because he opposed Cleveland, the Nebraska Bourbons tried to prevent Bryan's re-election to the House in 1892 and his election to the United States Senate in 1893 and 1895. They considered him foolish in permitting himself to be captured by the "superficial shibboleth" of free silver, and in the state convention of April 1892, which chose the delegates to the national convention, he was "sat down upon": he failed to get a plank on silver, to whip up enthusiasm for Horace Boies, of Iowa, as the presidential nominee instead of Cleveland, or to get elected as a delegate. In one of Nebraska's most fiery conventions, in October, 1892, the delegates voted for gold and then overwhelmingly endorsed him.²⁰ He was beaten on gold, according to one Cleveland biographer, by the power of the Cleveland wave that swept over Nebraska;²¹ others believed he had committed political suicide by bucking Cleveland. Yet the convention marked a new era in Democratic politics in Nebraska. Young men had fought for silver, older men for gold. Although silver was omitted from the platform, its triumph in the next convention was predictable. Moreover, the disaster of the moment could lead to victory for Bryan, for he had made his fight in part to outgeneral Morton and

²⁰ Omaha *Morning World-Herald*, March 3-31, 1892; J. Sterling Morton and Albert Watkins, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1913), III, 240-241; Paolo E. Coletta, "The Nebraska State Convention of April 13-14, 1892," *Nebraska History*, XXXIX (December, 1958), 317-333.

²¹ McElroy, *Cleveland*, I, 334.

win back to the silver wing of the Democracy those who had left it for Populism. His popularity with the Populists and with a small group of silver Republicans could be the saving factor in his re-election. The First Congressional District convention was exclusively his affair, and he was renominated without opposition,²² partly because Morton, the gubernatorial candidate, joined in the loud singing about the "new Moses."

The new Moses was in a stern mood, however, for the nomination and prospective election of Cleveland had driven him to the fringe of the Democracy. Cleveland's attitude, he charged, was that of a money changer and capitalist, not that of a leader of the agrarian and urban masses who were justifiably turning the nation into a madhouse of discontent.²³ He refused to aid Cleveland's campaign, but he gave faithful support to such men as James B. Weaver, the Populist presidential candidate, as well as to various progressive Democrats, and he won re-election only because the Populists again came to his aid, enabling him to overcome a much more formidable opponent than that of 1890. Bryan's support by goldbug Morton was a paradox explained by Morton's hope of securing a cabinet post if Cleveland were elected. The result was that many persons in Bryan's district went cross-eyed trying to believe one and vote for the other. Bryan won by 140 votes only, while Morton trailed him by 5,500 votes in his district and swore that Bryan had traded him off to the Populists.²⁴ Bryan was again the sole Democrat elected to Congress and represented the only Democratic victory in both the national and state elections in Nebraska.

²² *Nebraska State Journal*, April 15-25, 1892; *Omaha Daily Bee*, April 9-11, 16, 19, 1892; *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, April 8-11, 16, 1892; Bryan, *First Battle*, 72.

²³ *Omaha Daily Bee*, *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, June 23, 1892.

²⁴ Morton, "Arbor Lodge Journal," August-December, 1892; Morton to Emma Morton, October 6, 1892, to Michael D. Harter, January 9, 1893, James C. Olson, *J. Sterling Morton* (Lincoln, 1942), 344; *Omaha Daily Bee*, *Nebraska State Journal*, August 12-November 10, 1892; Paolo E. Coletta, "William Jennings Bryan's Second Congressional Campaign," *Nebraska History*, XL (December, 1959), 275-291.

More important than Bryan's immediate victory and more pregnant for his future and for that of the country was the "Populist bombshell" in the form of a million popular votes and the electoral votes of four states. The failure of the Populists to capture the Southern Democracy in 1892 gave Bryan a good chance in 1896, for he had four years in which to cement fusion. The election of 1894, also, strengthened the reform spirit to the point where it made inevitable the selection of a progressive for presidential candidate. Bryan and Cleveland would lead the fight. Against the unyielding conservatism of the banking, railroad, manufacturing, and mercantile world of Cleveland Bryan would speak in behalf of the common man, "in defense of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty—the cause of humanity."

