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Propositions for Reform

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PROPOSITIONS FOR REFORM:
THE DIALECTICAL POLITICS OF THE PROGRESSIVE ERA

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
History

by
Brett Edward Vigil
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Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

In the decades immediately following the Civil War, the impetus for industrialization and technological development which had helped propel the Union to victory began to dramatically pick up speed, engendering staggering changes in almost every facet of American economic and social. Indeed, by the end of the century, such changes had helped precipitate the closing of the frontier, the United States' emergence onto the international scene as a major imperialist power, and the rise of the populist movement, which climaxed in the great realigning Presidential election of 1896. The last of these was particularly significant in that it was arguably the first large-scale attempt to seriously address the various problems created by the rapid urbanization and industrialization of the late nineteenth century and would moreover serve as the prelude to a much larger and more fundamental awakening in American political life, that vast tangle of reforms and prescriptions which beggars all generalization, best known to us today as the progressive movement. In the quarter century to follow, the three greatest leaders of this movement at the national level, William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson each articulated a distinct conception of or approach toward reform, inspiring and antagonizing each other in ways which significantly shaped both the thought and action of the progressive era. This interaction between the three men and the ideas they espoused can be understood as following a roughly dialectical pattern, with Bryan's agrarian and insurgent brand of reform functioning as the thesis, Roosevelt's more patrician

and paternalistic approach as the antithesis, and Wilson and his New Freedom as a sort of synthesis of the two. By more closely examining the careers, public statements, and political convictions of these three archetypal figures, we may be able to better understand the origin, development, and effects of this political dialectic not only within its own time, but throughout the following century, leading down to our own day.

DEDICATION

For My Grandparents:

Dolores Feyad (1912-2002) and Abraham Vigil (1910-1979)

Mary Newport (1918-2007) and Buford Poole (1916-present)

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PROLOGUE:

THE GILDED AGE CONSENSUS

In his magisterial cultural history of the West in modern times, *From Dawn to Decadence*, Jacques Barzun memorably labeled the era around the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century as “A Summit of Energies.” Indeed, such a term certainly feels à propos when applied to the political and social developments of the time in the United States. In less than four generations, the United States had grown from a thinly populated, scarcely half-settled republic clinging to the Eastern seaboard into one of the world’s incontestable economic and geopolitical “great powers” holding sway not only over the expanse of the North American continent itself, but, after the imperialistic adventures of William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, over a far-flung empire in the Caribbean and Pacific and a *de facto* but very real hegemony over the hemisphere as a whole. Economically and technologically, the changes were even more incredible, as the rush of industrialization, fueled partly by the nation’s explosive birth-rate (55 live births per thousand of population at the beginning of the nineteenth century, 43.3 per thousand of population at mid-century, and still as high as 32.3 at the beginning of the twentieth century) and more so by the thousands, and eventually hundreds of thousands of European immigrants who arrived every year (with 425,000 coming in 1900 alone and well over eight million more to follow in the ensuing decade) completely upended the cherished Jeffersonian order of rural smallholders’ which had largely defined (though, as Richard

Hofstadter later delighted in pointing out, never as simply or as thoroughly as folk memory would have it) the nation's socioeconomic life before the Civil War. The concomitant and fantastic mushrooming of cities throughout this period is an even more compelling testament of encroaching modernity as the nation, which had no metropolitan areas of 100,000 or more in 1810, found itself with thirty-eight such cities ninety years later.

Arguably the most significant effect associated with the rise of industrialization, however, at least at the socio-economic level, was the explosive, and, to some Americans, profoundly troubling rise of corporatism in almost all aspects of the American economy, and through that eventually, virtually all aspects of American life in general. The growth of the modern joint-stock corporation cannot be separated from the rise of industrial civilization, as each facilitated the other so synchronously so as to seem almost like a single phenomenon. And yet the common practice of several individuals banding together (i.e. "incorporating") to create an artificial economic person was relatively new, with the first general incorporation law being passed by New York State in 1813, and only becoming widely feasible legally in the late 1830's after the Jacksonians picked up on general incorporation laws as one of their central economic reforms and pushed for their passage in states around the country. However, as Forrest McDonald has pointed out, it was the building of the railway system which above all else truly established and solidified the corporation's supremacy in America's economic order, in that it proved itself "ideally suited" to

the railroad's special requirements of "the raising of private capital on an unprecedented scale" coupled with "a semi-permanent form of business organization."¹ More importantly, it provided entrepreneurs with a superb instrument to exploit the now truly national economic opportunities opened by railroads. Aided by state governments that were cooperative with this drift toward incorporation either through sympathy, apathy, or occasionally outright venality (or any combination thereof), the corporate system of consolidation swept all before it. This tendency reached a climax in a great wave of consolidations between 1897 and 1903, when, as John M. Cooper has explained, "over three hundred consolidations took place, totaling \$7.5 billion in capitalization and encompassing 40 percent of the country's industrial output."²

However, there was a dilemma implicit in the creation of the new corporations that would eventually involve and to a large degree remake national politics. While created at the behest of state governments, the largest corporations soon developed a truly national reach and influence to a degree unprecedented in the history of the American economy. In other words, like the sorcerer's apprentice, the forces that the state governments had summoned became much too large and powerful for them to effectively police or let them to control themselves. Clearly only the federal government possessed the requisite power to lay down the law to such economic colossi as Andrew Carnegie and J.

¹ Forrest McDonald, *The United States in the Twentieth Century* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1968), 4-5.

² John Milton Cooper, *Pivotal Decades: The United States, 1900-1920* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 11.

Pierpont Morgan, who between themselves orchestrated the merger creating the United States Steel Corporation in 1901, the first business ever initially capitalized at \$1 billion or more, or John D. Rockefeller of the Standard Oil Company, who became the first American to amass a personal fortune of a similar size at around the same time.

For decades following the Civil War, the likes of Carnegie, Rockefeller, and Morgan had little to fear from the federal government. In fact, they almost came to see the government as a bulwark and an appendage for their own purposes. Partly, this was due to a striking overlap in key personnel between business and government leadership, a phenomenon that, while hardly new or unique to the period, did grow increasingly acute as the Third Party System continued. For example, turning again to the railroads, of the seventy-three men who held cabinet-level offices between 1868 and 1896, forty-eight had at some point either sat on railroad boards, lobbied for railroads, served railroad clients, or had family with meaningful railroad connections, including most prominently the supposedly incorruptible Grover Cleveland's Secretary of State and Attorney General Richard Olney. Olney functions as a particularly vivid case-in-point of the influence of corporate interests in determining government policy, as it was he who committed federal power to forcibly (and brutally) break the Pullman Strike of 1894. During this period his financial compensation from his time serving the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad—one of the roads whose traffic was significantly tied up by the Strike—"coincidentally" happened to exceed his

government salary. Apparently, the tentacles that Frank Norris suggested in *The Octopus* reached even into the highest councils of government. No wonder Jack Beatty has bitterly concluded of Gilded Age government that “Jay Gould was president...He staffed the government...He rented politicians, fattening his purse off their favor...this was his time—this was his country.”³

This was not so much Vernon Louis Parrington’s concept of regulatory capture in action, as much as an almost total regulatory co-optation, so thorough that the establishment of any effectual regime of regulation seemed almost impossible during this period even as an idea. It would be inaccurate, however, not to say unfair, to attribute this easy rapprochement between the federal government and the trusts to simple partiality and corruption alone. This confluence between public and private interests has always been an indelible feature of American government at all times, and was especially programmed in by the prevailing ideological climate of post-Civil War era. In an era of hyper-partisanship, in which every presidential election was a brutally-contested, nail-bitingly near-run grudge-match, America’s two major parties showed surprising accord when it came to the sanctity and inviolability of property rights and the absolute necessity of strict *laissez-faire* and economy in government. Therefore, it was the Democratic president Grover Cleveland who piously promised at his inauguration that “No harm shall come to any business interest as the result of administrative policy so long as I am President” and who sternly lectured the

³ Jack Beatty, *Age of Betrayal* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 192.

nation that “the lesson should constantly be enforced that though the people support the Government the Government should not support the people” as he vetoed federal aid to stricken farmers. And, except for a demagogical demurral here or there on behalf of the tariff and veterans’ pensions, such sentiments might just as well have been uttered by most of his Republican rivals and contemporaries.⁴ As Andrew Martin has explained, by fixating on such small-bore issues and framing elections around such emotional lightning rods as the bloody shirt in the North and the race bogey in the South, the Gilded Age’s “party-system provided America’s industrializing elites with the insulation they needed against the challenges to which the prior establishment of democratic institutions made them vulnerable.”⁵

And what of those democratic institutions? To contemporary sensibilities, accustomed to at least a persistent advocacy for government regulation of big business by reform groups even when effectual policy in this line is lacking, this can seem strange. Why did it take so long, until almost the end of the century, for an effective reform movement to arise advocating the regulation and policing of the largest corporations in the broader public interest? The real answer lay in the fact that most of the major movements for political reform of the past century or more, and therefore the only traditions of reform most Americans then knew or

⁴ Michael Kazin, “Which U.S. President Does Romney Most Resemble? (Hint: It’s Not a Republican),” *The New Republic*, September 25, 2012, accessed October 20, 2012, <http://www.tnr.com/article/107721/which-us-president-does-romney-most-resemble-hint-its-not-republican>.

⁵ Beatty, *Age of Betrayal*, 23.

recognized as acceptable, had been largely oriented around the same sort of small-government shibboleths that now governed both of the two major parties. Jeffersonian Republicanism, Jacksonian Democracy, the Liberal Republicans of the 1870s, the Goo-Goos clamoring for civil service reform, and Henry George and his Single-Taxers, were all oriented (at least theoretically) around strongly anti-statist dogmas and rhetoric. Even George, who was widely considered one of the preeminent radicals of his time, chose to endorse Cleveland and fervently denounce the People's Party in 1892 as "a socialistic party, aiming not at less restriction but at more."⁶ As Beatty has pointed out, even the rigorously stand-pat Cleveland was widely considered a reformer before the Depression of the 1890's broke out, albeit of the variety, as Matthew Josephson has wittily defined it, of "one who gives to the capitalist for nothing that which the real politician holds for a price."⁷

Louis Hartz perceptively defined the historical and ideological *volte-face* that made the corporate capitalism (or as he called it "the New Whiggery") of the time so potent and all of the initial attempts to reform it so feeble when he pointed out that "[i]t had been the American democrat, with Jefferson, who in theory at least had opposed it [capitalism] and had developed the closest thing to a laissez-faire dogma that the country had produced" but that, after nearly a century of growth, development, and consolidation,

⁶ Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 58.

⁷ Jack Beatty, *Age of Betrayal*, 193.

big capitalism was able now, with the major exception of the tariff, to dispense with the Hamiltonian promotionalism on which it had relied in the days of its weakness, especially since the corporate technique had become established and important.⁸

In other words, J. P. Morgan, John D. Rockefeller, Jay Gould, and the other “New Whigs” had found a way to effectively appropriate Jeffersonian means to achieve Hamiltonian ends far beyond the wildest dreams of the “Old Whigs” like Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, or even Alexander Hamilton himself. Therefore, in seeking to ascertain a remedy with which to deal with the problems raised by this “New Whiggery” Herbert Croly, and through his influence, Theodore Roosevelt and many American reform leaders since that time, latched onto the logical antinomy of this—that, as James Chace has defined it, “the country needed Hamiltonian means to achieve Jeffersonian ends.”⁹ After all, as Barzun has defined his aforementioned “Summit of Energies”: “The turn of the century was a turning indeed; not an ordinary turning *point*, but rather a turntable on which a whole crowd of things facing one way revolved till they faced the opposite way.”¹⁰ The period from about 1896 to 1920 was such a turntable in America’s political history, in which the old notions of (Hamiltonian) conservatism and (Jeffersonian) reform underwent great revolutions into forms still essentially recognizable and deeply relevant to us today. And the three men who incarnated and led those

⁸ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), 215.

⁹ James Chace, *1912: Wilson, Roosevelt, Taft & Debs—the Election That Changed the Country* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), 59.

¹⁰ Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life, 1500 to the Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 615.

revolutions on the reform side of the equation—William Jennings Bryan, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson—would collectively pave the way for the modern American conception of liberalism.

And yet, despite their seeming ideological accord, Bryan, Roosevelt, and Wilson, differed from each other strikingly in terms of origins and personalities. And certainly, the three evince an almost archetypal variety in their respective personal style and preferred leadership roles: Bryan, the consummate small-town middle American lawyer *cum* preacher *cum* editor; Roosevelt, the consummately patrician polymath (one is tempted to say “hobbyist”) who brought to reform all the aggressive enthusiasm which characterized all of his endeavors; and Wilson, the consummately dry, even priggish academic for whom ideas (and ideals) had just as much force and reality (if not more so) than men. Moreover, these vividly contrasting personae take on an especial significance when considered within the context of the prevailing regional and class tensions which not only helped produce them but the political climate they sought to amend.

Not surprisingly, considering that all three men’s childhoods unfolded beneath the shadow of the Civil War, regional consciousness was still perhaps the most imposing and significant cleavage in American life. John M. Cooper has perceptively observed that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, “Economically, America was not one country, but three.”¹¹ And, fittingly, Bryan,

¹¹ Cooper, *Pivotal Decades*, 5.

Roosevelt, and Wilson were each either native or adopted sons of one of these three regions.

