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## Bryan's 'A Cross of Gold': The Rhetoric of Polarization at the 1896 Democratic Convention

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Bryan’s “A Cross of Gold:”

The Rhetoric of Polarization at the 1896 Democratic Convention

His arms spread wide, William Jennings Bryan thundered at the huge, cheering crowd, “You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold” (Coletta 141; “Bryan’s Great Speech”). Bryan’s speech of July 9, 1896, given during the platform debate at the Democratic convention, is one of the most discussed speeches in the history of American public address. Substantial evidence is consistent with the view that the speech had a powerful influence on the convention delegates; nonetheless, “A Cross of Gold,” which employed forms of radical rhetoric, was a divisive speech that was poorly adapted to the national audience.

Many scholars believe that it was, at least in part, because of this speech that this dark-horse candidate was able to gain the Democratic Party’s nomination to be President of the United States. Reid, for example, terms the speech a “rhetorical triumph.” Reid writes that “What can be ascribed to his speech is that . . . the ‘silver-tongued orator’ was nominated” (600). Springen calls it “a masterpiece of its type” (*William Jennings Bryan* 18). Andrews and Zarefsky assert that the speech’s concluding lines “no doubt played a role in securing him the nomination” (389). Oliver comments that this speech “won Bryan the nomination” (478; see also Valley 34-35). Coletta writes that “Bryan had won men’s hearts, diverted their passions and preferences, obscured every other presidential aspirant, and wrecked the plans of skillful managers” (148). Leech states in her biography of William McKinley, Bryan’s opponent in the general election, that “Bryan’s

impassioned periods had electrified the convention, and made him its presidential candidate” (85).<sup>1</sup>

A number of rhetorical scholars have written insightfully about other speeches of Bryan’s.<sup>2</sup> However, there has been little study of “A Cross of Gold.” Several excellent works discuss “A Cross of Gold” briefly, often as part of a larger review of Bryan’s speaking.<sup>3</sup>

Prevailing scholarly opinion about this speech has been based on two fundamental misassumptions or claims: first, that Bryan lost the election only because the Republicans overwhelmed him with a veritable juggernaut of resources, and, second, that Bryan’s oratory enabled him to achieve, against impossible odds, a near-victory in the election. Neither assumption, this essay contends, survives serious examination.

“A Cross of Gold” is worthy of re-examination for two reasons. First, the speech has been much discussed and widely anthologized. Bryan’s speech certainly captured the public’s imagination.<sup>4</sup> A speech that receives that kind of attention should receive thorough investigation. Second, the prevailing judgments about Bryan’s speech are in large part based on claims about the immediate audience response to the event, ignoring the speech’s larger implications.

### Did the Republicans Buy the Election?

A lore has developed that non-rhetorical factors determined the outcome of the 1896 election. Several authors claim that McKinley had so much money behind his campaign that Bryan never stood a chance.<sup>5</sup> This assumption implies that Bryan’s rhetorical accomplishments far exceeded those of McKinley, but that non-rhetorical

factors were decisive.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, the evidence does not support an implication that the candidates’ rhetoric was irrelevant to the campaign.

First, Bryan’s supporters and admirers attributed his defeat to the vastly greater resources that McKinley and the Republican Party were able to command. Paul Glad comments that the Democratic campaign looked “like a peanut operation” (170; see also Oliver 485). Phillips claims that “the Republicans spent \$7,000,000 to Bryan’s paltry \$300,000” (904). This was something of an exaggeration; the Republican National Committee actually spent about \$3.5 million on McKinley’s behalf (Dawes, *Journal* 106; Leech 86-87).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Bryan (and, presumably, McKinley) gained support from state party organizations, the value of which is difficult to estimate (see, e.g., “Bryan and Hill” and Coletta 169).

The enormous resources that the Republicans disposed do not, however, fully account for Bryan’s defeat. Bryan obtained abundant news coverage by touring the nation on the railroad. On four whistle-stop tours of the nation, Bryan gave by his own estimates about 600 speeches to several million citizens. A swarm of reporters followed Bryan’s every move, to the extent that Bryan complained about the lack of privacy. Bryan later listed the names of dozens of reporters who traveled with the campaign (*First Battle*, 612-620). A staff from the Associated Press accompanied Bryan and wired reports of Bryan’s speeches, often including complete texts taken down by shorthand, to newspapers all over the country (“Associated Press;” Bryan, *First Battle* 612-620).