In his two races for the Senate, in 1893 and 1895, Bryan found some goldbug Democrats so frozen in their attachment to Cleveland that they would not vote for him under any circumstances and some Populists so devoted to the middle-of-the-road philosophy that they would under no conditions abet fusion. Although the election in 1893 depended upon fusion of the Populists with either the Democrats or Republicans (the Republicans held fifty-three seats, the Democrats seventeen, and the Populists fifty-three), the Democrats split until the end came in the election of William Vincent Allen, Populist. Although he lost, Bryan was pleased that his influence with eleven of the seventeen Democrats had made Allen's election possible and with Allen himself, who promised to organize the Senate in opposition to Cleveland if the President tried to coerce Bryan because of his silver views. Cleveland cracked down by giving the post of Secretary of Agriculture to Morton, who turned the state patronage over to the tender mercies of Tobias Castor, Euclid Martin, and James Boyd, all Bryan-haters. To become the master of Nebraska Bryan must wean Democratic strength from Cleveland and join it to the Populist fusion element; unless he convinced the nation at large that he represented the interests of the people of

the United States better than Cleveland, he would never master the national organization.²⁵

The Nebraska Populists, while enjoying their balance of power, kept an especially sharp eye on Bryan during 1894, for the fall elections would affect the composition and control of the Congress and have a definite effect upon the presidential contest of 1896. So long as he remained with them in sentiment and principle he posed the greatest barrier to their success by keeping an estimated 15,000 Democrats from their ranks. Finding the Populists more determined than ever to stick to the middle-of-the-road and to make capital out of the prevailing Democratic hard times, Bryan rejected the suggestion that he take the senatorship and the Populists take the state offices, stating that he would not offer the Democracy as fresh meat of sacrifice upon the Populist altar and that his brand of fusion proposed that the Populists furnish the votes and he the leadership; he opposed fusion if it meant that Populism would engulf the Democracy.²⁶

When Bryan told close friends of the need of making a great fight to keep party control out of Cleveland's hands, several of them organized a statewide conference for June, 1894. At the same time he accepted the editorship of the daily Omaha *World-Herald* as a step to foster his race for the Senate and his presidential aspirations, and he declined re-election to the House.²⁷ The reasons for his declination are clear: he had been re-elected in 1892 by only 140 votes in what amounted to a fusion ticket; his unconcealed opposition to Cleveland had cut him off completely from ad-

²⁵ For greater detail, see the writer's "William Jennings Bryan and the Nebraska Senatorial Election of 1893," *Nebraska History*, XXXI (September 1950), 183-203.

²⁶ *Nebraska State Journal*, February 8, 18, 19, March 3, 11, 16, 1894; *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 21, March 19, 1894; *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, February 23, March 22, 27, April 4, 8, 1894.

²⁷ "If I am footloose I can help make combinations . . . and I might stand a good chance for the Senate. . . ." Bryan to Gilbert M. Hitchcock, April 14, 1894, Bryan Papers. Hitchcock, the owner-editor of the Omaha *World-Herald*, was later a Representative and finally, as a Senator, played an important part in the Wilson administration.

ministration support;²⁸ he was now fighting to take control of the whole Nebraska Democracy away from Cleveland and could do so only with the aid of the Democrats in the Populist camp. If he succeeded, the fusion tactics that elected Allen in 1893 could elect him in 1895 and lead to the presidency.

Morton said that Bryan had taken a considered plunge into Populism, that the Democracy would not cross the gulf that separated the two parties, and that true Democrats would not admit that Jefferson and Jackson were the prototypes of the Bryan movement. Willis J. Abbot, then writing for the *Chicago Times*, declared Morton insanely jealous of Bryan, adding, "Mr. Bryan no more contemplates becoming a Populist than Mr. Morton contemplates becoming a Democrat in the real sense of the word."²⁹

A week after Bryan's declination, Constantine J. Smyth issued the call for a convention at Omaha on June 21 that would create a Nebraska Democratic Free Coinage League which would try to obtain recognition for silver in the forthcoming state convention. Caught completely by surprise, the Clevelandites asked Smyth if this meant separation from the party or a fight within it. Smyth replied that the bimetallists meant to capture the party organization in the state. Without a hitch the delegates formed the desired League, embodied Bryan's silver plank in their resolutions, and asked for the co-operation of all Democrats. Then president Joseph C. Ong asked Bryan to announce his candidacy and publish his platform, and promised his support. Those who had believed the Democracy at death's door were shocked by its resurgence and by the almost fanatical hero worship of Bryan. There was little doubt that he could force the state convention to adopt a silver plank and get Populist aid in his race for the Senate.