Paramount among these, as defined by Cooper, was the area to the north of the Ohio and Potomac Rivers and east of the Mississippi, (or, the Upper Midwestern and Northeastern states, in other words), which, while it comprised only one-sixth of the nation's continental territory, accommodated forty-five percent of its overall population and a still greater proportion of its commonly recognized avatars of development and infrastructure, including "cities and towns, money and banking institutions, schools and libraries, offices and commercial concerns, and factories and railroads." No wonder therefore that Cooper pithily concludes that this region "formed the nation's industrial, financial, and cultural heartland."¹² And, significantly, as a New Yorker, Roosevelt was a product not only of this national "heartland" generally, but indeed its hub and epicenter. Moreover, Roosevelt grew up during the hothouse cultural atmosphere of the Civil War and Reconstruction, from which, like many others of his milieu (and political party,) he imbibed a passionate admiration for Abraham Lincoln and the Union cause. Tellingly, Roosevelt conflated these almost totally with the cause of the nation as a whole, saying of them during the debate over American intervention in the First World War, that during the Civil War the Union/North had

¹² Cooper, *Pivotal Decades*, 5.

shown exemplary “willingness to face death and eager pride in fighting for ideals, which marked a mighty people led by a mighty leader.”¹³

The other two “sub-nations” of the time, the West and the South, were seriously economically and culturally deprived relative to the North, and were in fact essentially economic “colonies” of it in some senses. In other words, it is most likely not a coincidence that Wilson and Bryan, who originally hailed from the “hinterland” South and West respectively, were both life-long Democrats, who were very much the minority party at the time, while Roosevelt, who came from the wealthy, industrial North, was a Republican. Advocates for socio-economic reforms from these two “have not” regions would consistently find and make common cause all throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from the Greenback movement of the 1870s, through the Populist uprising of the 1890s, down to the New Deal in the 1930s.

At the turn of the century, the area south of the Potomac and east of the Mississippi (hereafter to be referred to simply as “the South”) had yet to fully recover economically and psychologically from its catastrophic military defeat and occupation. Much of its countryside still bore the scars of battlefield damage and the wealth of its ruling planter aristocracy had been greatly denuded (albeit not destroyed, thanks to replacement practices like sharecropping) by unremunerated emancipation. Worse still, its large Black population labored

¹³ John Milton Cooper, Jr., *The Warrior and the Priest: Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 307.

under a harsh regime of peonage, segregation, and disenfranchisement, and a significant and growing proportion of its population both White and Black found itself trapped in a crippling cycle of indebtedness thanks to its stultifying overreliance on the cotton monoculture. Moreover, despite its strenuous attempts throughout the 1880s and 1890s to make itself attractive to capital with rock-bottom tax-rates, virtually non-existent economic regulations, and brutal, often violent, suppression of anything even remotely resembling an organized labor movement, the South stubbornly remained the most thoroughgoingly agrarian and thereby economically retrograde portion of the country. Wilson, a Virginian by birth who spent most of his childhood and early youth in Georgia and South Carolina, was shaped by this environment significantly, as can be evidenced by his ardent White suprematism, his rock-solid evangelical fervor, his youthful conservatism, and even perhaps in his preference for what C. Vann Woodward would memorably label “procrustean” style policies during his second administration, particularly regarding “seditionists” and “Reds.”¹⁴ While he would eventually shed the ingrained (white) Southern shibboleths against strong central government and an active executive, he always seems to have conceived of their ideal uses in profoundly Jeffersonian (i. e. Southern) terms. Like Jefferson, Wilson conceived of government as a potential means of leveling the playing field so that his rhetorical “men who are on the make”—a disproportionate number of whom, one assumes, were Westerners, or, even better, Southerners—might

¹⁴ C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South: 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951) 75-106.

have a fighting chance against all “the men who are already made”—a disproportionate number of whom, again, one assumes, just happened to be Northern.¹⁵

The vast expanse of the continent west of the Mississippi River was by far the largest, the most multifarious, and the most thinly populated of the nation’s major socio-economic regions. Although the last major uprising of Native resistance had been brutally quashed at the “Battle” of Wounded Knee in 1890 and the Superintendent of the Census had declared the frontier “officially” closed in 1893, much of it was still largely unsettled and undeveloped at the turn of the century. Much of the region was still given over to primitive economic activities like basic resource extraction (in the forms of mining and logging) or peripatetic herding across huge, nebulous ranching domains, all on a dauntingly gargantuan scale. Ironically, the overwhelming “bigness” of economic endeavors in the West, far from deriving from the great “land of plenty” romanticized by boosters then and nostalgists since, actually serves as vivid evidence of the area’s relative economic deprivation. Only vast economies of scale could consistently turn a profit in a land of such harsh terrain, extreme weather conditions, and a crippling lack of reliable labor, demand, and infrastructure. Many who did try their hand at settled agriculture, mostly in the semi-arid prairie states, frequently found their efforts stymied by inclement climate, high cost of equipment, exceeding difficulty and cost in transporting goods to market, the excessive dearness of credit,

¹⁵ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 203

chronic if not constant indebtedness, recurrent market gluts, and what historians from Richard Hofstadter to Donald Worster have diagnosed as a general and self-negating tendency to attempt to apply agricultural precepts and practices from Europe and the Eastern states to the altogether different and unsuitable conditions of the West.

Although he lived his early years in Illinois, Bryan would spend most of his career as a paladin for the West in national politics. Charles Willis Thompson explained that his “hold on the West lay in the fact that he was himself the average man of a large part of that country; he did not merely resemble that average man, he was that average man.”¹⁶ Throughout his life he would champion policies especially popular with Westerners, including free-silver, anti-imperialism, and neutrality in the Great War. Indeed, it is telling that, although Bryan was always strongly pro-labor and in fact dearly needed the labor vote in the east to have any shot at winning the presidency, his regional identity fatally hamstrung his ability to effect a broad farmer-labor alliance. As Michael Kazin has pointed out, in Bryan’s famous “Cross of Gold” speech “the only wage earners he singled out were miners”—the only wage workers commonly familiar throughout the inland West—“most of whom toiled in company towns quite dissimilar from the swelling metropolises where factory hands and building

¹⁶ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition, And the Men Who Made It* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951), 184.

tradesmen lived and worked.”¹⁷ When considered in such a light, it is difficult not to read Bryan’s famous rhetorical apposition in that speech to “[b]urn down your cities 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 the country” as a not-so-veiled jab at the city-slicker East. The industrial East apparently found such appeals decidedly resistable, as Bryan never won a single electoral vote from the industrial heartland (excepting Maryland, a border state, in 1908) in any of his three runs for the presidency.

If any of these three men were merely parochial favorite sons, however, they never would have been able to command the truly national followings which each of them did at the height of their powers. Stories of Roosevelt’s extended emotional convalescence from the deaths of his first wife and mother by hunting and ranching in the rugged Dakota Territory were an integral part of his popular image. And his initiation and pursuit of conservation in the West with the Newlands and Antiquities Acts won him further popularity in the region. Wilson largely secured his national reputation in the Northeast as President of Princeton University and later as a crusading progressive Governor of New Jersey. Moreover, he could not have carried off his razor-thin 1916 re-election victory without making a clean sweep of all but four of the Western states. C. Vann Woodward points out in “The Populist Heritage and the Intellectuals,” the former Confederacy “was easily the most Bryan section of the country, and its dogged

¹⁷ Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 60-61.

loyalty long outlasted that of the Nebraskan's native state," while Michael Kazin has shown that, although he won relatively few votes there, nearly 70% of Bryan's fan-mail in the campaigns of 1896 and 1900 arrived from the rock-ribbed Republican Northeast and upper Midwest.¹⁸ In short, each candidate had at least the potential to bring together a formidable regional alliance behind him in support of either a run for office, agitation on behalf of a specific issue, or both.

In a similar vein, each man stood for or led, or was widely believed to have stood for or led, a different, broadly construed socioeconomic class. The Populist movement that Bryan represented in 1896 (even if his identification with it was perhaps superficial or even, as some have claimed, a disingenuous ploy), and the broader populist tendency in progressive politics which he incarnated and led for long after, was always at least broadly proletarian in its character. It was moreover usually quite seriously so in its rhetoric. In the ringing final line of his "Cross of Gold" speech, for example, Bryan tellingly identifies the constituency he seeks to protect and liberate from the "crown of thorns" of the gold standard as "labor," while as late as 1908, his Presidential campaign slogan rhetorically inquired "Shall the People Rule?" While terms such as "labor" and "the People" can convey ambiguous or even contradictory content, their broader political implications within the context of the times were crystal clear. Bryan saw himself as carrying the banner on behalf of the labor theory of value in particular, and the "producer's democracy" of populist mythology in general. Although far from the

¹⁸ C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), 150-151.

radical socialist that Mark Hanna and other conservatives accused him of being, Bryan was almost certainly the most pro-labor candidate either of the major two parties had yet put forward, going so far as to pledge to make Samuel Gompers a member of his cabinet if elected in 1896. While Bryan was far from a proletarian himself, coming as he did from a comfortable middle-class family, he was still undeniably a member of the American “yeomanry” he cherished so much, and, since his move to Nebraska in 1887, had ample exposure to a constituency but a few years removed from frontier conditions.

In terms of class origins, Theodore Roosevelt presents, or at least seems to present, a strong contrast to the Great Commoner. Born into a venerable old Dutch patroon dynasty in the nation’s greatest metropole and educated at Harvard, where he was a member of several prestigious fraternities and clubs, including the ultra-exclusive Porcellian Club, from which even his equally blue-blooded younger cousin Franklin was rejected, Roosevelt was clearly a product of the nearest approximation late nineteenth-century America had to an aristocracy. Roosevelt’s considerable civic conscience largely inhered around a sense of *noblesse oblige* paternalism and social responsibility exemplified for him as a child by his father’s philanthropic work among the poor, which Howard K. Beale has claimed inculcated him with “a sense of the responsibility of people of *culture*, especially young men with *college educations*, to enter public life and

help run the nation” (emphasis mine).¹⁹ Is there not something of the quintessential aristocratic polymath in the exuberant enthusiasm Roosevelt brought to his myriad extracurricular pursuits like sport, historiography, hunting, natural history, and international geopolitics and war? Roosevelt feels rather akin to a fairly common type in European political history, exemplified by figures such as Alphonse de Lamartine several generations earlier, and Winston Churchill a generation later: the aristocratic Renaissance man who descends from Parnassus into the more quotidian realm of politics whose various studies and outside interests (one abstains from saying “hobbies”) color and (hopefully) enrich his understanding of the salient issues and policy proposals of the day. For example, Roosevelt’s readings in history, specifically those in the works of Alfred Thayer Mahan and Brooks Adams, were a significant influence on his conception of global geopolitics, just as his interest in natural history and concomitant friendships with leading environmentalists like John Muir and Gifford Pinchot inspired the new preservationist and conservationist policies of his administration respectively.

Wilson, meanwhile, largely split the difference between the two men in terms of class origins and appeals, both in his biography, and, in a broader sense, in his policies. Born into the modest yet comfortable household of a middle-class Reverend, and trained to become a professional, Wilson’s formative experiences were defined neither by privilege nor hardship, and were in fact

¹⁹ Howard K. Beale, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America to World Power* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 5.

largely detached from either condition while leaving him ample opportunity to apprehend broad elements of both in action. Perhaps this is why throughout his public career Wilson's preferred domestic policies were oriented toward a sort of broad American *Mittelstand*, though incorporating many of the concerns and desires of less privileged groups like laborers and farmers. This was ideally to be administered faithfully by an elite class of educated and (doubtless) morally upright and disinterested men like himself. In other words, Wilson's social vision, such as it was, did not inhere too strongly around any particular class's interest or values, which of course by default made it as incurably middle class as himself. Moreover, Wilson often voiced a faith in the overriding virtue and importance of what he called the "great middle class" as "the originative part of America, the part of America that makes new enterprises, the part into which the ambitious and gifted workingman makes his way up, the class that saves, that plans, that organizes." Indeed, Wilson seems to have valued the middle class not so much as a *ding an sich* but rather as a sort of hinge or way-station around which the rest of society turned. At one point he even went so far as to assert that "every country is renewed out of the middle stratum."²⁰

All of these contrasts between the three men in terms of class and regional identity and appeal are certainly meaningful in terms of what they reveal about the candidates themselves. They are perhaps most significant to the extent to which they illustrate the intellectual heritage and political constituency which

²⁰ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 203.

raised each of them to prominence, and, in the case of Roosevelt and Wilson, to power. For while progressivism is usually treated as a single, unified movement for reform, it is perhaps better understood as a broad complex of reform movements, or at the very least broad conceptions of reform. These were rooted in disparate historical antecedents and social philosophies, but all arose more or less in tandem and in response to problems and conditions that were essentially connate or at the least closely interrelated. From the Depression of the 1890's until the end of the First World War, Bryan, Roosevelt, and Wilson would each in their turn shepherd and lead one of these reformist paradigms into the national spotlight, and again in the case of the latter two, eventually into the highest realms of policy-making.

Significantly, however, with the important exception of the election of 1912, none of the three men ever really had to share the mantle of progressive leadership on the national stage at the same time. Bryan was *the* face (and, more importantly, voice) of progressivism at the national level from the election of 1896 until the accession of Roosevelt to the presidency in 1901, who held the stage of the national progressive movement entirely to himself (Bryan being denied his party's nomination in 1904 by its ascendant Bourbon wing) until his decision to retire it in 1908, whereupon Bryan briefly reemerged. In 1912, after the awkward and unsatisfying entr'acte of the Taft administration, there ensued a bravura battle for the spotlight by Woodrow Wilson and a returning Roosevelt, which the former won (largely by default). Now unquestionably the star of the

progressive movement, Wilson did not relinquish this stage until ruining his performance, himself, and practically the venue itself (including many members of the audience), and the entire drama ended as a tragedy. Like a play by Brecht, the sequence in which these various acts of the progressive movement succeeded one another was essentially dialectical in character.

The aforementioned class origins and characters of Bryan, Roosevelt, and Wilson provide an inlet into the character of this dialectical progression. Bryan and the agrarian populism whom he eventually came to embody and lead sought reform “[f]rom the bottom up” as Eric F. Goldman has characterized it.²¹ Theirs was fundamentally an insurgent movement of Lincolnian “plain people,” such as smallholders, tenant farmers, and—they hoped eventually—wage earners, people of limited to modest means. Such people were trapped (or believed themselves to be so) in the vises of indebtedness, isolation, and exploitation and sought to band together first in the Farmers’ Alliances, then the People’s Party, and eventually (again, it was to be hoped) Macune’s Subtreasury Plan, and eventually even government. Once united and with such instruments at their command, they hoped that they might be able to effectively stand up to the monopolists of the East and the big cities. Although they radically departed from the anti-statism of Jefferson and Jackson, they cited them in their efforts on behalf of farmers, artisans, and workers as their ideological forbears (even if this required a good measure of what Postel has wryly called “rhetorical alchemy”) in

²¹ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 29-57.

their pursuit of what they considered “industrial liberty.”²² At bottom, Bryan and the populists sought to empower the powerless of their time through organization and collective uplift, whether through the mediums of Farmers’ Alliances, Subtreasury Plan, People’s Party (and, briefly, the Democratic Party), municipal or state governments, or even the federal government in Washington.