The Democratic press often reprinted these texts in full (e.g., “Bryan Talks;” “Bryan Back in Nebraska;” “Bryan Defends”). Many Democratic newspapers, especially in the West and South, endorsed Bryan and covered his campaign. Even the Republican

press routinely published excerpts from Bryan’s speeches.<sup>8</sup> Despite the lack of money, Bryan was able to convey his message to the public.

Also, the Democrats complained about unethical Republican campaign tactics. For example, in a patently political article, the Democratic, pro-silver *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* accused Republican Chairman Marcus Hanna of passing out “boodle” to be used “in the different states where voters are to be bought” (“Hanna’s Brazen”). Bryan claimed that factory owners told their workers not to come to work on Wednesday if Bryan won the election on Tuesday. Bryan further asserted that Democratic employees were often intimidated at work (*First Battle*, 616-618).

Many of these charges may have been true, although the charge of “boodle” seems to have been unsubstantiated (Glad 169).<sup>9</sup> One too easily forgets, however, that much institutional corruption favored Bryan. First, despite his reputation as an anti-machine politician (Coletta 252), Bryan campaigned with support from Democratic machines such as New York’s Tammany Hall (“Tammany;” Myers 281; Blake 162-164). Bryan’s picture often appeared on the front page of the Tammany newsletter (Riordon 21). Electoral fraud was a routine part of the machine’s way of doing business (Myers xiii-ix). Machine support for Bryan forced McKinley into a battle for the votes of the large cities (S. Jones 345).

Perhaps even more important in swaying key states toward Bryan, however, was the denial of voting rights to African Americans. In 1896 many Southern states were in the midst of a massive effort to recast their voting rights laws to disenfranchise African Americans (Lewinson 79-81; Goldman, 254). Influential Southern Democrats spearheaded this movement (Kleppner 66). Residency requirements made it difficult for

African American sharecroppers to vote. The poll tax and literacy restricted voting by African Americans. Lawson comments that: “by 1890 it was apparent to the Republican party that it would disappear completely in the South unless something were done to protect the Negro voter.” However, the voting rights legislation that resulted from this concern failed to pass Congress. By 1890, the voting rights of African Americans in the South had deteriorated (Lawson 8-11).

The African American vote tended to be heavily Republican and, in the Deep South, many of the cities had substantial populations of African American voters (Diamond 293). The movement of the majority of African American voters to the Democratic Party dates only back to the early twentieth century (Walters 10). Various African American groups from the North visited McKinley in Canton to hear McKinley speak during his Front Porch campaign.<sup>10</sup> In a speech to one of those groups, Harry C. Smith, an African American politician and newspaper editor from Cleveland (Davis 130-141), assured McKinley “that . . . you have no more sincere or energetic friends among the many in all this broad land of ours, than are to be found among the Afro-Americans, and that on the third of November next you will have a practical demonstration of this fact such as you have never before had an opportunity to note” (“Colored Rifles”).

On the other hand, there were also reports of African Americans voting *en masse* for the Democrats under the supervision of their landlords (Lewinson 77-78), and the Populist movement, which was pro-Bryan, also appealed to many African Americans (Lawson 9-10). All in all, Bryan probably profited from the gradual impingement on African American voting in the Deep South.

Another Democratic excuse for losing the election was bossism. Throughout the campaign the Democrats thundered about “Boss Hanna,” criticizing McKinley for caving in to the political bosses of Cleveland (e.g., “Mark Hanna;” “The New Boss”). This accusation is absolutely startling, considering that Ohio’s political bosses actually gerrymandered McKinley out of his congressional seat and opposed his nomination for the presidency (Mott 48; S. Jones 139-157; Dawes, Letter, 13 March 1896). Hanna became a political power only because he and McKinley ran an effective campaign.

Thus, although the Republican Party certainly brought enormous resources to bear during the 1896 campaign, one must turn to the rhetoric of the candidates to fully understand the 1896 campaign.

### Bryan’s Rhetoric and his Audiences

To achieve the Presidency, Bryan had to face two different audiences who held two different sets of expectations: first, the delegates to the Democratic convention, and, second, the general voting public. The prevailing view, that “A Cross of Gold” won Bryan the nomination, may well be correct. Nonetheless, Bryan faced an awkward, if not an impossible, task, in seeking to adapt his rhetoric to both audiences.