²⁸ Bryan received 1 per cent of the Nebraska offices and goldbug national committeeman Tobias Castor 99 per cent. Bryan to Cleveland, February 7, 1894, Bryan Papers; *Nebraska State Journal*, *Omaha Daily Bee*, May 24, 1894; *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, January 18, 1894.

²⁹ *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, May 20, June 4, 1894.

Bryan published his platform, which ended with an excoriation of Cleveland's financial policies, and said he would use the preference ballot provided for in the state constitution and not used since 1886. Since his demands paralleled those of the Populists, conservatives again shrieked about his radicalism, for they feared that his overlapping of both the Democratic and Populist parties made him a national leader of those with similar tendencies. Cleveland now feared him as an apostle whose oratorical artistry, if devoted to the leadership of the fusion movement, might make Populism a direct threat to the Democracy. Progressives countered by praising him for everything the Bourbons deplored, and Willis J. Abbot, who had encountered great difficulties in getting the Illinois Populists to fuse, wrote him that "If you succeed in driving the Democrats and Populists of Nebraska in a span I will take my hat off to you as a master of politics."³⁰ On his side Bryan had the silver Democrats, an unknown number of Populists, and organized labor; against him were the Republicans, the Populist mid-roaders, the Cleveland administration forces, and the state's corporate and railroad power. Could he down them all?

Demanding fusion and more fusion, Bryan stimulated his supporters to their best efforts while he discussed with James B. Weaver the methods of pumping sense into the Nebraska Populists, but the Populists nominated Silas A. Holcomb for governor, asked for Democratic support, and offered him nothing in return, while the Cleveland Democrats supported the incumbent Republican lieutenant governor, Thomas A. Majors, for governor, hoping to force him to bolt to the Populists.³¹ The primaries, straight-out Bryan versus Cleveland affairs, returned three silverites

³⁰ Abbot to Bryan, August 21, 1894, Bryan Papers.

³¹ H. M. Boyston to Bryan, August 30, 1894, E. M. Harrington to Bryan, September 1, 1894, *ibid.*; *Omaha Daily Bee*, *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, *Nebraska State Journal*, August 15-September 15, 1894; N. C. Abbot, "Silas A. Holcomb," *Nebraska History*, XXVI (October-December 1945), 187-192; Addison E. Sheldon, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln, 1931), I, 747-748.

for each goldbug, and Bryan stood on the threshold of taking the Nebraska Democracy away from Cleveland.

No sooner was Euclid Martin named in the Democratic state convention as the state central committee's choice for permanent chairman than Bryan substituted the name of Edward P. Smith, silverite. Lashing the goldbugs in a fiery speech he humiliated them with the election of Smith, took the party away from Cleveland, and established the tactical pattern followed in the national convention of 1896. Party whip clenched in his capacious hand, he delivered the Democracy to the Populists by endorsing Holcomb rather than the goldbug's choice. He himself was the only prominent Democrat completely endorsed, but the unanimity of his endorsement was made possible only because sixty goldbugs bolted after the nomination of Holcomb.³² The disruption of the Democracy now proceeded apace. Led by Euclid Martin, the bolters held a rump convention, adopted the national platform of 1892, endorsed Morton and Cleveland, and made plans to enter a full "straight Democratic" ticket into the field by petition. Determined to down Bryan, they tested in court his right to call the silver wing of the party "Democrat."³³ Bryan in turn called all silverites and fusionists to his side. "Synthesis, not division," Weaver wrote him, "is the order of God and of common sense," and he added, prophetically, "We must have *two gold bug* tickets in 1896 and only *one* reform ticket."³⁴ From Wisconsin a supporter of Bryan wrote: "If you win this fight the presidency is not beyond your reach."³⁵

The election was a miniature of that of 1896. The railroads used all power at their command to beat Bryan, while loan companies frightened borrowers into voting Republican by threatening immediate collection of loans. More important, perhaps, was the fact that many voted for the

³² Omaha *Morning World-Herald*, September 26-28, 1894; Bryan, *First Battle*, 150-151; Olson, *Morton*, 384-385.