This Populist-Bryanite thesis for reform was vigorously opposed and seemingly thwarted by a new generation then rising to power in the nation’s highest circles of political and economic power, best personified and eventually led by a dynamic young Theodore Roosevelt. In many ways was a belated product of the Goo-Goo movement of the 1870’s and 1880’s, Roosevelt had flirted with the Mugwump revolt of 1884 before finally resolving to hold his nose and support James G. Blaine. However, he and the reform currents he eventually came to embody and lead diverged strikingly from them, just as the Populists did from the Jefferson-Jackson tradition, in their willingness and even eagerness to countenance assertive government intervention to counter growing corporate power. But almost antithetically to Bryan and the Populists (to say nothing of the rising Socialist movement, which they feared and abhorred even more) however, Roosevelt and the other Square Dealers (and later New Nationalists) saw this intervention not so much as a means of empowering the powerless *per se*, but rather as a somewhat paternalistic means of bringing the “malefactors of great wealth” to heel and protecting the general public from their

²² Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 142.

most flagrant frauds and abuses. Of course, there was a great deal of *noblesse oblige* about such attitudes, especially when one considers how elite and wealthy most of its practitioners were, but it must be owned that the benevolent umpire state developed by Roosevelt did manage to effectively adapt the old “good government” ideas to meet the pressing social and economic issues of the day, especially in dealing with the populists’ broader bugbear of monopolistic business interests.

After he left office, Roosevelt’s notions of government’s needful role expanded dramatically. His bruited New Nationalism program taking his Hamiltonian notions of reform considerably further while incorporating some new planks concerning social justice like woman suffrage and a rudimentary welfare state. When he ran on this platform at the head of his new Bull Moose Party, he found his way blocked by the emergence of a new progressive leader from the Democratic Party bearing with him his own conception of reform, Woodrow Wilson. Although on the stump Wilson’s New Freedom proposals mirrored Bryan’s bottom-up approach to reform (albeit from within the framework of a seemingly more Jeffersonian brand of economic democracy), once in office he pursued these goals in tandem with many measures lifted largely from the top-down, New Nationalist playbook pushed by Roosevelt (which he had ironically once denigrated and opposed throughout his campaign). In action, therefore, the New Freedom tended to function like a rather rough synthesis of the two prior conceptions of progressivism promulgated by Bryan and Roosevelt respectively.

Moreover, after the consummation of Wilson's domestic aspirations in 1914, he continued to play the role of man in the middle between Bryan and Roosevelt. This took place in the key debates raised by the outbreak of war in Europe, including preparedness, America's proper role in international affairs, and eventually, intervention on the Allied side and arbitration at the Versailles Conference. When his Treaty failed in the Senate, Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke, and the entire progressive movement fell badly out of balance, collapsing under a harsh reaction in 1919 and 1920 that led to a bloody Red Scare and eventually the landslide election of a strongly conservative ticket of "normalcy" under Warren G. Harding.

THESIS:
THE POPULIST CHALLENGE

One of the signal ironies of the late nineteenth century is that the first protest movement of truly national dimensions against the forces of industrialization, urbanization, above all else, corporate consolidation than remaking American society arose out of a milieu as yet seemingly far removed from their direct effects. The rural areas of the South, Great Plains, and Far West excluding California at that time were notably deficient in huge, decadent metropolises, dark Satanic mills (or indeed industrialization of any kind), or waves of impoverished and hapless European immigrants (especially in the South). And yet it was there that the Populist movement, which even the otherwise skeptical Richard Hofstadter has denominated as “the first modern political movement of practical importance in the United States...to attack seriously the problems created by industrialism” first arose.²³ Contrary to the predictions of Karl Marx and other such theorists of class struggle, the new industrial-capitalist order in America was not initially challenged by any “urban proletariat” scrambling for pitiable wages in vast, impersonal cities, but by almost their socioeconomic antinomies (except at the level of income, of course), rural and provincial smallholders who were decidedly remote from any centers of political or economic power. Moreover, the “hell” the Populists raised on behalf of

²³ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 61.

reform would in the long run turn out to have wide-ranging influence and implications and would help to catalyze progressivism in large cities and, eventually, the national government in Washington.²⁴ What Richard Hofstadter once said of the United States in general feels even more *à propos* when applied to the progressive movement in particular, in that it was “born in the country and has moved to the city.”²⁵

But perhaps the fact that remote farmers were the first to mount a sustained revolt against the social inequities of the new corporate order is understandable when one considers how the political culture of the nineteenth century had in many ways primed them for the role. Generations spent absorbing Jeffersonian axioms about how “how those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God” and how “great cities [and presumably all that they entailed like industrialization and great concentration of wealth] were “pestilential to the morals, the health, and the liberties of man” had given the nation’s farmers a deep and persistent sense of civic self-esteem if not paramountcy. Perhaps it was for this reason that Bryan was, as his biographer Michael Kazin has put it, “unstinting” in his devotion to what he saw as the legacy of the Sage of Monticello, seeking to yoke “the legitimacy of nearly every major reform for which he campaigned to ‘Jeffersonian principles.’” At one point he told an admirer that “Jefferson trusted the people [probably meaning in this instance smallholders of White “native” stock] and believed they were the source of power and authority”

²⁴ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 39.

²⁵ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, 23.

and moreover that his “motto of equal rights and privileges to none is the fundamental law that governs legislation and the administration of government.”²⁶ Furthermore, the farmers’ conception of themselves as a submerged majority was still far from implausible when the Populist agitations began, with a full half of all Americans still making their living directly from farming as late as 1880, and the cities not outstripping the countryside in population (and then only just) until 1920. In other words, while Hofstadter may have been partially correct that some of the impetus for Populism derived from a collective crisis of confidence among the nation’s farmers in the face of forces undermining their way of life, Postel’s contention that the greater portion of it could just as easily have arisen from a deeper, abiding sense of their own importance and their concomitant belief in their right to take control of and direct (rather than simply thwart or resist) said forces seems at least equally if not more plausible.

The long pedigree and continued prevalence of the labor theory of value, at least at the popular level, in the United States gave the Populists further confidence in the historical righteousness of their cause. As Beatty has explained “this ‘producerist’s ideology,’ expressed in the antique phrase ‘the fruits of labor,’ was republican doctrine descended from the Revolution and ‘omnipresent in political rhetoric throughout the 19th century,’ according to the historian James Huston.”²⁷ When the Omaha Platform of 1892 referred fondly to the “union of labor forces” and Populist politicians like Tom Watson used the term “the laborer”

²⁶ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, xv.

²⁷ Beatty, *Age of Betrayal*, 357-358.

virtually interchangeably with phrases like “the people” and “the great Middle Class,” they were verbally deferring to the “producers” which many at the time still credited with the creation of wealth. Unlike the more doctrinaire Marxist conception of “the proletariat,” the Populists did not strictly confine “producer” status to those who worked at manual labor, but instead believed, as Postel has explained, that “a broad spectrum of trades, professions, and occupations—farmers, mechanics, miners, craftsmen, doctors, editors, and manufacturers—might be included in the expansive and fluid category of labor.” Likely this is why Watson defined his rhetorical “laborer” as one who “works with brawn or brain, with thought or speech”²⁸ and Bryan closed his famous “Cross of Gold” speech by invoking “the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere.”²⁹

The essential continuity of the Populists’ calls for “a producer’s republic” or “a producer’s democracy” with radical political movements earlier in the century is well illustrated even at the level of their protest songs. In 1840 radical Democrats canvassing to re-elect Martin Van Buren sang what they called a “*Producer’s Election Hymn, or an Address to Poor Men,*” (emphasis mine) in which they exhorted

Then let the working class,
As a congregated man,
Behold an insidious enemy:
For each *Banker* is a foe,
And his aim is for our woe—

²⁸ Postel, *Populist Vision*, 224.

²⁹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero* 61.

He's the *canker-worm of liberty!*³⁰
(emphasis in original).

A half-century later, their grandsons were singing of similar themes, albeit in a decidedly darker tone:

Oh Kansas fool, poor Kansas fool!
The banker makes of you a tool...
The bankers followed us out west
And did in mortgages invest
And looked ahead and shrewdly planned
And soon they'll have our Kansas land.³¹

The demonology of 1840 has survived remarkably intact, but the appeal to class-based collective action and self-assertion has been replaced by a bitter, almost pitiable sense of helplessness and defeat that broke into outright vengefulness in other, more strident songs sung on the prairie:

When brokers are freed from all their harm
And lobbyists are dead
The banker'll bow unto the farm
And come to us for bread.³²

The essential purpose of the Populist movement, therefore, was to find practical means of replacing these fears and resentments with at least the possibilities of collective empowerment and hope for a better future. As Postel has put it, "[a]cross much of America's rural territory, Populism formed a unique social movement that represented a distinctly modernizing impulse."³³ The key

³⁰ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945), 297-298.

³¹ "Kansas Fool," The Mudcat Café, accessed December 10, 2012, <http://www.mudcat.org/@displaysong.cfm?SongID=8794>.

³² Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 23-24.

³³ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 9.

difference between the “modernization” favored by the Populists and that actually being effected by Gould, Cooke, Hanna, and others was that the former ideally conceived of modernity in terms of forces which would make the American economy and American society more egalitarian, rather than more stratified. One of the most striking things about the leadership of the Populist movement—at least in the West—is how truly humble and modest much of its leadership was in its origins, at least compared to their solidly respectable opponents. Almost all of them really do seem to have represented a broad cross-section of the sort of unpretentious “plain people” on whose behalf they claimed to speak and work in terms of class origins and backgrounds. While a few of Populism’s major leaders like Leonidas Polk and Adolph Sutro came from positions of wealth and privilege, the working or lower-middle-class origins of Charles Macune, John B. Rayner, Luna Kellie—to say nothing of labor leaders associated with the movement like John McBride and Martin Irons—is much more indicative of the type, with even the solidly bourgeois Bryan seeming almost well-to-do in such company.

Moreover, it is striking how strongly the measurable rank-and-file support for the People’s Party corresponds to the broad social stratum that Robert Johnston has defined as “middling socioeconomic groups of small proprietors or the lower petite bourgeoisie,” particularly in the South.³⁴ For example, C. Vann Woodward has cited how in Texas “the ‘prosperous farmers fundamentally were Democrats’ and that ‘it was the poor, small farmer then who constituted, together

³⁴ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 224.

with thousands of his fellows, the rank and file of the People's party," while in Georgia "the Populist vote 'varied in the rural districts, to a considerable extent, in inverse proportion to the prevalence of the Negroes [who were mostly sharecroppers] and the large plantations.'"³⁵ Elaborating upon Woodward, Steven Hahn, in his study of the rise of populism in the Georgia upcountry, has described the populist movement as both a regional and class conflict, pitting the large-scale planters of the plantation belt, who controlled and overwhelmingly supported the dominant Democratic Party, against the middling yeomen of the piedmont who sought, according to Hahn, "a vision of a cooperative commonwealth of producers to be realized through public regulation of production and exchange."³⁶

And yet, while populism in practice was often predicated around class conflict, the populists, much like the subsequent progressives they would at least partially inspire involved in the Square Deal, the New Nationalism and the New Freedom, considered themselves and their efforts as standing above mere "class legislation," a phrase they associated with laws benefiting one industry or profession at the expense of another, and therefore frequently used as a term of opprobrium. Instead, the Populists saw themselves and their movement as constituting a broad coalition of more modest "interests"—a baggy term engrossing disparate occupations, industries, and even certain professions—

³⁵ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 246.

³⁶ Steven Hahn, *The Roots of Southern Populism: Yeoman Farmers and the Transformation of the Georgia Upcountry, 1850-1890* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 3.

arrayed against the growing power of large industrial combinations and concentrated wealth. As Postel has explained, “[t]he Populists viewed their new People’s party as a fusion of interests, or a ‘confederation of industrial orders,’” or, more precisely, “as organized contingents of modern American industry,” with which they might challenge the formidable “organized contingents” of the trusts and other giant corporations.³⁷

In other words, the populists sought to fight fire with fire, reasoning that if superior organization and pooling of resources and expertise had helped a small cadre of Eastern “bankers” and “capitalists” to gain control of larger and larger shares of the nation’s wealth, and even to a large extent the government itself, the laboring and middling “People” of the West and South could likewise do the same. As the movement developed throughout the 1880s and 1890s, however, the Populists’ ambitions shifted more and more from measures to achieve economic parity, such as Macune’s Subtreasury Plan, to efforts to win political power outright, whether in the form of their own political party in 1892, and eventually through an alliance with one of the nation’s major two parties in 1896.

And yet that such a thing might come to pass at all would have seemed well-nigh unthinkable to many Populists as recently as five years before. At that time, for instance, President of the California Farmers’ Alliance and future Populist Representative in the Fifty-third Congress Marion Cannon memorably exhorted the delegates at the People’s Party state founding convention in Los

³⁷ Postel, *Populist Vision*, 224-225.

Angeles to forever eschew any and all ties to both the Democratic and Republican parties and henceforth promise “our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor” to the new party.³⁸ In the South, where the Democrats employed rampant fraud, intimidation, violence, and recently, widespread disfranchisement of blacks and many poor whites, an alliance with the Democracy was a particularly bitter pill for many Populists to swallow. Indeed, after Bryan’s defeat that November, many disillusioned Populists complained that Fusion under Bryan in general, and the silver panacea in particular had been essentially little more than a ploy by the Democrats to finish off the People’s Party once and for all. Tom Watson, Bryan’s ill-fated running mate on the Populist ticket that year, expressed this belief pungently when he despaired that “Our party, as a party, does not exist any more...Fusion has well nigh killed it. The sentiment is still there, but confidence is gone.” Many subsequent historians have tended to agree, with C. Vann Woodward concluding—with all his trademark irony—that “If the primary purpose of the old party [i.e. the Democrats] was a national victory for silver, the campaign was a failure,” but “[i]f on the other hand the purpose was the destruction of the Populist party, it was a success.”³⁹

Why, then, given the great breadth and depth of mistrust and disdain for the two major parties among many of the Populists—without which their People’s Party would never have been created in the first place, of course—would they ultimately choose to tie themselves to the Democratic nominee, William Jennings

³⁸ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 272.