Bryan arrived at the Democratic convention trailing Richard Bland in popularity among the delegates (“Silver Fanatics;” “‘Twill Be”). Indeed, at the opening of the convention, it was not absolutely certain that Bryan would be credentialed as a delegate (“Paving the Way;” “Just a Bit Shy”). To gain the nomination would require all of the resources and skills at Bryan’s disposal. McKinley knew that he would be nominated before the Republican convention in St. Louis even began (“Silver Will Get;” “Ingalls”).

McKinley could aim all of his efforts at winning in November. Bryan lacked that luxury. His speech was, as the ensuing argument shows, adapted so specifically to the Silverites who dominated the convention that Bryan either could not adapt, or neglected to adapt, to the national audience at the same time.

In “A Cross of Gold,” Bryan used the *forms* of radical rhetoric, casting the issues into the framework of a contest between the haves and the have-nots. Superficially, bimetallism may appear to be an abstruse economic issue. But Bryan used this issue to symbolize the struggle of the ordinary working American.

### The Silver Issue

The thesis of “A Cross of Gold” was that the nation should undertake the free, unlimited coinage of silver, to use as money in addition to the gold-backed currency already in circulation.

The nation was still reeling from the Depression of 1894. The conservative Democratic president, Grover Cleveland, was taking the blame for the economy’s troubles. The nation was rapidly industrializing, particularly in the regions east of the Mississippi and north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Automatic machinery was revolutionizing farming. Farmers had gone into debt to purchase machinery and to enlarge their farms. The depression cut the prices they received for their produce. The depression simultaneously increased the value of the currency in which they were to repay their debts. Squeezed from both ends, the farmers’ situation deteriorated rapidly (S. Jones 3-18; Sloan, “American Imperialism” 126; Glad, ch. 4).



The depression also reduced the output of factories. Many of the factories that made steel, tinplate, and pottery had cut back production and laid off their employees. Factory workers were beginning to unionize but unions typically faced vigorous, sometimes violent, opposition from industry and government (see, e.g., Krause 12-43; Wolff 100-126).

A number of political movements sought to solve the nation's problems by increasing the supply of money, which they argued was not sufficient to meet the needs of the growing nation. The Greenback Party was an example. Their idea was to discontinue retiring the inflationary paper currency left over from the Civil War. The Greenback Party was not able to triumph, however, and their approach became moot when the last greenbacks were withdrawn from circulation (S. Jones 15).

The free silver movement followed. The free silver movement received a boost, as well as a body of doctrine, from a popular book entitled *Coin's Financial School*. This entertaining little book attributed the depression to the hoarding of gold money by banks and industrialists. The free silver movement proposed to place more money into circulation by allowing anyone to take raw silver to the mint to be coined. The usual proposal was to coin silver at a ratio of 16 to 1 with gold by weight. This infusion of money would, the Silverites contended, stimulate the economy, halt the deflation of currency, stimulate employment, and relieve the farmers' debt load (S. Jones, ch. 2, esp. 12, 27)

Industrial and banking interests, however, found free silver to be unsavory. The banks in particular entertained no pressing desire to see debts repaid in devalued currency. Industrial interests worried that the Silverites' proposal would be inflationary

because of their fear that it would produce an uncontrolled increase in the money supply (see, e.g., Coletta 206).

### Polarization in “A Cross of Gold”

The fundamental point of most radical rhetoric is to advocate a shift in power toward less-favored groups. Radical rhetoricians sometimes reject compromise that might perpetuate the inequalities against which they protest (e.g., Lange 489) or because they are committed to the absolute truth of their views (Darsey 57-58). Furthermore, radical rhetoric may generalize about the “enemy” to unite less-favored groups in opposition to a common oppressor (e.g., Smith 220-221).

The free coinage of silver was a footnote to this broader quality of Bryan’s speech. The essence of “A Cross of Gold” was what Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen term *polarization* (34-36). A polarization strategy attempts to induce the audience to abandon the middle course and to make a commitment to one side or the other. Polarization is the obverse of unity and compromise. Such confrontational rhetoric, however, can easily drive away persons who were previously undecided (see, e.g., Bormann 20-22). In “A Cross of Gold,” Bryan indeed seemed to set himself against large segments of potential voters.