³³ *Nebraska State Journal*, *Omaha Daily Bee*, *Omaha Morning World-Herald*, September 30-October 20, 1894.

³⁴ Weaver to Bryan, September 1, 30, 1894, Bryan Papers.

³⁵ Edwin C. Wigganham to Bryan, October 19, 1894, *ibid.*

Democratic bolters' ticket because they were uninformed and thought the word "straight" on the goldbug ticket added strength to their Democracy. Credit for Holcomb's narrow victory goes to the counties off the railroad lines and to Bryan and to the hardworking members of the Nebraska Democratic Free Coinage League. The Republicans won the other state offices, obtained a majority in the legislature, and carried five of the six congressional districts. Fusion, attempted in three districts, carried one. With Bryan out of the race the First reverted to Republicanism and confusion—it took 1,236 ballots to choose his successor.³⁶

Thus Bryan was retired to private life. The Populists made no nomination for senator, and John M. Thurston, the leading Republican contender, wisely worked on the prospective members of the legislature rather than using the preference ballot. Of those who expressed a preference, 75% favored Bryan and two per cent favored Thurston. Bryan had received 35,000 more votes in a Republican year than Morton had received in the Democratic year of 1892. By holding almost all the Democrats who had gone into the Populist party he had definitely assumed the leadership of the Nebraska Democracy.³⁷ Since Thurston was elected by the Republican legislature, the returns also gave concrete illustration to Bryan's contention that he would have won had direct elections been provided. Bryan rejoiced in defeat because he had mastered his state and because Cleveland had been thoroughly repudiated in the national elections and would face a Republican House for the last two years of his term. Since the Populists received 42% more votes than in 1892, it seemed to Cleveland that the fate of the Democracy in 1896 was already sealed. Bryan looked

³⁶ F. I. Illick to Bryan, J. L. Cleaver to Bryan, C. J. Smyth to Bryan, October 13, 1894, Thomas H. Gillan to Bryan, November 10, 1894, *ibid.*; Omaha *Morning World-Herald*, September 20-November 19, 1894.

³⁷ Morton to a son, Carl Morton, November 7, 1894, Kenneth E. McIntyre, "The Morton-Bryan Controversy," (MA. thesis, University of Nebraska, 1943), 22; Omaha *Morning World-Herald*, November 19, 1894.

for a complete victory by the progressives in 1896. His hope lay in an alliance in which the silver Democrats and Populists would hold him the only Democrat of national importance deserving of their support. Henceforth, as a private citizen, he would seek to hack from the forest of conservatism a progressive road along which great reforms could be achieved. To those who advised him not to push fate but to rest quietly for a year or two and "let time do right by you"³⁸ he replied that he itched to go to war against the money power. Weaver was asking him to "help shape things properly when a new order of things is precipitated." Demands for speeches came from silver leaders throughout the country. The silvery tones of an unmistakable "Bryan for President" boom tickled his ears, and he believed that his fight for the right would not be forgotten when the Democrats scanned the horizon for the rising light of their success.

From March 4, 1895 to the meeting of the Democratic national convention in July, 1896 Bryan roamed across the land addressing congregations and making converts. He won the friendship of almost every man destined to be a delegate to the national convention and impressed many state leaders with speeches delivered in the unending stream of conferences in which the silverites sought to perfect their organization. In May, 1895 he attended the Illinois silver men's state meeting which Cleveland marked as beginning the fight for control of the national convention and then countered the "sound money" crusade Cleveland had launched in the South by replying in Memphis, Tennessee, to a speech delivered in the same city by John G. Carlisle. In the great silver convention held in Memphis in mid-June he overcame demands for an independent silver party and helped create the Bimetallic Democratic National Committee, designed to capture the Democratic national convention for silver.

³⁸ Edgar Howard to Bryan, November 13, 1894, Bryan Papers.

Bryan returned from tour to Nebraska in August for one of the bitterest of his many fights, for the goldbugs had been using their newly established Sound Money League, Morton's favorite child, to break his hold upon the state. Bryan asserted that those who had bolted the convention of 1894 ought at least to give the date of their repentance if they expected to return to the fold, but the unrepentent bolters insisted upon calling themselves "straight Democrats," issued a call for a state convention, and promised to send a contesting delegation to the national convention. If gold controlled therein, their delegation would be seated regardless of the merits of Bryan's case.