³⁹ Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 289.

Bryan, and thereby compromise their hard-won insurgency and political independence? This seemingly enormous *volte-face* on the part of the Populists is even more surprising when one recalls that they were largely persuaded to rally behind Bryan's standard on the strength of a solitary speech of his, the famous "Cross of Gold" speech delivered at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Much of the answer lies in the fact that, for all of the rhetorical anathema that the Populists poured on the two major parties, the People's Party owed much of its electoral success to either fusion tickets with one or the other of them, or the endorsement and support of same. Indeed, as Postel has pointed out, even Cannon, for all of his self-righteous truculence, largely owed his House seat to the endorsement of the Democratic Party in 1892. Moreover, in states like Nebraska, Colorado, and Kansas all but the most die-hard "middle-of-the-road" [i.e. rejecting any connection with either of the major two parties] candidates accepted such cooperation as a virtual requirement for survival in a first past the post electoral system.⁴⁰

However, it was the personal character and, more importantly, the ideological convictions as expressed by the nominee himself which largely served as the determining factor in temporarily bringing the Populists to the Democrats' side. While there was no more sincerely partisan Democrat than Bryan, who seems to have imbibed liberally from his father the radical Jacksonian dogmas which Michael Kazin has memorably defined as "a potent

⁴⁰ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 272-273.

mixture of egalitarian principle and racist fear” (to say nothing of an enthusiasm for currency reform), Bryan’s admittedly brief career leading up to the “Cross of Gold” speech did show a real affinity with the populist agitation then roiling around him.⁴¹ In his race for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1890, for instance (the only election he ever won, incidentally), Bryan essentially endorsed or expressed agreement with all the major planks of the People’s Independent Party’s platform—the precursor to the People’s Party in Nebraska—including the “suppression” of the trusts, a ban on speculation in land by “non-resident aliens,” and debt relief in the form of the free coinage of silver “on equal terms” with gold.⁴² Indeed, it is telling that even the nationalization of the railroads—the one demand of the insurgents that Bryan (no doubt deliberately) ignored in 1890—would eventually be taken up by him in his 1908 bid for the presidency. Once in Congress, however, it was the bimetallism plank which above all others most captured Bryan’s attention, not only for the duration of his term but the remainder of the decade.

That Bryan and the rest of the “radical” wing of the Democratic Party fell so hard for the silver panacea can at first blush seem to be bizarre if not rather foolish. Americans have gotten so used to money whose value is arbitrarily determined that even after the major financial panic of 2008, calls for a return to metal-backed currency has remained confined to a small (but vocal) segment of the rightmost fringe in American politics. So why exactly did the prospect of the

⁴¹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 4.

⁴² Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 26.

free coinage of silver drive so many at the time to such levels of apocalyptic fervor? Michael Kazin has perceptively explained that “in the mid-1890s, most Americans assumed that wealth consisted largely of products that were tangible and visible—crops, livestock, iron, coal, textiles, real estate,” and so, consequently, “when calamity struck, they naturally fell to arguing whether the fault lay in a surplus or shortage of the shiny commodities, or specie, on which their dollars were based.”⁴³

The silver panacea may also have owed much of its popularity among Democrats to an inchoate sense of party heritage. Currency and financial reform in the form of the Specie Circular and Hard Money agitation of the 1830s was after all the Democracy’s first great political crusade, and one that left an indelible mark on their party’s ideational folklore. Bryan himself explicitly harkened back to this legacy by peppering his “Cross of Gold” speech with several flattering references to important figures from the Bank War such as Thomas Hart Benton and, of course, Old Hickory himself, who Bryan rather grandiloquently claims “destroyed the bank conspiracy and saved America.” Indeed, in Bryan’s version of history, Jackson sounded like nothing so much as a proto-populist, such as when he declared that “What we need [today] is an Andrew Jackson to stand as Jackson stood, against the encroachments of aggregated wealth.”⁴⁴ Moreover, this party heritage of currency reform may well have outlived Bryan and the

⁴³ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 50.

⁴⁴ “Bryan’s ‘Cross of Gold’ Speech: Mesmerizing the Masses,” *History Matters*, accessed December 10, 2012, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5354/>.

Popocrats. Indeed, it is perhaps not surprising that when the next great depression hit, another Democrat (and one far less credulous than Bryan at that) would, among many other attempted reform remedies, take the nation off the gold standard, and that, moreover just as in the 1890's (and 1830's, for that matter), some responded with apocalyptic fervor, solemnly intoning, among other things, that this was "the end of western civilization?"⁴⁵

However, while it may have held center stage in the "Popocratic" campaign of 1896 (and to a lesser extent in Bryan's second go at McKinley in 1900), Bryan's espousal of free silver was far from the only reason the Populists eventually chose to endorse him. Rather it was because the speech did such a rousing job of placing the bimetallism issue within much broader questions of economic democracy and the value and rights of laboring, or "producing" people. Indeed, Michael Kazin has grasped the larger argument of the speech well when he says of it that "[f]ree silver may have been the 'paramount issue,' but that is because of who advocated it and who opposed it," and that consequently, "[t]he issue [free silver] was not really the issue." Indeed, from almost the very beginning of the speech, Bryan makes it clear how truly expansive and weighty the "real issue" of the campaign as he saw it was by declaring "I come to speak to you in defense of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty—the cause of humanity."⁴⁶ Thus, as befitting the fundamentalist piety of Bryan and many in his

⁴⁵ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 201.

⁴⁶ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 59.

audience, the coming struggle was described as having an almost religious significance.

However, it was most likely not the appeals to tradition or the past in Bryan's speech that ultimately won over so many in the People's Party in Bryan's speech, but rather the way he expertly played on their collective desire for parity with, and recognition from, the "modern" and "organized" world of the great corporations of the East. In other words, as Michael Kazin has explained, Bryan's address was primarily "a Jeffersonian's plea for *moral equity*, not a radical's demand for power" (emphasis mine).⁴⁷ Bryan began this appeal by lightly and deftly playing on the regional antagonisms motivating many agrarian insurgents by first reminding the Convention that "we stand here representing people who are the equals before the law of the largest cities in the state of Massachusetts," before moving on to a more substantive explication of the economic grievances of many of the "common men" of the South and, especially, the West.⁴⁸ "You come before us and tell us that we are about to disturb your business interests," Bryan rhetorically addressed the wealthy magnates of the east coast, immediately followed by his retort that "[w]e say to you that you have made the definition of a business man too limited in its application." This then set Bryan off on as broad and as forward-looking an explication of the labor theory of value

⁴⁷ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 60.

⁴⁸ "Bryan's 'Cross of Gold' Speech: Mesmerizing the Masses," History Matters, accessed December 10, 2012, <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5354/>.

and a call for a “producer’s democracy” as could have come from any People’s Party orator:

“The man who is employed for wages is as much a business man as his employer, the attorney in a country town is as much a business man as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis; the merchant at the crossroads store is as much a business man as the merchant of New York; the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day...and who by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of the country creates wealth, is as much a business man as the man who goes upon the board of trade and bets upon the price of grain; the miners who go down a thousand feet into the earth, or climb two thousand feet upon the cliffs, and bring forth from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured into the channels of trade are as much business men as the few financial magnates who, in a back room, corner the money of the world.”⁴⁹

In this remarkable passage we see Bryan vividly expound the labor theory of value as seen through the prism of what Postel has described as the “expansive and fluid category of labor” preferred by the populists, albeit with a crucial difference. Whereas the “producerists” ideology had usually been hitherto invoked to set the “productive” laboring classes against the supposedly “parasitical” class of businessmen and financiers, Bryan rhetorically turned this formulation on its head by insisting that virtually anyone who was economically “productive” in some sense was, perforce, also a businessman themselves. In other words, Bryan sought not a class struggle between the laboring “producers” and the capitalist “parasites,” but to unite and empower all the unrecognized and relatively powerless “businessmen” whom he doubtless believed populated (and were currently languishing in) the middle American countryside. In this he resembled certain members of the Farmers’ Alliance who recommended a more

⁴⁹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 60.

“businesslike” approach to both farming and government to alleviate the farmers’ difficulties and who consequently abjured third-party politics. For example, former head of the Southern Farmers’ Alliance and originator of the Sub-Treasury Plan (and lifelong partisan Democrat) Charles Macune anticipated Bryan’s attempts to rhetorically conscript the business ethos for the farmers’ cause (while sounding ironically for all the world like a Chamber of Commerce orator) with his claim that “government is a business organization for carrying out the public business in a commonsense, business-like manner,” and his expressed belief that the activities of government “should be reduced to business terms, placed upon a business basis and attended to by business agents.”⁵⁰

While Bryan’s rhetorical framing of them and their constituency as thwarted and disadvantaged “businessmen” was doubtless flattering to many populists and in line with many of their own ideals, there can also be little doubt that in so doing he also significantly watered down their movement’s sense of insurgency, or what Tom Watson memorably described as its “yearning, upward tendency.”⁵¹ Indeed, according to Eric F. Goldman, this “approach to reform softened and blurred the ‘producer’ class philosophy of Populism—the farmer and industrial worker were businessmen too, Bryan insisted—and he was careful to emphasize that he was no revolutionary.” Indeed, for all of his supposed “radicalism,” Bryan’s rhetoric could occasionally strike a tone more akin to Grover Cleveland than Andrew Jackson, such as when he insisted that “[w]e cannot

⁵⁰ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 139-140.

⁵¹ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 52.

insure to the vicious the fruits of the virtuous life,” and furthermore, “[w]e would not invade the home of the provident in order to supply the wants of the spendthrift.”⁵² Even the crusading “Cross of Gold” speech contains passages which, while they were no doubt intended by Bryan to convey a sense of the moral equity between the great cities of the East and the hinterlands of the West and South which victualled and supplied them, feel rather more like the backward-looking, reactionary gripes of a Luddite against the city slickers:

“You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities 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 the country.”⁵³

While later critics of the populist tendency in politics in general and Bryan in particular, including most notably H. L. Mencken and Richard Hofstadter, would arguably make too much of “The Commoner’s” provinciality and narrow-mindedness, there can be little denying that at times he gave them more than enough to work with.

Not surprisingly then, many in the People’s Party balked at having their movement co-opted and diluted by the Democrats, and consequently reviled Bryan as a tempter. And, due to the Democracy’s brutally unscrupulous methods of squelching the Populist challenge in the South, many Southern Populists were particularly vehement in their rejection of fusion under Bryan. At the 1896 Populist National Convention in St. Louis, for example, one outraged delegate

⁵² Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 64.

⁵³ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 61.

from Texas rhetorically demanded “Do you expect us to run now with the creatures [i.e. the Democrats] who heaped these insults on us?” And when one recalls that the “insults” Populists from the man’s region had had to endure from Democrats included widespread fraud, intimidation, violence, and eventually the almost wholesale disenfranchisement of blacks and many poor whites, it is scarcely surprising that he should have bitterly answered his own question by swearing “So help me God, I will never march with you into...that cesspool of hell.” Another elderly Texas delegate was even more explicit in his rejection of Bryan, sobbing that “[w]e will not crucify the People’s Party on the Cross of Democracy!” Like it or not, an endorsement of one of the two major parties’ nominees would bring the People’s Party firmly and unmistakably into the American political mainstream, where the stakes for both future failures and successes would be exponentially higher.

That the failure of the Fusion ticket in 1896 inflicted a mortal wound on the People’s Party from which it never entirely recovered has tended to reinforce this perception of Bryan as a sort of “popocratic” siren whose beautiful voice lured the more radical and independent strains of the populist movement to wreck. This interpretation elides, however, how seriously Bryan was taken as a challenge to the prevailing *laissez-faire*, Gilded Age consensus of the time, both by those who supported that consensus and those who opposed it. In the case of the former, Goldman has recounted how conservatives at the time pilloried Bryan as, among other things, “a ‘baby orator,’ a ‘slobbering demagogue’ talking a creed of

'national dishonor, private robbery, the exaltation of anarchy...[and] the damnation of the Constitution."⁵⁴ Meanwhile, many independent and radical figures like Henry George, John Peter Altgeld, and even Eugene Debs (not yet a socialist, but drifting that way) all heartily endorsed the Commoner, with the latter even writing to tell him that "[y]ou are at this hour the hope of the Republic—the central figure of the civilized world."⁵⁵ Moreover, Bryan went to far greater lengths to court organized labor than any previous candidate from the two major parties, such as criticizing the use of injunctions, defending workers' right to organize, advocating the regulation of big business by the Federal government at a huge Labor Day picnic in Chicago, and even promising to induct President of the American Federation of Labor Samuel Gompers into his Cabinet.

If anything, it was not Bryan or even fusion with the Democrats that ultimately undermined the populist movement, but rather the silver panacea that brought them all down together. While the free silver issue may not have been entirely the "monomania" which Richard Hofstadter claimed kept Bryan and the Populists distracted from other, more substantive reforms, it is hard not to agree with the muckracking journalist Henry Demarest Lloyd's description of it as "the cow-bird of the reform movement," which "waited until the nest had been built by the sacrifices and labour of others, and then it laid its eggs in it, pushing out the others which lie smashed on the ground."⁵⁶ Specifically, by emphasizing the

⁵⁴ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 63.

⁵⁵ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 64.