One key tactic in polarization is the *flag issue*. A flag issue is one that is especially vulnerable to the agitator’s attack. The flag issue is not necessarily the most important point under dispute, but is rather a target that symbolizes larger issues. The rhetor undertakes to create such strong emotions concerning the flag issue that the audience will lash out in anger about the flag issue (Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen 34-35).

This can be significant in that it is difficult for an audience to become aroused against an abstraction, such as the nation’s economic system, whereas they can more easily focus their attention on a narrow but more vivid question.

The gold standard served as a flag issue in Bryan’s speech, and thus took on significance far transcending currency standards. The convention delegates focused their energies on free silver. Nonetheless, Bryan’s speech, and the delegates’ response to that speech, reflected not just the currency standard, but also the more fundamental issues for which monetary standards were merely symbols. The gold standard became in Bryan’s rhetoric a symbol of the mighty eastern financiers’ assault on the American worker. Thus, the conflict depicted in Bryan’s rhetoric was not really between gold and free silver, but between the rich magnates of the East on the one side and the farmers and workers of the nation’s heartland on the other side.

A similar polarizing tactic is the *flag individual*. Like a flag issue, a flag individual functions as a target of attack who symbolizes a larger question (Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen 34-36). In “A Cross of Gold,” Bryan depicted McKinley as a flag individual who represented the nation’s wealthy interests.

The rhetoric of polarization is familiar to radical leaders. The twentieth-century radical organizer Saul Alinsky claims in his book *Rules for Radicals* that, in a complex society, “it becomes increasingly difficult to single out who is to blame for any particular evil.” As a result, it becomes ever more difficult to identify “the enemy.” One cannot become angry over an abstraction. For that reason, Alinsky urges radicals to use “personification” and to “freeze the target.” Alinsky concludes that “with this focus comes a polarization” (131-133). Indeed, he contends that “life seems to lack rhyme or

reason or even a shadow of order unless we approach it with the key of converses. Seeing everything in its duality,” Alinsky suggests, “we begin to get some dim clues to direction and what it’s all about” (15). As Bryan demonstrated in “A Cross of Gold,” these radical tactics of polarization predated its modern terminology.

Yet, a difficulty facing Bryan in making his rhetorical choices is that he did not really advocate a revolution. He sought to rise to power within the American political system, a system in which he firmly believed. His announced intention was to use the political system to bring economic reform to the rural elements and other working class Americans. Thus, Bryan ran squarely into what Lange calls the “radical’s paradox:” either the radical’s rhetoric faces rejection on the ground of impracticality, or it is “subsumed” within the existing power structure (Lange 475). Bryan, doubling the paradox, undertook to polarize the nation and to integrate his economic reforms into its political system at the same time.

### The Democratic Convention

The Democrats did not know whom they would nominate when they met in Chicago in July 1896. There was no question, however, that their candidate would be pro-silver (“Silver Fanatics”). Several silver candidates were being promoted. Bryan, at the time known as a young newspaper editor and former member of Congress, was frequently mentioned as a dark-horse candidate (“Silver Fanatics;” “Standard Bearer;” “Wet Blanket;” Coletta 121). Together with his substantial entourage, Bryan arrived in Chicago confident that he would be the nominee (Coletta, ch. 7, esp. 124). *The Wall Street Journal* tentatively predicted Bryan’s nomination even before he delivered “A

Cross of Gold” (“Chicago Convention,” 9 July 1896). Various demonstrations had called for Bryan earlier in the convention (“Ablaze!,” Heiss, “Made Haste”; “Still Nothing;” “Silverites Worry”). Bryan, however, held out to speak at the most opportune moment (Koenig 178). His good friend, the powerful young Republican leader Charles Dawes, was also in Chicago. Dawes, familiar with Bryan’s speaking ability, predicted that if Bryan got a chance to speak, the nomination could not escape him (Dawes, *Journal* 89).

The convention’s first major order of business was the platform. Although the platform dealt with several issues (“Platform”), only silver really concerned the delegates. The predominance of Silverites at the convention guaranteed a fairly radical free-silver plank (“Silver Fanatics”). Bryan worked his way onto an influential committee and arranged to give the concluding speech during the platform debate (Coletta 132). Confident that the silver plank would be adopted no matter what he said, Bryan set out to make a sufficient impression to gain the convention’s attention.