The regular convention was a "silver triumph," with Bryan himself, as chairman of the Committee on Resolutions, writing the money plank and serenely leading the silverites to victory over a minority plank that reaffirmed the national platform of 1892. While Bryan thoroughly disavowed the goldbug convention, Morton appealed to state committeeman Castor to take their case to court and have the goldbugs declared the "Simon-pure, unadulterated, original, and everlasting organization of the Democracy." A Bryanite protested to the secretary of state against the filing of the bolters' certificate of nominations, but the three days established by law for filing such certificates having passed, nothing could be done to stop the bolters from using the word "Democrat" on their ticket. With a demand for a restraining order against the goldbugs the matter went to the state supreme court, which listened to Bryan and others but declared that it possessed no jurisdiction over political questions; both silver and gold candidates must be certified and the decision left to the voters. Since the candidates were listed alphabetically, Thomas J. Mahoney, gold "Democrat," would precede Charles J. Phelps, silver "Democrat," on the ticket opposite the post for supreme court judge. In desperation, Bryan suggested that the Populists make no nomination and support Phelps, but the Populists disregarded his plea and named their own man, again demonstrating that the Republicans would win so long as the Democrats and Populists refused to fuse. Moreover, since

Mahoney polled twice as many votes as Phelps, it was evident that the gold Democracy controlled the larger section of the disrupted Democracy and that their claim to represent Nebraska in the national convention would have great weight.

While Bryan refused to attach any great importance to a mere state election in an off-year, he undertook to organize Nebraska in the name of the newly formed Bi-metallic Democratic National Committee. Within a week of his call a group of Democrats, Populists, and Republicans organized the Nebraska Silver League and strove to educate the public before the primaries of 1896 brought partisan spirit to interfere with calm discussion. Bryan also delved deeply into a plan whereby all forces would merge if the Democratic convention chose gold. He wrote Weaver, David Waite, Marion Butler, Ignatius Donnelly, William V. Allen, Clarence Darrow, and Benjamin Tillman, at least, that he looked for a bolt of the silver men and desired to know how much co-operation he could expect from other parties. Weaver promised aid; the wily Butler asked for more information; Waite stuck to the "Omaha platform"; and Tillman volunteered the information that in the last six months the silver leaders of the Democracy had veered more and more toward a fusion policy and toward Bryan as their chief.³⁹

Bryan said that he would bolt a Democratic goldbug running on a gold platform and that duty to country was higher than duty to party, absolutely refused to bow down and worship the golden image Cleveland had erected, and for the South and West demanded the same liberties and independence of action enjoyed by the East. Cleveland, in contrast, spoke of "unjust accusations of political antagonists and the hatred and vindictiveness of ingrates and traitors who wear the stolen livery of Democracy."⁴⁰ By

³⁹ Waite to Bryan, November 26, 1895, Tillman to Bryan, December 7, 1895, Weaver to Bryan, December 31, 1895, Butler to Bryan, January 8, 1896, *ibid.*

⁴⁰ Cleveland to Don Dickinson, February 18, 1896, Grover Cleveland Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress.

the time of the primaries, then, Bryan stood ready to bolt his party if a gold minority within it assumed to declare the policy for the majority. By consistently and conscientiously opposing the Cleveland-Carlisle-Morton demands for a gold standard he had become one of the outstanding silver leaders of the nation. Now he was assured by many Southern and Western Democrats and Populists that he was considered presidential timber, a judgment that need be tested only in the crucibles of the primaries and in the convention itself.