⁵⁶ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 156.

silver issue so heavily in 1896, Bryan and the populists may very well have alienated the urban wage workers they so desperately needed to eke out an electorally viable coalition of “producers.” Contrary to the Populists’ insistence in the Omaha Platform that “the interests of rural and civic labor are the same; their enemies are identical,” the hard economic truth of the matter was that the heavily indebted wheat and cotton farmers of the West and South stood to benefit the most by the inflationary effects that would be wrought by a return to the free coinage of silver. For all of their high-minded appeals to principle and the need to unite and empower “the producing classes,” Bryan and the populists could simply not compensate for the hard economic fact that, as Michael Kazin has explained, urban, wage-laborers “had nothing concrete to gain from free silver and would only suffer if a change in the currency drove up prices for food and other necessities.”⁵⁷

However, while the silver plank would ultimately fail and drag the populist movement as thing-in-itself down with it, many of their other major goals would eventually come to be achieved either in whole or in part in the generation or so following the Fusion campaign of 1896. Two of their most significant bruited political reforms—the establishment of a progressive tax on income and the direct election of U.S. Senators—would eventually be enacted in 1913 via the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Amendments to the Constitution respectively, with none other than then-Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan enjoying the

⁵⁷ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 68-69.

privilege of formally declaring the ratification of the latter. Many of the farmers' economic grievances would be addressed by legislation in Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom, including the Smith-Lever Act, the Federal Farm Loan Act, and several others which when taken together almost constituted a sort of facsimile of Macune's Sub-Treasury Plan. Perhaps most significantly of all, however, in the decade or so following their defeat under Bryan, many Populists matriculated into the reform wings of the Democratic and Republican Parties, where their ideals of regulation and big business and the use of organization and institutions to extend parity and opportunity to the relatively disempowered would inspire much of the impetus for the progressive movement to follow. As Charles Postel has vividly phrased it, "[t]he callused-handed Populist shared much ideological ground with the university-groomed Progressive of the next generation."⁵⁸

And what of Bryan himself, the man who briefly captured the movement and led it to national prominence? While it is difficult to disagree with Bryan's biographer Michael Kazin when he contends that, for all of the Commoner's virtues, it is probably ultimately for the best that he never became president, it is also difficult to deny the long-range influence he would have, not only on the progressive movement that he helped to define but on what eventually succeeded it. He remained the de facto leader of his party's progressive wing until the rise of Wilson, and was consequently its perennial candidate of choice, winning the Democratic presidential nomination again in 1900 and 1908 (with the

⁵⁸ Postel, *The Populist Vision*, 5.

conservative wing interpolating Alton B. Parker in 1904), and, while both of these later campaigns were even less successful than his 1896 run, they also helped to introduce and articulate new reformist ideas into national politics, such as opposition to imperialism in the case of the former and calls for the taming of big business in the latter. Most importantly, the notion espoused by Bryan, that the Federal government ought to intervene directly to aid those hurt or threatened by economic calamity, while rejected by the electorate in 1896, would prove remarkably durable and influential in the long run, helping to pave the way for the success of a similar appeal made by Franklin Roosevelt thirty-six years later. As much as most American liberals today might balk at Bryan's rather retrograde scientific and social views and his loudly trumpeted evangelical piety, the fiscal and economic policies they forward would be unrecognizable and perhaps even nonexistent without his influence.

ANTITHESIS:

THE ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

After William McKinley's assassination in September 1901, the progressive movement, in the person of Theodore Roosevelt, finally moved into the White House. But it was to be a progressivism far removed and much further to the right in its orientation than the crusading oratory of Bryan on behalf of "the common man" or "the producing masses."⁵⁹ There was very little "common" about the nation's new president whether in background, education, interests, vision, or ambition as Americans would come to learn over the next generation. Although he was relatively judicious and restrained in the measures he promulgated as president (particularly in comparison with the policies he advocated later), Roosevelt expended much of his trademark vigor in erecting a workable and practical raft of reforms to restrain some of the most flagrant abuses of the largest corporations, bring a few of the worst "malefactors of great wealth" (as he called them) to book, and establish a new modicum of welfare and protection for the general public as guaranteed by the government.⁶⁰ While Bryan and the Popocrats dreamed of an insurgency of the "plain people" taking control of and transforming the federal government, Roosevelt and his associates sought (and largely effected) an administrative revolution from above which in a few

⁵⁹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 60-61.

⁶⁰ Edmund Morris, *Theodore Rex* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2001), 499.

short years managed to upend much of the once well-nigh impregnable Gilded Age consensus.

Like the Populists and their rather strained but vital sense of descent from the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian movements, Roosevelt and his reform contingent also grew out of a historical heritage, albeit one that was much more recent and with a legacy much more defined by its persistent frustrations than by great, long-ranging achievements. Roosevelt's political forbears, at least at the level of ideals if not practice, were the "Goo-Goos" and Mugwumps of the 1880s, and perhaps in a broader sense even the ill-starred Liberal Republican uprising of the Reconstruction era. Like many others of his class, educational background, and regional milieu, Roosevelt abhorred the easy venality of the era in which he came of age and deplored it as both a cause and a symptom of the supposed accelerating vulgarization of American society in general and American politics in particular following the Civil War. The undisputed intellectual *sine qua non* of this type, Henry Adams, has left an indelible expression of the snobbish derision—mixed with no small amount of fear—with which the patrician class of the late nineteenth-century viewed "professional" (i.e. not "gentlemanly") politicians:

The type was pre-intellectual, archaic, and would have seemed so even to the cave-dwellers...In time one came to recognize the type in other men, with differences and variations, as normal; men whose energies were the greater, the less they wasted on thought; men who sprang from the soil to power; apt to be distrustful of themselves and of others; shy; jealous; sometimes vindictive; more or less dull in outward appearance; always

needing stimulants; but for whom action was the highest stimulant—the instinct of fight.⁶¹

Indeed, in his spirited opposition to the nomination of James G. Blaine by the Republican Party in 1884, a touch of such high-minded priggishness sometimes snuck into Roosevelt's rhetoric, as when he solemnly pledged that "I will not stay in public life unless I can do so on my own terms...and my ideal...is rather a high one."⁶²

Roosevelt's real significance in relation to the genteel reformers of the Gilded Age, however, lay not in how he followed in their footsteps, but rather in how he deviated from them. As historian Richard Hofstadter has perceptively defined Roosevelt's primary insight:

A recruit from the same social and educational strata as the reform leaders, he [Roosevelt] decided at an early age that the deficiencies charged against them were real, and that if reform was to get anywhere, their type must be replaced by a new and more vigorous kind of leader from the same class.⁶³

He may therefore have seriously flirted with the Mugwump rebellion of 1884, but in the end finally resolved to swallow his misgivings and remain loyal to his party. He justified his decision by insisting that a "healthy party spirit" was a "prerequisite to the performance of effective work in American political life."⁶⁴

Roosevelt was even able to develop a sense of humor about the whole affair, in

⁶¹ Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (New York: The Modern Library, 1918), 265.

⁶² John Morton Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1954), 10.

⁶³ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 191.

⁶⁴ Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt*, 11.

stark contrast to his earlier, loudly-trumpeted (self-)righteousness, at one point playfully offering a mock diagnosis to the powerful arch-Mugwump editor, Ernest Lawrence Godkin, who had attacked him vehemently through his *New York Evening Post* for truckling to Blaine's nomination, of "a species of moral myopia, complicated with intellectual strabismus."⁶⁵ True to form, Godkin, and with him much of the high-minded Goo-Goo element of the nation's patriciate, signally failed to take the ribbing, and became one of Roosevelt's harshest, most persistent public critics.

Moreover, when one peruses Adams's long categorical critique of the archetypical Gilded Age spoilsman, it is noteworthy not only how strongly Roosevelt contrasts with many of its clauses, but how appositely certain others seem to apply to him. While to be sure nobody would ever mistake Roosevelt for one who "sprang from the soil to power," or of being "shy" and "apt to be distrustful of themselves and of others," at the same time they also could doubtless not fail to notice that he had a marked tendency (in his weaker moments, and especially once out of power) to be "jealous" and even "sometimes vindictive." While, whether at his best or worst, he was certainly "always needing stimulants" and was almost a perfect epitome of one "for whom action was the highest stimulant—the instinct of fight." These latter characteristics, however, far from being the deficiencies which Adams considered them, had a powerful leavening effect on Roosevelt's potential appeal

⁶⁵ Edmund Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1979), 272.

and, consequently, his political effectiveness, or, as Richard Hofstadter has memorably put it,

it was one of the major sources of his popularity at large, toward the end of the century, that he could be portrayed as an Easterner, a writer, and a Harvard man from the well-to-do classes who nevertheless knew how to get along with cowboys and Rough Riders.⁶⁶

Moreover, Roosevelt himself was acutely aware of this. Consider for example the not-so-subtly implied contrast he drew between himself and the Godkin-style reformers, whom he penetratingly derided in his *Autobiography* as “gentlemen who were very nice, very refined, who shook their heads over political corruption and discussed it in drawing rooms and parlors, but who were wholly unable to grapple with real men in real life.”⁶⁷

While Roosevelt may have disdained the ineffectuality and even the “effeteness” of the Goo-Goos, and generally managed to even rise above their snobbishness, he was still far from being an arrant proletarian or even a Bryanite “man of the people.” On the contrary, while no one would ever accuse him of aristocratic “effeteness,” Roosevelt was indeed a creature of his class in terms of how he consistently expressed a powerful fear of anything which to him smacked of radicalism, whether it was something as truly drastic as socialism (which he claimed was “far more ominous than any populist or similar movements in time past”), or relatively benign as muckracking-style journalism (which he accused of

⁶⁶ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 192.

⁶⁷ Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 191-192.

“building up a revolutionary feeling”).⁶⁸ Not surprisingly then, Roosevelt was a fierce critic of the populist movement in general, and Bryan in particular. He castigated the former as “a semi-socialistic agrarian movement, with free silver as a mere incident, supported mainly because it is hoped thereby to damage the well to do and thrifty.”⁶⁹ Meanwhile, Roosevelt served effectively as McKinley’s attack against the latter as his running mate in the election of 1900. Something more of the class divide and, consequently, profound differences in social attitudes separated Rooseveltian from Populistic-style reform and is vividly illustrated in the acidulous verbal portrait Roosevelt painted of Bryan’s constituency after secretly sitting in on one of the Great Commoner’s campaign speeches in 1896. According to Roosevelt, the crowd was primarily comprised of “that type of farmer whose gate hangs on one hinge, whose old hat supplies the place of a missing window-pane, and who is more likely to be found at the cross-roads grocery store than behind the plow.”⁷⁰ Indeed, Roosevelt is reported to have said of the populist movement that

[t]he sentiment now animating a large proportion of our people can only be suppressed as the Commune in Paris was suppressed, by taking ten or a dozen of their leaders out [which would presumably include Bryan], standing...them against a wall, and shooting them dead.⁷¹

And, indeed, with utterances and attitudes such as these, it is no wonder that the real nature of his ideological identity remains a point of contention. Was he, as

⁶⁸ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 220.

⁶⁹ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 216.

⁷⁰ Morris, *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt*, 575.

⁷¹ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 217.

historians like Howard K. Beale, John M. Cooper, and John Morton Blum have insisted, not really a progressive as such, but rather more of an activist or meliorist conservative who, to paraphrase Macaulay, reformed so that he might conserve? Even Eric F. Goldman, who called Roosevelt “the most tremendous thing that could have happened to American progressivism” at the time, also pointed out in practically the same breath that he “could be brutally militaristic, evasive about trusts, compromising on social legislation, purblind to the merits of reformers who did not equate reform with Theodore Roosevelt.”⁷² Moreover, it could be argued that the top-down, *noblesse oblige* character of the reforms which Roosevelt sought, whether in office or out, is itself an indication of an essentially conservative temperament. As John Morton Blum has explained Roosevelt’s attitudes, “if self-imposed *order* was in his time no longer to be anticipated, it had to be provided from above,” ideally by a “strong, disinterested government equipped to define, particularly for a powerful executive prepared to enforce, the revised rules under which the America of immense corporations, of enormous cities, of large associations of labor and farmers could in *orderly* manner resolve its conflicts” (emphasis mine).⁷³ Although conservatives typically tend to balk at expansions of governmental power (at least in the economic realm), Blum insisted that Roosevelt sought a larger role for government for essentially conservative reasons: “He broadened power precisely for the purpose

⁷² Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 163.

⁷³ Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt*, 109.

of establishing *order*" (emphasis mine).⁷⁴ Perhaps this is what Hofstadter meant in his ironic epithet for Roosevelt, "The Conservative as Progressive."⁷⁵

Roosevelt's major domestic reforms, whether enacted or merely advocated, basically reflect this essentially Burkean conception of progressive reform. Specifically in the sense of that precept of Burke famously cited by the progressive muckraking journalist, Ray Stannard Baker, in reference to Roosevelt: "Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere."⁷⁶ Roosevelt felt that those most fit to furnish this "power" to control, as he defined the most pressing social dichotomy of his time, "improper corporate influence on the one hand as against demagoguery and mob rule on the other," were those who, (like himself) came from long established backgrounds of comfort, privilege, and, so they liked to flatter themselves, of disinterested civic virtue.⁷⁷ Unlike populism, which was insurgent and devoted to a comprehensive redistribution of power, if not wealth, the Square Deal was essentially custodial in nature, and sought instead to clean up and contain the worst excesses of industrial capitalism and regulate certain economic activities and resources in a broader public (i.e. not just lower class) interest. Of course, such an ethos of stewardship—which Cooper has defined in Roosevelt's case as "that those favored by wealth, social position, and education in turn owed their less fortunate fellows service, inspiration, and *guidance*" (emphasis mine)—

⁷⁴ Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt*, 108.

⁷⁵ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 203-233.

⁷⁶ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 448.

⁷⁷ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 217-218.

would require a very high standard of administrative ability to be effective. Therefore the as-yet relatively new figure of the “expert” would an especially important role as the new stewards of policy.⁷⁸ And since, as Blum has perceptively pointed out, “[i]n his [Roosevelt’s] time, less than a tenth of the American people had access to the kind of education and professional training necessary for the role,” it naturally followed suit that “[g]overnment by an elite of talent would be government by an elite of station.”⁷⁹

To be sure, Roosevelt’s administration was certainly as much an elite of station as of talent. At various points during his seven and half-years in the White House, Roosevelt had serving under him the son of a former president as his secretary of the interior, a grand-nephew of a French emperor as his secretary of the navy and attorney general, and even a former private secretary to Abraham Lincoln as his secretary of state. In other words, like McKinley, who sprinkled his government with solid, on-the-make Midwesterners like himself, Roosevelt built his cabinet of men much in his own image. Of the twenty-four men who served in Roosevelt’s cabinet, twenty-one were either born or established their careers in Cooper’s Northeastern-industrial “heartland,” and moreover, among them Roosevelt tended to place a special amount of trust in fellow New Yorkers like Elihu Root, George B. Cortelyou, and Oscar Straus. Significantly, most of them were in possession of at least one of the president’s privileges, if not all of them

⁷⁸ Cooper, *Pivotal Decades*, 34.