Bryan’s speech cast out a net for the true believers: but *only* for the true believers. He conveyed the view that the old guard represented by the Gold Democrats and the Republicans stood against the ordinary working person, the “toiling masses,” as he called them. Near the beginning of the speech, in language reminiscent of the Civil War, Bryan asserted: “In this contest brother has been arrayed against brother and father against son” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”).

Nor was Bryan unaware of the conflict that the money issue created in the East. Indeed, part of his method was to build upon the conflict. Despite his assurance that he would avoid sectionalism (Springen, *William Jennings Bryan* 17-18), Bryan depicted his region of the nation to be locked in economic conflict with the East. Responding to the

previous speech by William Russell of Massachusetts, Bryan began “A Cross of Gold” by reassuring the delegations that “not one person in all this convention entertains the least hostility of [*sic*] the state of Massachusetts. But we stand here for people who are the equals of the state of Massachusetts” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”). Certainly a Westerner such as Bryan would praise his own region. Dressed in what was considered Western fashion, in “a short alpaca jacket, a low cut vest, a white lawn tie” (“Ablaze!”), Bryan implied that the silver issue pitted the interests of the East against those of the equally deserving West: the pioneers, “who braved all the dangers of the wilderness, who have made the desert to blossom as a rose,” and so forth, “are as deserving of the consideration of this party as any people in this country.” Continuing with his military metaphors, Bryan stressed that “we do not come as aggressors,” but nonetheless “we are fighting in the defense of our homes, of our families and our posterity” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”).

Not only did Bryan try to polarize the East and the West: Bryan pitted the rich against the poor. He blamed the wealthy for the nation’s woes: “What we need is an Andrew Jackson to stand as Jackson stood against the encroachments of aggrandized wealth. (Applause).” Bryan ridiculed the notion that the prosperity of the rich “will leak through on those below” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”).

To further this point, Bryan commented to his audience concerning the argument that free silver was harmful to business: “We say to you that you have made too limited in its application the definition of business man.” Bryan then argued that the farmer, the storeowner, the laborer were businesspeople just as were the Eastern tycoons (“Bryan’s Great Speech”). This passage, which Bryan later claimed to have written the night

before, tied free silver to the interests of the ordinary American (Bryan and Bryan, *Memoirs* 104-105). At the same time, this passage addressed the claim that free silver would harm business.

It is entirely unclear that free silver *per se* would have been a great benefit to the storeowner, much less to the factory laborer. Free silver would, nominally, improve the lot of the debtor classes. In Bryan’s speech, however, free silver functioned as a flag issue. Calling attention to the economic contributions of ordinary citizens, Bryan underlined that he stood on their side. Bryan used free silver to show that he stood for the poor, the downtrodden, and the rural. Wood correctly points out that “A Cross of Gold” does not prove a “causal relationship” between free silver and economic improvement (159). In this speech, however, economic cause and effect arguments, although significant, were not at the center of Bryan’s rhetoric.

Bryan’s compelling rhetoric also attempted to polarize the farmer from the city dweller. The gold delegates had argued that the large cities all favored the gold standard. Bryan retorted: “I tell you the great cities rest upon these broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities,” Bryan boasted, “and leave our farms and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in this country. (Loud applause.)” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”). With such rhetoric, Bryan accented the conflicts within the nation, not its unity.

A frequent element of a successful radical movement is to follow a logical sequence of heightening protest. An audience might consider a rhetorician churlish who *begins* a movement with confrontation (Bowers, Ochs, and Jensen 19-20; cf. Bowers and Ochs 18). Confrontation may become more credible when milder discourse has failed.

In the classic form of protest rhetoric, Bryan stressed that the Silverites had already attempted to gain their way by petition and persuasion. Having failed, they were now ready to escalate. “We have petitioned,” Bryan said, “and our petitions have been scorned. We have entreated, and our entreaties have been disregarded. We have begged, and they have mocked, and our calamity came.” Bryan now moved to a higher challenge: “We beg no longer; we entreat no more; we petition no more. We defy them” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”).