In the Nebraska primary convention, which refurbished Bryan's senatorial platform of 1894 and made it a Chicago platform in embryo, C. J. Smyth, W. H. Thompson, W. D. Oldham, and Bryan himself were elected delegates-at-large. Then Bryan "permitted" James C. Dahlman to introduce a resolution instructing the delegation for him as presidential candidate. After the delegates had shouted themselves hoarse, however, he asked that the resolution be withdrawn. He was not insensible to the compliment, he said, but he preferred to go to Chicago as a fighter rather than as a figurehead. Furthermore, principle should come before personalities; only after the contest for principle was settled should the battle for honors begin. Dahlman withdrew his resolution and Bryan then delivered a speech on the "great betrayal" by Cleveland of the Democratic cause.⁴¹

Despite forebodings of futility the goldbugs selected close friends of Morton as delegates and resolved that the silver delegates be denied seats in the national convention. Bryan thereupon prepared a brief of the Nebraska contest and sent it to a delegate slated for the Credentials Committee. In a letter he sent to hundreds of delegates he also emphasized that his was the "regular" delegation.

By June 1, thirteen states had declared for silver and seven for gold. Of their 338 delegates, 172 favored silver and 166 opposed, leading Cleveland to pray that "the preva-

⁴¹ *Nebraska State Journal, Omaha Daily Bee*, April 23, 1895; Fred Carey, *Mayor Jim: Life of James C. Dahlman* (Omaha, 1930), 77-78, 97.

lent infection would pass away, leaving life and hope for complete recovery. In the meantime the brood of liars and fools must have their carnival."⁴² By June 5 silver had more than the simple majority needed to adopt the platform; by the end of the month almost two-thirds of the delegates favored the white metal. The silver leaders naturally concluded that they represented the sentiment of the party and that they should define its policies and select its candidates. The Democratic voter had spoken, said Bryan; the national convention need only record the verdict. Morton, who kept on the fringe of the crowds in Chicago on convention eve, opined that the candidate would be one of the "B brand—Bland, Boies, or Bryan." Two facts stand out: one, never before had a national administration been so completely ignored; two, it would be a free-for-all race for candidate. Chaos prevailed because of the prospective transfer of power within a great political organization from old and long-accepted to untried and revolutionary leadership.

Goldbug strategy mapped by William C. Whitney was simple enough: name a gold man for temporary chairman, stop the silverites from getting two-thirds of the votes, and then force the convention to adopt "bimetallism" and a gold candidate.⁴³ But in 1895 the National Committee had recommended increasing the vote of the territories, and because twenty-nine of the thirty-six territorial delegates favored silver, at best only 312 of the 930 delegates would be for gold. To win, the goldbugs must seat the administration delegates from the contested states of Nebraska, South Dakota, and Michigan, at least. Unshaken by the onslaughts of the silverites, the National Committee followed precedent and insisted upon its "right" to name the temporary chairman. Then, using "regularity" as its guide, it seated enough contested delegates to put South Dakota and Michigan in the gold column and found a majority of four against the Bryan delegation. Bryan could be seated now

⁴² Cleveland to L. Clarke Davis, May 14, 1896, Cleveland Papers.

⁴³ *New York Times*, June 19-20, 1896; *New York World*, June 19, 1896; Hirsch, *Whitney*, 488-494.

only by action within the convention. The vote for David B. Hill, the goldbugs' choice for temporary chairman, and for the Nebraska goldbugs was the same, twenty-seven to twenty-three, and represented the determination of the Committee not to grant recognition to silver.⁴⁴

Bryan was not one whit disheartened by the seating of the Nebraska goldbugs because he believed the Committee on Credentials would "right the wrong" he had suffered. In the light of what fate intended to do a few days later, his "turning down" by the National Committee and his reduction to a mere spectator in the convention is one of the most vivid ironies in history.⁴⁵

As soon as the selection of Hill was announced by the Cleveland forces, the silver men substituted John W. Daniel, of Virginia. While Nebraska's goldbugs would retain their seats and committee assignments until the Credentials Committee could report, a silverite was chosen permanent chairman and the Committee on Resolutions was silverite by almost two to one. Now the Clevelandites decided that rather than bolt outright they would participate no further in the proceedings. Upon going home, however, they would sound out their people on the creation of a separate gold organization.

An added jolt came to the goldbugs when the Credentials Committee admitted the Bryan delegates to the convention, relegating the Nebraska goldbugs to the gallery. Bryan's seating in a way was as dramatic as the bolt of the Teller silverites from the Republican national convention, and a stinging rebuke to the old Clevelandized National Committee as well as to the impertinent pretenders who assumed to represent the Nebraska Democracy. "To be seated with the other silver delegations would have been one thing," said Bryan, "but to walk down the aisle and put the gold standard delegation on the tip of my toe as

⁴⁴ Bryan, *First Battle*, 495; Olson, *Morton*, 390-391.