⁷⁹ John Morton Blum, *The Progressive Presidents: Roosevelt, Wilson, Roosevelt, Johnson* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1980), 50.

together, whether it was a prominent or wealthy family (like Secretary of the Interior James R. Garfield and Secretary of the Navy and Attorney General Charles J. Bonaparte, or Roosevelt's final Postmaster General George von Lengerke Meyer), an Ivy League education (including Secretary of State John Hay, Secretary of War William Howard Taft, and even Oscar Straus, a Jewish immigrant and Roosevelt's final Secretary of Commerce and Labor), or a preeminence in the fields of business or the law (as with Secretary of War and later State Elihu Root and Attorney General Philander C. Knox). Even the administration's resident Ragged Dick, the ever-versatile Cortelyou, who served as Secretary of Commerce and Labor, Postmaster General and finally Secretary of the Treasury by turns, and who came up without much money, a prestigious education, or much professional experience beyond public administration, had, like his chief, at least the relative good fortune to be descended from a venerable old New York family with roots which stretched back to the days of Dutch rule.

So how precisely did Roosevelt and his lieutenants effect their reforms from the top-down? For a start, they strongly re-asserted the supremacy of the public interest over private concerns. While Roosevelt's "trust-busting" efforts were arguably justified on purely legal grounds alone, their real importance lay more in the establishment of a principle, particularly in the instance of the first such lawsuit he pursued against the Northern Securities Company in 1902. As Roosevelt explained, "whether the government had power to control [corporations]...at all...had not yet been decided...A decision of the Supreme

Court [in the E. C. Knight case] had, with seeming definiteness, settled that the National Government had not the power” and, by his successful prosecution of the Company leading to the Supreme Court’s decision in favor of the government in the *Northern Securities Co. v. United States*. Roosevelt went on, “this decision, I caused to be annulled.”⁸⁰ In other words, in order to act effectually as an arbiter of the public interest, Roosevelt believed the government had to be truly above any specific private interests or individuals. No doubt a similar impulse motivated Roosevelt’s decision to personally lay down the law right in J. P. Morgan’s (the Northern Securities Company’s primary architect) fiery purple nose when the latter personally visited the White House to try to straighten things out with the president.

And yet, that tense *tête-à-tête* (or rather *tête-à-tête-à-tête*, as Attorney General Knox was apparently also present) also contains an illuminating dialogue that reveals much not only about Roosevelt’s attitudes about the proper relationship between government and business, but about what a departure this attitude was from the consensus of the Gilded Age. As Roosevelt remembered it (or rather, as Edmund Morris has wryly put it, “chose” to remember it), when Morgan asked Roosevelt why the government had not simply asked *him* directly to straighten out the new trust’s defects, the following exchange ensued:

Roosevelt: That is just what we did not want to do.

⁸⁰ Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt*, 119-120.

Morgan: If we have done anything wrong, *send your man to my man and they can fix it up* (emphasis mine).

Roosevelt: That can't be done.

Knox: We don't want to fix it up, we want to stop it.

Morgan: Are you going to attack my other interests, the Steel Trust and others?

Roosevelt: *Certainly not—unless we find out that in any case they have done something that we regard as wrong* (emphasis mine).⁸¹

Morgan's pleading for an informal, almost off-handed rapprochement between business and government would have almost certainly sufficed for any other president of the previous thirty years or so, and would in fact have probably been unnecessary to begin with. In other words, the Gilded Age was truly over, and Morgan (and many others like him) just had not realized it yet. Moreover, Roosevelt's final utterance provides a succinct index not only for *why* it was over, but what he hoped to put into its place in the coming years.

Unlike Bryan and the Populists, who opposed the trusts while seeking similar methods to empower themselves like consumer cooperatives, or Wilson and his supporters, who labeled the trusts a danger to free enterprise and whose New Freedom was intended to restore competition and opportunity on behalf of the enterprising individual, Roosevelt had no objection to large-scale business consolidation as a *ding an sich*, and in fact regarded it as an unavoidable and

⁸¹ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 91-92

even potentially positive concomitant of industrial modernization. As he put it in his second State of the Union Address,

[o]ur aim is not to do away with corporations; on the contrary, these big aggregations are an inevitable development of modern industrialism, and the effort to destroy them would be futile unless accomplished in ways that would work the utmost mischief to the entire body politic.⁸²

Unlike many conservatives at the time and since, Roosevelt did not believe that the state should adopt a *laissez-faire* approach toward these new economic combinations. Instead he believed that strong regulation from the top (as opposed to insurgency or catalyzing competition from the bottom) was required to maintain order and a certain modicum of social mobility and peace. As Roosevelt explained more fully in his *Autobiography*, “it was folly to try to prohibit them [corporations], but...it was also folly to leave them without thoroughgoing control,” and that, consequently,

the government must now interfere to *protect* labor, to *subordinate* the big corporation to the public welfare, and to *shackle* cunning and fraud exactly as centuries before it had interfered to shackle the physical force which does wrong by violence (emphases mine).⁸³

When justified by rhetoric such as this, is it any wonder that John M. Cooper has concluded that, rather than “anticipating John Kenneth Galbraith’s concept of ‘countervailing power’ between big business and big government,” Roosevelt was instead advocating in effect for “an overwhelming governmental supremacy

⁸² “Second Annual Message (December 2, 1902)—Theodore Roosevelt,” Miller Center, accessed January 3, 2013, <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/3774>.

⁸³ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 222-223.

that did, in a nonpejorative sense, deserve the designation “paternalism”?⁸⁴ While Roosevelt’s “paternalism,” such as it was, would wax most fully during the Bull Moose campaign of 1912, many of the other major domestic reforms he pursued throughout his presidency seem to have been imbued with something of the same spirit.

Consider the first of the duties that Roosevelt enumerated for the government in his *Autobiography*, that of “protecting” labor. The most significant action Roosevelt pursued in this line, occurring appropriately enough at around the same time as the Northern Securities lawsuit, was his decision to intervene in the anthracite coal strike in northeastern Pennsylvania in 1902. Theoretically, the government was only playing the role of a neutral, honest broker between the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), led by their president John Mitchell, and the mine owners, represented by president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad George Frederick Baer. In practice, however, by refusing to unequivocally (or even tacitly) take the side of management, as Cleveland had done in the case of the Pullman Strike, and referring the controversy to an arbitral commission which eventually gave the strikers much of what they wanted, plus *de facto* recognition henceforward for the UMWA, Roosevelt was seen by his intervention, even if only by default, as more favorable toward workers than any other previous federal intervention in a strike before. To a certain extent, factors unique to the incident may have inclined the president’s

⁸⁴ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 212.

judgment—specifically the exceptionally stubborn obstinacy and arrogant nastiness of Baer, who once opined that laborers’ interests would be better served in deferring to the “Christian men to whom God in His infinite wisdom has given the control of the property interests of the country”—but the case was indicative of Roosevelt’s general sympathy for the labor movement.⁸⁵ And, not surprisingly, Roosevelt supported the organization of labor for the same reason he supported (albeit with reservations) the consolidation of business interests, because he wanted to extend what he called “the benefits of organization” to workers, who like their employers, had “an entire right to organize” and moreover “a legal right...to refuse to work in company with men who decline to join their organizations.”⁸⁶

And what of the second fundamental task Roosevelt assigned to the federal government, that of “subordinating big corporations to the public welfare”? While most of the reforms Roosevelt either pursued or advocated could be interpreted as contributing to this goal, the most significant measure promulgated under this aegis would most likely be the Hepburn Act of 1906. By giving the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) the power to establish maximum railroad rates, the measure sought to end the price discrimination that widely prevailed between small-scale and large-scale shippers, and in a manner consonant with Roosevelt’s preference for top-down control. Moreover, by giving the ICC the authority to inspect railroads’ financial records and even prescribe a

⁸⁵ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 137.

⁸⁶ Blum, *The Republican Roosevelt*, 112-113.

uniform standard of bookkeeping for their records, the legislation helped to facilitate both the further consolidation of railroads and their more effective monitoring by the federal government, two developments very much in line with Roosevelt's belief in the inevitability of business combination and the concomitant necessity of oversight from above. Roosevelt himself claimed as much in his 1905 State of the Union Address when, after unequivocally stating his preference for private rather than public ownership and management of the railway system (again, no socialist he), he insisted that:

it [the railway system] can only be so managed on condition that justice is done *the public*" (emphasis mine) and that to that end "[w]hat we need to do is to develop an orderly system, and such a system can only come through the gradually increased exercise of the right of efficient government *control* (emphasis mine).⁸⁷

The third clause Roosevelt identified in his slate of responsibilities for the federal government, that of "shackl[ing] cunning and fraud," found its "purest" expression in the two food-safety measures that Roosevelt enacted in 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Federal Meat Inspection Act. While these measures were obviously inspired by Upton Sinclair's muckraking socialist tract *The Jungle*, they were more in line with Roosevelt's own top-down, paternalist approach to reform than with any sort of proletarian empowerment advocated by Sinclair. Instead they granted power to the federal government—through the newly-created Food and Drug Administration—to (in the case of the Pure Food and Drug Act) prohibit

⁸⁷ "State of the Union 1905 – 5 December 1905," University of Groningen, accessed December 10, 2012, <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/theodore-roosevelt/state-of-the-union-1905.php>.

the sale, production, or transportation across interstate lines of any fraudulently labeled or adulterated drugs or foodstuffs and (in the case of the Meat Inspection Act) to rigorously inspect meat products and police sanitation standards in the stockyards. In other words, highly placed and educated experts were going to regulate and clean up (quite literally in this instance) the excesses and deleterious effects of the corporate order, partially (or so the president would claim) to blunt exactly the kind of socialist agitation described by Sinclair. Moreover, in keeping with Roosevelt's fondness for organization and (well-behaved) consolidation, one of the most influential agents lobbying for the reforms was the consortium of great packing houses in Chicago popularly known as the "Beef Trust." As Forrest McDonald has ably explained, the Beef Trust wanted a stricter regime of regulation and inspection for two reasons:

[1.] to facilitate the sale of American meat in foreign markets [where the quality of American meat products was widely distrusted], and [2.] to strike at the domestic competition of the 300 or so small packers who supplied half the American market, often sold impure meat, and could not afford the cost of meeting high standards of sanitation.⁸⁸

Some of Roosevelt's most significant reforms, however, and perhaps the most enduring and valuable part of his legacy to posterity, encompass in some senses all of the enumerated new obligations he imputed to the federal government in his *Autobiography*. These would be the various measures he instituted on behalf of the burgeoning conservation movement, including the Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902, creation of the National Forest Service in 1905, and—arguably the

⁸⁸ McDonald, *The United States in the Twentieth Century*, 114-115.

most ambitious of all—the Antiquities Act of 1906. Of these, the latter two were especially consistent with the president’s custodial conception of progressivism, in that they significantly augmented the government’s ability to act as an enlightened steward of the nation’s natural resources, with the powers granted to him to set aside public lands for protection by executive order in the Antiquities Act no doubt being especially congenial to Roosevelt’s masterful temperament. Roosevelt himself expressed these principles well when he drew a rhetorical distinction “between the man who skins the land and the man who develops the country,” before swearing with all of his customary gusto that “I am going to work with, and only with, the man who develops the country.”⁸⁹ And has there ever been a more vivid personification of the sort of expert, aristocratic service ethos—other than the president himself, of course—preferred by Roosevelt than his first chief of the Forest Service and primary lieutenant in the battle for conservation, Gifford Pinchot, he of (as Edmund Morris has dizzily reeled them off) “Exeter, Yale, postgraduate study at the École Nationale Forestière in France, and research spells in the ancient woodlands of Switzerland and Germany,” and moreover, “to Roosevelt’s approval, a New England *gentleman, rich and well-connected, with a strong social conscience*” (emphasis mine) to boot?⁹⁰

The yen for “paternalism” which John M. Cooper diagnosed in Roosevelt would blossom dramatically after he left office in 1909, until by 1912 he was

⁸⁹ Cooper, *Pivotal Decades*, 48.

⁹⁰ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 486-487.

advocating such an expansive purview for the federal government that the conservative wing of his party, then firmly in the saddle under his hand picked successor Taft, essentially disowned him. This process began shortly after Roosevelt left office, when he stumbled upon a new book *Justice Learned Hand* had mailed him while on safari in Africa. This book, Roosevelt soon declared after reading at least a few of its over 450 pages, was “the most profound and illuminating study of our national conditions which has appeared for many years.”⁹¹ Not surprisingly, soon after his return to America, Roosevelt invited the author, Herbert Croly, to Oyster Bay to lunch so they might further discuss this book, entitled *The Promise of American Life*.

Croly, like Roosevelt a Harvard-educated New Yorker with a strong social conscience but totally unlike him in that he was raised in a strikingly unorthodox and bohemian household and was almost neurotically shy, articulated a vision of government rather in line with what Roosevelt had pursued as president with his Square Deal. He castigated the Jeffersonian influence in the progressive movement (which Roosevelt also deplored), such as the restoration of free competition through antitrust laws and direct democracy via referendums, primaries and initiatives as so much “cant,” and articulated instead a more Hamiltonian conception of reform.⁹² Like Roosevelt, Croly felt that, while some large corporations had been undeniably guilty of misconduct, they in the main “contributed to American economic efficiency,” and, moreover, they were “an

⁹¹ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 189.

⁹² Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 196.

important step in the direction of the better organization of industry and commerce.” Croly struck a particularly Rooseveltian note when he claimed that industrial combinations indicated “cooperation, and it should be effort of all civilized societies to substitute cooperation for competitive methods, wherever cooperation can prove its efficiency.”⁹³ For similar reasons, Croly suggested the encouragement of organized labor, although he stressed that in practice the unions would most likely have just as corrupting an influence on politics as the large corporations.

How best to secure these blessings of “organization” and “efficiency” with as little of possible of their seemingly inevitable evil shadows of corruption and monopoly then? Eric F. Goldman has summarized the crux of Croly’s suggested solution as “the establishment of a tremendously powerful national state that would regulate corporations, unions, small businesses, and agriculture in the ‘national interest.’” This “New Nationalist” state and its tremendously powerful governors would work for “much more than a group of individuals,” but “the nation of yesterday and to-morrow, organized for its national historical mission,” all under the aegis of “a morally authoritative Sovereign will.”⁹⁴ Touching as it did all the well-worn Rooseveltian chords of organization, national mission, sound moralism, and overweening power wielded by a virtuous cadre of the best and brightest, the book seemed almost tailor-made for the Colonel. And, with Roosevelt’s frustration with Taft’s increasingly evident conservatism and hunger

⁹³ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 194.