This passage was not an attempt at compromise. It was a call to action, made necessary, Bryan implied, by the failure of rational means of persuasion. Bryan’s rhetoric admitted no common ground. This is the typical approach of the radical, polarizing speaker.

“A Cross of Gold” did not depict the decision between the silver plank and the gold plank as a simple disagreement between reasonable persons. On the contrary, to Bryan, the advocates of gold were the “enemy:” “We go forward confident that we shall win. Why? Because on the paramount issue in this campaign there is not a spot of ground upon which the *enemy* will dare to challenge battle” [emphasis supplied]. In his peroration, Bryan continued to characterize the advocates of gold as enemies: “If they dare to come out and in the open defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”). This, again, is the language of confrontation.

Bryan struck out at his opponent in personal terms. In this speech, and in this speech alone, he employed the polarizing tactic of attacking a flag individual. In his subsequent campaign speeches, Bryan spoke about McKinley with respect. In *The First*



*Battle*, Bryan denied that the campaign had been personal (608). In “A Cross of Gold,” however, Bryan said that McKinley, who had compared himself to Napoleon, “shudders today when he thinks he was nominated on the anniversary of Waterloo.” After a pause for lengthy cheering by the silver delegates, Bryan continued that McKinley heard “the sound of the waves as they beat upon the lonely shores of St. Helena” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”).

Near the end of the speech, Bryan revealed the true meaning of his flag issue, free silver. He tied together the constituencies upon which he would base his campaign: “Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses . . .” (“Bryan’s Great Speech”). Thus, Bryan claimed unity with those who supported him. To support free silver was, symbolically, to express his loyalty to these groups. Yet he also implied his opposition to other constituencies. During the entire speech prior to this point Bryan had gone out of his way to deny his appeal to industrial interests, and to the East, and to the cities.<sup>11</sup>

### Responses to the Speech

The convention voted on its nomination a day after “A Cross of Gold.” Support for Bland began to disintegrate after the second ballot, leading to Bryan’s nomination on the fifth ballot (“Bryan the Candidate;” Heiss, “Bland Losing”). Seemingly only the flip-flopping *Wall Street Journal* missed out on predicting Bryan’s nomination after his speech, claiming that “Bryan has had his day” (“Chicago Convention,” 10 July 1896).

The statements of various witnesses are consistent with the prevailing scholarly opinion that attributes Bryan’s nomination, in whole or part, to “A Cross of Gold” (Reid

600; Andrews and Zarefsky 389; Valley 34-35; Coletta 148; Leech 85). The pro-silver press generally attributed Bryan’s nomination largely to his brilliant speaking, while the pro-gold press credited the nomination to Bryan’s demagoguery. The pro-silver *Cleveland Plain Dealer* called his speech “An eloquent, stirring, and manly appeal;” they concluded that the speech “gave William Jennings Bryan the Democratic nomination for President of this great republic” (“Bryan”). Another free-silver paper, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, commented that Bryan “just about immortalized himself” with the speech (“Wm. J. Bryan’s”). The *Post-Dispatch* did note that, although the speech led to Bryan’s nomination, Bryan had long been working for free silver (“Bryan for President”).

The Democratic, but anti-silver, *New York Times* agreed: “With fine elocution and honeyed Populist phrases he aroused the silverites again and again and stirred them to tumult almost beyond the power of the Chairman to restrain.” They disparaged Bryan as “the gifted blatherskite from Nebraska” (“Repudiation Has Won”). A day later, they commented that “Bryan’s nomination was not a surprise to anyone who was in the convention Thursday” (“Bryan, Free Silver”). The *Akron Beacon and Republican*, obviously not a pro-Bryan paper, agreed that “Never probably has a national convention been swayed or influenced by a single speech as was the national Democratic convention at Chicago yesterday by W. J. Bryan, of Nebraska” (“Welcome Visitor”). Similarly, the pro-gold, Republican *Pittsburg (sic) Press*, although very critical of the Democratic platform, agreed that “The nomination of Bryan was doubtless assured from the moment when he delivered his oration” (“Bryan’s Gospel”). Former Senator Walsh of Georgia stated that “Mr. Bryan’s speech secured his nomination” (“West Gone Loony”). Even the pro-gold *Chicago Tribune* commented that “with the masterful oratory for which he

has become famous [he] soon wrought up the crowd to a spirit of the wildest enthusiasm” (“Call It”).