⁴⁵ Mark Sullivan, *Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925* (New York, 1926-1935), I, 122.

they are being kicked out of the Convention is another."⁴⁶ The Credentials Committee then gave four contested Michigan seats to the silver men, reversing a National Committee vote of forty-nine to one against them, and assured silver of a two-thirds majority.⁴⁷ The course of history might have been different had the decision gone against the Michigan and Nebraska silverites, for in winning a two-thirds majority the silver men had by coincidence offered Bryan his opportunity to win the nomination. That night at dinner Bryan said to Mrs. Bryan and Dr. Charles M. Rosser, of Texas, "So that you may both sleep well tonight, I am going to tell you something. I am the only man who can be nominated. I am what they call the 'logic of the situation.'"⁴⁸ And he was right!

Dazed by his repudiation, Cleveland asserted that his administration could not be blamed for the disasters that awaited the Democracy and complained that the prerequisite for honors at the convention seemed to be hatred for himself.⁴⁹ From the convention he got a new phrase. Instead of fighting against the "free silver heresy" he would now battle against "Bryanism," an abstraction abhorred become reality. He could not openly advise the goldbugs to repudiate Bryan and support the Republicans, but he did nothing to stop organized Democratic resistance to Bryan. Thus he was caught in the goldbugs' dilemma of trying to defeat the regular nominee of an official convention at the risk of destroying the party so thoroughly that no seeds would remain for the future. The goldbugs took the risk and worked so fast that they met in national convention on September 2. As Euclid Martin put it, the Nebraska goldbugs hoped "to help the Republicans either by supporting a third ticket or by voting for McKinley." Morton added that he wanted "every patriotic citizen to do all in his power

⁴⁶ Charles M. Rosser, *The Crusading Commoner* (Dallas, 1937), 33.

⁴⁷ For details see *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1896* (Logansport, Indiana, 1896).

⁴⁸ Rosser, *Crusading Commoner*, 38.

⁴⁹ Cleveland to Richard Olney, July 13, 1896, Cleveland to Daniel Lamont, July 15, 1896, Cleveland Papers.

to bring about the defeat of Mr. Bryan and those who support him and the platform on which he stands," and made his desire plainly known to Cleveland.⁵⁰ After Cleveland peremptorily rejected the offer of a nomination but cheered the goldbugs' resolutions as an infusion of fresh air into a fetid political atmosphere,⁵¹ John M. Palmer and Simon B. Buckner were chosen to head the third ticket. Bryan felt deeply the refusal of these "Boltocrats" to accept his leadership, referred to them in increasingly critical tones as the campaign progressed, acknowledged that they fought him even more bitterly than the Republicans, and declared that they "sought to use the party name for purposes of deception."⁵² He never forgave or forgot.

Although defeated by McKinley, Bryan pointed with justifiable pride to the fact that he had done better than Cleveland in 1892 and that he had given the Republicans of Nebraska their first complete defeat in history. He had carried Nebraska, which had gone to Harrison in 1892, Holcomb had been re-elected governor with a Democratic-Populist legislature, and four of the state's six congressmen had been saved.

Mark Hanna revealed no secret of the strange Republican-gold Democratic honeymoon when he said of the latter, "I have a rather soft feeling for them. I know that they consulted our wishes at every step." Although Palmer received only 133,146 votes, and only 2,885 in Nebraska, he obtained enough votes in such critical states as Kentucky to insure McKinley's victory therein. Only 14,000 of Palmer's votes, properly distributed, could have elected Bryan. Had voters simply not been confused by the two Democratic tickets Bryan might have been elected. In Min-

⁵⁰ Morton to Cleveland, August 24, 1896, Olson, *Morton*, 294-396.

⁵¹ Cleveland to William F. Vilas, September 5, 1895, Cleveland Papers.