⁹⁴ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 201.

for power both mounting to their pitch, Croly's book supplied him with a playbook from which he might unravel both problems at once.

At Osawatomie, Kansas, in August 1910, Roosevelt aired his refurbished political convictions for the first time. There Roosevelt announced "I mean not merely to that I stand for fair play under the present rules of the game, but that I stand for having the those rules changed so as to work for a more substantial equality of opportunity." According to Roosevelt, this changing of the rules or "New Nationalism" which he now sought "puts the national need before sectional or personal advantage." It was highly "impatient of the impotence which springs from overdivision of governmental powers," and consequently regarded "the executive as the steward of the public welfare." Roosevelt then made his brief on behalf of the regulation of the trusts, explaining that "[c]ombinations in industry are the result of an imperative economic law which cannot be repealed by political legislation," and that, instead, "[t]he way out lies, not in attempting to prevent such combinations, but in *completely controlling them* in the interest of the public welfare."⁹⁵

Immediately the progressive wing of the GOP, which had been discontentedly seething under Taft, latched onto Roosevelt's new agenda as a cynosure around which a Republican reform movement might form. And form it certainly did, so that by the time of the 1912 Republican National Convention Roosevelt had not only decided to lead an insurgent campaign against his old

⁹⁵ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 208-209.

friend and former lieutenant Taft, he had decisively beaten him in most of the twelve new Republican primaries as well. After Taft and the Party's Old Guard stonewalled him and his supporters at the Convention in Chicago by allocating most of the delegates from the thirty-six states they still controlled to Taft, a defiant Roosevelt led most of his followers across town to form their own Progressive Party. And, although the Progressive platform contained several planks contrary to Croly's program such as the initiative, referendum and recall, Roosevelt largely premised his appeal to the voters around his New Nationalism proposals. Had the Democrats nominated a conservative, Roosevelt might have eked out a victory just by virtue of being the only progressive in the race. Instead they nominated a progressive, and one who was soon to develop a policy for reform of his own which Roosevelt would have to compete with and rebuff all across the country.

SYNTHESIS:

THE WILSONIAN CONSUMMATION

Although he would never enjoy the same kind of broad personal popularity or loyal following of either Bryan or Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson would in the long run turn out to be arguably a more impactful and transformational figure than either of them. Depending on which way one turns the medal, Wilson's presidency could be intelligently viewed as both the apex of the progressive movement—whether in the forms of the New Freedom, the mobilization efforts upon entering the First World War, or, even, in a sense, the war itself—as well as the ultimate terminus of it, culminating as it did with an epochal diplomatic failure, a harsh turn towards reaction at home in the form of the Red Scare, and, finally, the landslide election of the most consistently conservative ticket either of the major parties had put forward in a generation. The reason for this overweening importance lies not only in Wilson's greater political good fortune—he was, after all, the only progressive to be twice elected to the presidency, a goal which even the highly popular and ultra-ambitious T.R. never matched—but in the absorptive, heterodox nature of the reforms he would pursue while in office. Simply put, while Wilson's specific prescriptions for reform on the campaign trail in 1912 were fairly original, as a reformer in practice he engrossed signal elements from both the bottom-up Bryanite/populist and top-down Rooseveltian/New Nationalist paradigms of progressivism into a coherent program of his own during his first administration. This attracted just enough

support from both Bryan and Roosevelt's old followings to narrowly win for himself a second. While he would later come to considerable grief when his reach exceeded his grasp and he tried to lead this ragtag reformist army on a quest to remake the world and America's place in it, there can be no denying that in his first term Wilson managed to effect a deft synthesis of two hitherto seemingly incompatible notions of progressive change.

Despite his centrality to the progressive movement, it is actually something of a wonder that Wilson chose to ever become a progressive at all. Wilson was raised with the small-government and conservative shibboleths of Jefferson and the "Lost Cause", and these beliefs continued to inform his thinking throughout his life, with the former having a significant influence upon his initial conception of the New Freedom, and the latter imbuing him with a strong conviction of the necessity of White Supremacy. His conservatism, at least until he hit about fifty years of age or so, went considerably deeper than this, however, and even bore a passing resemblance to Roosevelt's youthful Goo-Goo tendencies. He generally preferred "cleaning up" government and making it more in line with the supposedly more genteel British political tradition of his heroes like Bagehot, Burke, and Gladstone in lieu of pursuing more substantial social and economic reforms. Eric F. Goldman has painted a memorable portrait of the young, stand-pat Wilson and his attitudes, and it is striking how thoroughly of an anti-Bryan he sounds: "He lauded combinations and trusts, attacked the initiative, referendum, and recall, proclaimed himself a 'fierce partizan of the Open Shop,'

and uttered a fervent wish that some ‘dignified and effective’ way could be found ‘to knock Mr. Bryan once for all into a cocked hat’” (emphasis mine)⁹⁶ Moreover, other conservative Democrats who intently shared in Wilson’s desires believed they had discovered in him just the man to do said knocking, with George Harvey—the powerful editor of the staunchly conservative *Harper’s Weekly*—even attempting to set a Wilson-for-president bandwagon into motion throughout 1906 and 1907.

Unfortunately for Harvey and the rest of the right wing of the Democratic Party, Wilson was in the process of undergoing a profound ideological *volte-face* during this period. Goldman has wryly summarized this change as the deeply religious Wilson’s realization that “in the space of a few years, the Devil became a conservative.”⁹⁷ In what was to become an increasingly characteristic pattern throughout his life, Wilson seems to have definitively settled on the diabolical nature of conservatism after he was forced to grapple tenaciously with it in what he considered to be great contests of moral principles that arose while he was president of Princeton. This was his attempt, first countenanced in 1906 to abolish the college’s fashionable eating clubs, elitist social organizations equivalent to fraternities. Wilson—for all of his conservatism an instinctive democrat—disliked the clubs and blamed them for a “decline of the old democratic spirit of the place and the growth and multiplication of social

⁹⁶ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 213.

⁹⁷ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 213.

divisions.”⁹⁸ In its place, Wilson sought a more academically rigorous (and incidentally egalitarian) series of smaller “quad” colleges, in which all classes of students and faculty would eat and study together. But a contingent of the more conservative faculty, led by Wilson’s personal rival Professor Andrew Fleming West, rebelled and allied themselves with the overwhelmingly stand-pat alumni led by Moses Taylor Pyne to effectually frustrate Wilson’s designs by the end of 1907. Wilson found himself caught in a similar imbroglio a few years later (again primarily against West) over whether to further integrate the undergraduate with the graduate school. Wilson again took the more “democratic” stance of favoring more integration, justifying his stance by insisting that Princeton, being “intended for the service of the country” should therefore become “saturated in the same sympathies as the common people.”⁹⁹ Wilson grew so frustrated that he abandoned Princeton—and, incidentally, what remained of his conservatism—for a political career in 1910, sniffing revealingly at the time, “I am not interested in simply administering a club,” because, “[u]nless I can develop something I cannot get thoroughly interested.”¹⁰⁰

Over the years, it has become something of a commonplace to parse Wilson’s difficulties at Princeton as foreshadowing his later failures to secure passage of the Versailles Treaty through the Senate. Certainly the dogmatic way he attempted to bend the trustees, faculty, and alumni to his will is apt to put one

⁹⁸ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 96.

⁹⁹ John Morton Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1956), 34.

¹⁰⁰ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 103.

in mind of his refusal to compromise with Henry Cabot Lodge and the other stand-pat Republicans and his attempt to take the treaty over Congress's head directly to the public. What is almost as striking is how Wilson's reforming administration at Princeton mirrors the parliamentary approach he would go on to take as president. John Morton Blum's extended analogy of Wilson as a sort of "Prime Minister of Princeton," can, with only a few minor modifications in vocabulary, be profitably applied to the way Wilson successfully ministered reform bill after reform bill through Congress in his first administration:

He [Wilson] needed not just the approval but the continuing cooperation of the alumni—his constituents (i.e. the general voting public); the faculty—his Commons (or House of Representatives); and the trustees—his Lords (i.e. the Senate), and in this case his masters.¹⁰¹

John Milton Cooper has described Wilson's basic approach to achieving his desired academic reforms like his overhauling of Princeton's curriculum or the establishment of his preceptorial system as "a light-handed collegial leadership on issues that others had exercised themselves over more than he had."¹⁰² Moreover, this approach is also essentially the same one he would use to pass comprehensive reform programs as Governor of New Jersey and eventually president of the United States.

If this is the case, then is there not something rather paradoxical about Wilson as a leader, to say nothing of his personal character? Dogmatic to the point of being pugnacious, he nevertheless most excelled when he guided

¹⁰¹ Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality*, 25.

¹⁰² Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 91.

legislation toward its goal with a gentle hand. He was blessed with a formidable knowledge when it came to matters of government and legislating—in fact earning a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins in political science—and yet was most effective at shepherding through policies largely devised by others. Unshakably committed to his own ideas and principles and tending to see those of others as not only in error but almost morally wrong, he nevertheless opportunistically adopted large portions of Roosevelt’s New Nationalism (which he once reviled) program with nary a second thought when it proved convenient. Moreover, in addition to pursuing several policies in a Bryanite mold, Wilson even inducted the Great Commoner himself into his own Cabinet’s highest station. Like Roosevelt, the experience of power and responsibility and his own self-confessed “longing to do immortal work” seems to have softened many of his harder edges and tempered many of his temperamental excesses, at least for awhile, and even imparted to him a certain degree of wise restraint.¹⁰³ But above all it was his catholicity and willingness to learn and take freely from others as a reform leader, including even his former rivals, which made his first administration, and particularly its especially legislatively crowded first half, indubitably what Goldman has effusively called “a period of sweeping achievement.”¹⁰⁴

Such a development seems especially ironic when Wilson as a president is juxtaposed with Wilson as a candidate. While William Allen White may have waggishly likened the ideological and programmatic gulf between the New

¹⁰³ Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 226.

Nationalism and the New Freedom to the chasm separating Tweedledum from Tweedledee, Wilson passionately believed otherwise. He agreed wholeheartedly with his chief economic advisor Louis Brandeis in the contention that the “difference in the economic policy of the [Bull-Moose and Democratic] parties” was nothing less than “fundamental and irreconcilable.” in fact, to Brandeis and Wilson it constituted nothing less than “the difference between industrial liberty and industrial absolutism, tempered by governmental (that is, party) supervision.”¹⁰⁵ In contrast to what he saw as Roosevelt’s intrusively top-down paternalism, Wilson sought ways to re-empower, rather than merely protect, the individual actor and the small business against encroaching corporatism. Wilson’s preferred primary method for doing so continued to inhere in the classically liberal elixir of restored economic competition. His rhetoric therefore sometimes sounded in practice, as Louis Hartz has drolly noted, as beholden to Algerism “as a chamber of commerce orator.”¹⁰⁶ For example, he once declared that “[t]he man who is on the make is the judge of what is happening in America, not the man who has made good...that is the man by whose judgment I, for one, wish to be guided.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, at times on the campaign trail Wilson could sound almost like a reincarnation of Cleveland-style conservatism (which had in fact attracted him much in his youth), such as when he grandiloquently insisted that

¹⁰⁵ Chace, *1912*, 196-196.

¹⁰⁶ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 230.

¹⁰⁷ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 252.

“[i]f America is not to have free enterprise, then she can have freedom of no sort whatever.”¹⁰⁸

For all of its derivation from Jeffersonian rhetoric and ideals, Wilson’s platform was still far from conservative. Its ultimate goal, like the New Nationalism, and even in some senses the populist movement, was to bring the largest corporations under greater public control. The key difference was that while the Bull-Moosers wanted to regulate the trusts using a larger government, Wilson and his followers sought instead to undermine and perhaps destroy the trusts altogether by using the government to facilitate more effective competition from below. In some senses, therefore, the New Freedom could be construed as a more radical program than the New Nationalism, in that it bade fair to upend rather than simply police the current economic order. Wilson’s vision of the trusts being challenged from below by an army of small businessmen “on the make” (a decade or two before they might well have been called “producers) sometimes even unconsciously recalled Bryan’s championing of farmers and other small-time economic operators in his “Cross of Gold” speech as “businessmen” with “interests” of their own worthy of respect:

When we undertake the strategy which is going to be necessary to overcome and destroy this far-reaching system of monopoly, we are *rescuing the business of this country*, we are not injuring it; and when we separate the interests from each other and dismember these communities of connection, we have in mind...that vision which sees that no society is renewed from the top but that *every society is renewed from the bottom*” (emphasis mine).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era* (New York: Harper Torchbooks 1954), 21.

While Hartz has sardonically defined the reasoning behind this specific species of reform as “the equity of the Alger world flowering into politics,” premised around the notion that “the good American was not only a frantic economic dynamo rising to the top after trusts were shattered but a frantic political dynamo,” there can still be no denying that Wilson had found a way to turn the “Algerism” Hartz imputed to him toward profoundly progressive purposes.¹¹⁰

Hartz’s ascription of “Algerism” to Wilson does point up perhaps the key qualitative programmatic and rhetorical distinction separating Wilson from Roosevelt (and even to a significant extent Bryan as well), both during the campaign of 1912 and afterwards. Whereas Bryan and the populists had sought avenues of collective empowerment in America’s new corporate civilization, and Roosevelt and his supporters were attempting to fashion a certain modicum of collective control over that civilization, Wilson’s animating ideal seemed to be his desire to find means of *individual* empowerment within (if not against) the new corporate order. Doubtless his lifelong admiration for the British classical liberal tradition of Burke, Cobden, Bright, and above all Gladstone had much to do with this, as did his abiding reverence for Jeffersonian ideals. The primary source, however, of Wilson’s persistent emphasis upon the individual actor was his chief domestic advisor of the campaign, Louis Brandeis. Brandeis, like Wilson a staunchly Jeffersonian Southerner, unequivocally saw the new trend toward

¹⁰⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), 27-28.