After the convention, many political conservatives and moderates expressed deep consternation about the results. The pro-business *Wall Street Journal* warned that free silver would make prices unstable in international trade (“Effect of Free”). The *Akron Beacon and Republican* asserted that Bryan’s “smooth and ready tongue” did not qualify him to be President (Editorial). Cleveland business magnate Myron Herrick reported that after Bryan’s nomination the financier J. P. Morgan shut his rolltop desk and announced, “There is not going to be any more business in this office . . . until the election is over” (Mott 69). Morgan’s reaction does not represent the opinions of Easterners in general, but appears to reflect Bryan’s polarization. Similarly, the stockbrokers in St. Louis, alarmed by free silver, considered curtailing stock trading procedures until after the election (“Daily Public”). That is, Bryan was not merely a candidate to oppose; he became a candidate to fear. His admirers have admired him passionately. His opponents have despised him with remarkable intensity. This, of course, is a predictable result of polarization.

Opponents of free silver immediately perceived a radical slant to Bryan and the silver plank. *The New York Times* immediately termed Bryan a “radical” (“Radical of Radicals”). Citing unnamed bankers, *The Wall Street Journal* remained optimistic about the economy on the curious ground that “the Chicago platform and nomination meant revolution, and therefore would be bound to fail” (“Corner Turned”). Following “A Cross of Gold” and the adoption of the silver plank, Senator David Hill commented that “I am a Democrat, but I am not a revolutionist” (“Hill’s Speech,” see also “Repudiation

Has Won”). Bryan’s nomination a day later left Hill even more shocked: “I was a Democrat before the Convention and am a Democrat still--very still” (“Chicago Convention,” 11 July 1896). The pro-Bryan *Cleveland Plain Dealer* commented with approval that “It has well been said that this convention is revolutionary in practice as well as tendencies” (“Bryan”).

Bryan’s polarizing style of rhetoric did not escape notice: *The New York Times* complained about Bryan’s “cheap and shallow references to McKinley” (“Repudiation Has Won”). In an editorial endorsing Bryan, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* noted that “no voter, on either side, can fail to know how he is voting. The straddle has been effectively eliminated” (Editorial). This implied the view that Bryan’s speech had forced undecided voters to choose sides, a typical end result of polarization.

The election in November came almost four months later and was obviously influenced by factors other than “A Cross of Gold.” Most obviously, Bryan’s other campaign speeches and McKinley’s skillfully conducted campaign (Glad 167-188; Trent and Friedenbergl 78; Leech 66-96; Harpine) surely influenced the outcome. McKinley, in the speeches that he gave during his Front Porch campaign, capitalized on Bryan’s divisive approach. Two months later, McKinley stated in a campaign speech: “The attempt to inflame the passions of the west and south against the east is, therefore, but a mischievous and unpatriotic effort to arouse prejudice and hatred against men of their own calling” (“It’s an Honest”).

The election returns from November 3 showed a pattern that is consistent with a still-polarized public. Needless to say, the rhetoric of the entire election campaign probably contributed greatly to this response. Bryan received excellent support from

voters in the West, but this support was not as complete as the Silverites might have anticipated from the campaign’s rhetoric. For example, Bryan lost Minnesota and California. Oregon went for McKinley, possibly because of opposition from the press (Barrett). Bryan was the first Democratic candidate since the end of Reconstruction to lose the former slave-holding states of Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware (Coletta 191). McKinley carried Kentucky on the basis of a very strong showing in Louisville, while the rural areas of the state went to Bryan. Also, in general, McKinley did well in urban areas of the South (Coletta 191; Diamond 291-292). The loss of the Solid South is not consistent with a claim that Bryan’s campaign met with remarkable success.

Bryan received significantly better support from rural areas than from urban regions (Glad 203-204). Although Bryan received excellent support from farming communities, his most natural constituency, the pattern of that support was rather curious. He received the votes of many tenant farmers but got fewer votes from small land-owning farmers (Coletta 189-192). This is surprising because the free silver issue would seem to have its greatest appeal to debtors.

This result suggests that Bryan’s reputation as the Great Commoner, the supporter of the poor, had more influence on the election results than did the economics of free silver. Once one realizes, however, that the silver question was a *flag issue*, it should be no surprise that the poorest farmers would support Bryan the most. Free silver was the vehicle by which Bryan symbolized his advocacy of the needs of the poor, working class American over the rich and powerful forces of business. The voting public apparently sensed this and responded accordingly.