⁵² *New York Journal*, *New York Times*, September 5, 1896; Bryan, *First Battle*, 390-391.

nesota alone, for instance, 15,000 ballots were voided because voters marked everything "Democratic."⁵³ Many accounts point to widespread corrupt practices by the Republicans. Josephus Daniels is authority for the statement that Bryan never doubted that he was the winner but that he did not contest the election for fear a civil war might result.⁵⁴

Men of character, like Bourke Cockran, believed Bryan magnificent even though they opposed him. The loyalty with which he professed an idea, the ability with which he expounded it, and the courage with which he interpreted it challenged admiration.⁵⁵ Like Cleveland, one always knew where Bryan stood; neither was satisfied, like McKinley, to sit astride an issue. Bryan had struggled almost alone and fought with an elastic toughness, unshaken spirit, and unflagging fervor that lifted him to the highest rank of popular leader. While Cleveland was made to appear "a syndicated, mortgaged President, a feeble, plastic, dangerous tool in the hands of an ignorant, blind, brutal, unsentimental, unpatriotic, hypocritical, villainous, moneyed aristocracy," as a Westerner wrote Bryan, Bryan was now the "Peerless Leader of the People," "The Wellington of the Silver Forces," and "The Gallant Chieftain" as well as the "Great Commoner."

It is noteworthy that the Democratic platform of 1896 attacked the Cleveland administration at more points and with far greater bitterness than it did the Republican party, and that with consummate sententiousness Bryan summed up his defeat in the words "I have borne the sins of Grover Cleveland."⁵⁶ After all, Cleveland was somewhat responsible for the crisis of 1896, for his Democracy was almost

⁵³ W. E. Gooding to Bryan, November 16, 1896, M. Kraft to Bryan, November 20, 1896, T. T. Hudson to Bryan, November 23, 1896, Bryan Papers; John P. Altgeld, *Live Questions* (Chicago, 1899), 693-697.

⁵⁴ Josephus Daniels, *Editor in Politics* (Chapel Hill, 1941), 198-199.

⁵⁵ James McGurrin, *Bourke Cockran: A Free Lance in American Politics* (New York, 1948), 167.

⁵⁶ McElroy, *Cleveland*, II, 237.

as conservative as the Republicanism of Blaine and Hanna. He had done nothing to quench the prairies on fire with radicalism. Under him, for four depression years, government was merely an umpire between contending economic forces, a magnificent police state oblivious of rural or urban distress. He left his party weaker, more incoherent, and more discordant than he found it. He had prepared the way for both Populism and for Bryan, who had developed his talent for leadership in opposing his gold policies and his attempt to block his political preferment in Nebraska. Cleveland appeared solemn, owlish, heavy as a pagan idol, an oracle hidden away in caves and veiled in mystery, manifesting himself in rumblings and strange noises. Bryan took up the dying embers of party spirit and fanned them into flame; taking the van, he led his party as a palpitating and inspired force into the red vortex of the fight.

No one doubts that Cleveland was a constructive force in American history with respect to tariff reform and civil service reform, that he was conscientious in the handling of foreign affairs, that he courageously held steady in a period of unparalleled stress and confusion to the gold standard, the abandonment of which he believed would result in economic chaos. But he was unwilling to tackle privilege: he sided with capital against labor, corporations against consumers, bankers against borrowers, entrenched political and judicial power against the common man. He preached an impossible rugged individualism in a day when the Gospel of Wealth had created conditions under which common men could not rise in the economic or social scale without some help from government. Bryan superbly defended the tenets of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democracy against a dominant Hamiltonian capitalism in a dragnet of social revolt so savage that it appeared to threaten civil war over a new balance of class power. He demanded that the industrial system divest itself of the abuses of monopoly capitalism, sunder the corrupt alliance between Big Business and politics, and reapportion the national income so that the agrarian community would no longer feel a sense of blighting frustration in the face of the concen-

tration of financial power in the East. He demanded equal rights for all, East or West, North or South. He refused to allow the humble orders of society supinely to hand Congress over to the corporations and permit the Supreme Court to decide against them on matters deemed vital to the furtherance of democracy. At a time when the vote was not considered an effective cure for economic ills he tried to use it to equalize the burdens of government. His defeat was but one of the growing pains necessarily connected with progressive democracy. He was the symbol of reform, the herald who never warmed his throne, the voice crying before the Progressives and Woodrow Wilson, the man who bridged the era between Jackson and Franklin D. Roosevelt. A tireless physical machine fired by a burning faith, he was made of the stuff of which prophets and crusaders are made.