The silver issue may have gained Bryan some votes of wage laborers, most of whom were poor but suffered no crushing debts. Nonetheless, despite the endorsement of political machines and labor unions, Bryan was not able to carry the voters in Eastern industrial states (S. Jones 345; Diamond 281-305; esp. 284, 291-292; Springen, *William Jennings Bryan* 19).

### Conclusion

Bryan’s speech probably contributed to his nomination by a deadlocked convention as the Democratic candidate for President. Perhaps no less dramatic a speech could have helped Bryan to accomplish this. Nonetheless, by appealing in so uncompromising a way to the agrarian elements and to the West, Bryan neglected the national audience who would vote in the November election.

Bryan’s audience at the convention consisted almost entirely of Democrats, the majority of whom were strongly pro-silver from the outset. Russell, the pro-gold speaker who addressed the convention just before Bryan, admitted in a seemingly rueful tone that “The time for debate is past. I am conscious . . . painfully conscious that the mind of this convention is not and has not been Open to Argument” (“Still Nothing”). For Bryan to persuade such an audience depended, in part, on demonstrating to them that he was the party’s most committed and effective advocate of free silver. “A Cross of Gold” seems particularly designed to achieve this goal. The national audience, on the other hand, inevitably represented greater diversity in composition and opinion, and the rhetorical strategies that Bryan employed at the convention may not have been the ones best calculated to persuade the nation as a whole. Polarization more often is a strategy for

energizing true believers; it is not a technique to persuade the masses. By pursuing a strategy of polarization, Bryan made himself the darling of the Silverites, but failed to adapt his speech to the national audience.

Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Wood expresses doubts that “A Cross of Gold” earned Bryan the nomination, although she does call it “the highlight of the convention.” She does not give the reasons for her doubts (165).
- <sup>2</sup> For example, Mills discusses the speaking of the last ten years of Bryan’s life; Sloan, “I Have Kept” and “Bryan Versus ‘Bosses’” covers Bryan’s public speaking in the 1904 and 1912 conventions, and Springen, “Democrats” studies Bryan’s speaking against Oscar Underwood from 1911-1924. Hostetler examines Bryan’s rhetoric in the Scopes trial.
- <sup>3</sup> Phillips 902-903, 912; Wood; Springen, *William Jennings Bryan* 15-18; E. Jones 217-219; Valley 34-35.
- <sup>4</sup> For example, “A Cross of Gold” is one of only two events listed in the *World Almanac*’s historical chronology for the year 1896 (“United States” 525).
- <sup>5</sup> Oliver 485-486; Glad, ch. 8; Coletta 167, 200; Bryan, *First Battle* 616-620
- <sup>6</sup> Springen, *William Jennings Bryan* does note briefly that Bryan contributed to his own defeat by oversimplifying the issues and by his distrust of Easterners (19).
- <sup>7</sup> If Phillips’s figure includes spending by state committees and private groups, then he should have counted to Bryan’s favor the money spent on his behalf by state committees, city political machines, and unions.
- <sup>8</sup> The *Salt Lake Tribune* and the *Rocky Mountain News* were examples of non-Democratic newspapers that endorsed Bryan (Coletta 148).



<sup>9</sup> The article, published in the avowedly pro-silver *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, offered no evidence of voter fraud.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. “Delegation;” “Colored Callers;” “Colored Rifles;” “Afro-Americans;” “Every Agency.” These sources report speeches given to sizable delegations of African American voters who visited McKinley during his Front Porch Campaign in 1896.

<sup>11</sup> After the convention, Bryan suffered from a major embarrassment when it turned out that several of “A Cross of Gold’s” phrases were plagiarized from Secretary of the Treasury Carlisle and Congressman McCall. A chagrined Democratic Party leadership quickly reprinted the speech with the quoted passages (including “crown of thorns” and “cross of gold”) in quotation marks (“Bryan En Route”). A campaign document edition of the speech indeed places the phrases about the “crown of thorns” and “cross of gold” in quotation marks (without attribution to McCall) but also quotes them prominently (again, without attribution) at the top of the first page as a sort of flying heading (Bryan, *Speech*).