¹¹⁰ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 240.

increasing bigness in business as nothing less than a curse, commenting sourly that “[u]nder the trusts capital hires men; under a *real* corporation, men hire capital” (emphasis mine).¹¹¹ At a famous meeting at Sea Girt in August 1912, Brandeis tried to impress his conviction upon Wilson that

competition can be and should be maintained in every branch of private industry; that competition can be and should be restored in those branches of industry in which it has been suppressed by the trusts; and that, *if at any future time monopoly should appear to be desirable in any branch of industry, the monopoly should be a public one—a monopoly owned by the people and not by the capitalists* (emphasis mine).¹¹²

This last clause enumerated by Brandeis feels especially prescient, if not downright clairvoyant, when considered in the light of the economic mobilizations Wilson undertook after leading the nation into the World War five years later.

For all of his flaying of Roosevelt’s paternalistic “government of experts” and self-righteously Manichean avowals that “[o]urs is a program of liberty; theirs is a program of regulation,” Wilson took care not to reject the New Nationalism in its entirety.¹¹³ He unreservedly praised the planks in the Progressive platform that promised greater aid to labor and to widen the ambit of social justice, for example. And, like Roosevelt and contra Brandeis, he tried often to make it clear that his animus was not for bigness in business as such, at one point even offering up the decidedly Rooseveltian equivocation, “I am for big business, and I am against the trusts.”¹¹⁴ More importantly, Wilson struggled to protect his left

¹¹¹ Chace, *1912*, 194.

¹¹² Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 214.

¹¹³ Chace, *1912*, 195-196.

¹¹⁴ Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 252.

flank from Roosevelt's admittedly withering countercharges accusing him of being a conservative in progressive clothing, espousing "simply the *laissez-faire* doctrine of English political economists three-quarters of a century ago."¹¹⁵ This was a piercingly acute barb, considering their target's abiding admiration for Cobden, Bright, and Bagehot. Perhaps sensitive to the political stereotypes associated with men of his regional background, Wilson tried to put some rhetorical distance between himself and the small-government, state-rights conservatism of his youth by declaring unequivocally that "[t]he program of a government of freedom must in these days be positive." Nor was this necessarily incompatible with his newfound Brandeisan commitment to "regulated competition," for "[e]ven Brandeis," as Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has pointed out, "for all his fear of bigness, wanted the state not only to break up the trusts but to carry out an extensive program on behalf of labor and social security."¹¹⁶

To a large extent the arguments Wilson made on his own behalf and against the Bull-Moosers were probably only of ancillary significance in clinching his electoral victory. The fact that he was the sole candidate leading a well-established and united party in 1912 was far more significant in determining his success. Moreover, the schism in the GOP that put Wilson into the White House also paid serious dividends for the Democracy down ballot, helping it to win control of both houses of Congress for the first time in twenty years. With a Democratic majority of seventy-six in the House of Representatives and six in the

¹¹⁵ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 197.

¹¹⁶ Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 33.

Senate (and with a new rump contingent of nine Progressives in the House, and one in the Senate, who, if nothing else, could be counted on to be at least amenable to reform legislation) Wilson was uniquely blessed to ascend to office alongside an especially accommodating Congress. The president-elect therefore now had an almost ideal opportunity to exercise precisely the sort of parliamentary leadership he had been advocating for his office-to-be—not to mention admiring in British statesmen such as Gladstone—for years, and one of which he would take ample advantage, passing not only most of his own agenda, but much of Roosevelt's, and even some of Bryan's old objectives as well.

No matter how heated the campaign rhetoric got, and it got very hot indeed—at least until Roosevelt was wounded in October in a botched assassination attempt—it is striking how Wilson always kept the door at least slightly ajar for parts (if not the whole) of Roosevelt's New Nationalism program. While the primary motivation for this at the time was doubtless as a calculated political move to woo a few progressive waverers away from the Colonel's column, it may have also in the long run turned out to betoken a desire, and eventually an effort, on Wilson's part to see certain of them enacted. And enact them he did, whether as part and parcel of the broader raft of domestic reforms of his first administration or the economic mobilization policies of his second. While Roosevelt himself saw no flattery whatsoever in the president's imitation, bitterly condemning him to a British correspondent in 1916 for being “as insincere and cold-blooded an opportunist as we have ever had in the Presidency,” enough

of his former supporters demurred from their chief to help Wilson narrowly win a second term for himself in 1916.¹¹⁷ In fact, the effective disbandment of what remained of the Bull Moose Party that year probably has much to do with Wilson's successful co-optation of several of the most significant items in their agenda of 1912. This rendered another third party ticket from them almost redundant, which doubtless is partially what motivated Roosevelt's abandonment of his political handiwork in 1916 and subsequent return to the Republican fold.

For example, when the new administration put its hand to antitrust legislation in 1914, it wound up with measures with strongly New Nationalist elements. Typically, while on the campaign trail Wilson had denounced Roosevelt's pledge to create a powerful new industrial commission to regulate big business, explaining that

[a]s to the monopolies, which Mr. Roosevelt proposes to legalize and to welcome, I know that they are so many cars of juggernaut, and I do not look forward with pleasure to the time when the juggernauts are licensed and driven by commissioners of the United States.¹¹⁸

Once in office, however, Wilson proceeded to create just such a comprehensive trade commission with plenary authority to supervise business practices himself in the form of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Ironically, Wilson took up the idea for the FTC largely at the behest of Brandeis, who, like the president, had evidently warmed considerably to the principle of regulation since luncheon at Sea Girt, and who even co-drafted the original bill that served as the embryo

¹¹⁷ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 253.

¹¹⁸ Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*, 21.

for the Federal Trade Commission Act. And, indeed, the legislation did bear an unmistakable personal stamp from Brandeis in that the primary executive function granted to the new Commission was its ability to issue “cease and desist” orders to halt practices that illegally impaired competition.

The other major antitrust measure promulgated by Wilson, the Clayton Antitrust Act, was largely oriented around his New Freedom formula of “restrict[ing] the wrong use of competition that the right use of competition will destroy monopoly,” particularly in its proscription of a host of what the administration deemed to be unfair trade practices, specifically interlocking stockholdings and directorates. The measure also contained several provisions in a distinctly New Nationalist mold, especially in regard to labor issues. As passed, the act contained an amendment explicitly stating that labor unions should not “be construed to be illegal combinations in restraint of trade” and furthermore prohibited the issuance of injunctions by federal courts against any union on strike “unless necessary to prevent irreparable injury to property.” The latter of these, a plank off of the old Bull Moose platform of 1912, won Wilson especially fulsome gratitude from labor leaders with longtime president of the American Federation of Labor Samuel Gompers even going so far as to denominate the Clayton Act as “Labor’s Magna Carta.”¹¹⁹ The Act as originally drafted contained an even more Rooseveltian clause, once again ironically promulgated largely at the instance of Brandeis. This proposal, co-drafted by

¹¹⁹ Cooper, *Pivotal Decades*, 200.

Brandeis with future Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn, which would have, in the spirit of the Hepburn Act of 1906, empowered the Interstate Commerce Commission to supervise the issuance of new securities by the railroads, failed to make it into the final legislation as passed. Yet it does illustrate well how amenable the New Freedom had become in practice to a significant infusion of top-down, Square Deal-style reform.

Wilson would go on to consummate several more of the most significant labor-related planks in the New Nationalist platform during the second great period of domestic reform in his first administration, or “Second New Freedom,” as it were, of January to September 1916. The Adamson Act, while originally passed in order to defuse a threatened strike, did partially fulfill the Bull Moosers’ call for an eight-hour workday by stipulating as much for interstate railroad workers, and—doubtless even more in line with their affinities—establishing a commission to study the problem further. The Kern-McGillicuddy Act created a system of workmen’s compensation for all work done under contract with the federal government, which, some hoped, might go on to serve as a model for the nation at large. Perhaps the crown of all of the New Freedom’s labor reforms, the Keating-Owen Act, banned the sale of any manufactured article produced using child labor across interstate lines. Wilson personally intervened on behalf of this last, sternly insisting that it was an acid-test of party loyalty to the cadre of Southern senators who threatened its passage. Later he confessed to have

signed it “with real emotion.”¹²⁰ Unfortunately for Wilson and the progressives who had fought so long and hard for this milestone (not to mention the millions of poor children on whose behalf they fought), however, the Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional two years later.

The remarkable thing about the New Freedom, however, was that it not only managed to incorporate aspects of the *noblesse oblige*, top-down, or as Wilson once charged, “parernalist” conception of progressivism articulated by Roosevelt. But it also included elements of the older, more populist movement of reform associated with Bryan. It is easy to forget that, in winning the presidency in 1912 Wilson was not only at a stroke displacing Roosevelt as the *de facto* central figure and prime representative of the progressive movement nationwide, but also Bryan as the default leader of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. Despite his thrice leading the Democracy to defeat, Bryan remained a major if not preponderating force within the party. He in fact largely drafted the platform—including planks calling, like the Bull Moosers in Chicago, for greater regulation of big business and constitutional amendments for the direct election of senators and the establishment of an income tax—which was eventually adopted at the Democratic National Convention in 1912. Wilson might very well have lost the Democratic nomination in 1912 to Speaker of the House Champ Clark had not Bryan intervened to break the deadlock in his favor. While his reasons for doing so remain obscure—James Chace, for example, has

¹²⁰ Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*, 227.

contended that it was another attempt to win his party's nomination which misfired—it seems clear that the Commoner was at least partially motivated by a conviction of his greater ideological affinity to Wilson than to the relatively stand-pat Clark. Shortly after wrapping up the nomination, Wilson received a wire from a Western delegation leader who offered a marvelously perceptive analysis of both what united and what differentiated him from the Commoner:

The switch of progressive leadership from Bryan to Wilson means that the progressive movement is passing from emotionalism to rationalism...Bryanism is dead, a new Democracy [he might very well have said "New Freedom"] is being born.¹²¹

When one considers how several of the New Freedom's most significant reforms reflect some of the insurgent sense of collective empowerment which fired him and the populist elements he led, one cannot help but to conclude that perhaps the rumors of Bryanism's demise were greatly exaggerated. This was reflected most obviously in Wilson bringing Bryan into his government as Secretary of State (where, he enjoyed the altogether fitting privilege of officially declaring the adoption of the Seventeenth Amendment guaranteeing the direct election of Senators in 1913), but was also strongly evident in the measures passed by Wilson to bring aid and relief to the farmers. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914, for example, bade fair to allay the endemic isolation, ignorance and uncertainty of farm life that so vexed the Populists, through a new network of cooperative extension services. These would be administered by the land-grant colleges and would teach farmers how to apply the latest business and scientific

¹²¹ Chace, *1912*, 158.

methods to their farming. A raft of new agricultural regulations, including the Grain Standards, Cotton Futures, Land Bank, and Warehouse acts sought to inject a modicum of order and consistency into agricultural markets and credits. most importantl, the administration sought to ameliorate the endemic dearness of credit out on the grange that had necessitated the creation of Macune's Subtreasury Plan and caused the hunger for cheap money at the back of the silver panacea with the Federal Farm Loan Act of 1916. Indeed, later historians like John D. Hicks and Richard Hofstadter would later describe the measure as being in some senses an enactment of old populist ideas. According to the latter, when considered in concert with the Warehouse Act, this measure, which created a network of twelve federal farm banks to supply agricultural credits to family farmers, "embodied several provisions of the Populist independent treasury scheme."¹²²

The two most significant reforms of the New Freedom, however, cannot necessarily be neatly placed into rhetorical boxes of Bryanite insurgent populism or Rooseveltian *noblesse oblige* paternalism, but instead either furnish within themselves a synthesis of the two approaches or transcend the distinction between them altogether. The Revenue Act of 1913 corresponds to the latter, seeing as how the tariff had been calumniated for years by reformers all across the ideological spectrum as a symbol of economic privilege and "the mother of trusts," some sort of significant downward revision of tariff schedules would

¹²² Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition*, 253-254.

almost certainly be at least attempted.¹²³ The adoption of a federal income tax—the chief programmatic innovation introduced by the Act—had been advocated consistently since the 1890s by both Bryan and the Populists (who made it a plank in their party’s platform as early as 1892), and the Bull Moosers in 1912. There was a real consensus among virtually all shades of progressive opinion as to the necessity of the essential provisions of the legislation, with much of the haggling in Congress arising in the form of rather predictable horse-trading as to which goods might be put on or taken off the free list. The only real ideational conflict that arose on the way to passage was between the administration, who favored a relatively modest taxation rate intended primarily to replace lost revenue from the tariff and interestingly enough an unlikely alliance in Congress of the fringier elements of “radical” Bryanite Democrats and “insurgent” Rooseveltian Republicans, who clamored for more steeply graduated and thereby “redistributive” tax schedules.¹²⁴

The passage of the Federal Reserve Act, on the other hand, serves as an excellent encapsulation of Wilson’s approach as a reform leader in miniature, in that it is a single reform measure containing sundry qualities of the Bryanite and Rooseveltian conceptions of progressivism patiently stitched together into a workable proposal by his own light-handed guidance. What makes Wilson’s steerage of the legislation to its goal even more impressive is that, as John M.

¹²³ Morris, *Theodore Rex*, 145.

¹²⁴ Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era*, 39.

Cooper has explained, two major points of contention soon arose as to the potential character of the new central banking system:

One was whether the reserve system should be centralized or decentralized; the other was whether the system should operate as a government agency or as a private institution under some degree of government supervision.¹²⁵

Complicating matters further, as Cooper goes on to explain, was the fact that each of the ideological wings of both major parties tended to cluster around one of the four poles created by this crosscutting of policies: Conservative Democrats like Carter Glass, the Federal Reserve bill's primary drafter, wanted a private and decentralized institution; the more Bryanite or "radical" Democrats (alongside a handful of "insurgent" Republicans) preferred a decentralized and public system; other progressives, presumably former Bull Moosers or Rooseveltian Republicans, desired a centralized and public banking agency; while conservative Republicans would have liked a centralized and privately-run European-style central bank. They wanted one centered around the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street. After giving the four sides a chance to assert themselves both at the level of argument and log rolling, Wilson revised Glass's bill so that it squared the circle between them as much as possible. The new system was now a *mélange* of decentralized power—in the form of the system of regional reserve banks—and centralized supervision from the permanent Federal Reserve Board in the capital. Moreover, the system was now to be governed by elements of both public and private power in that the private member banks

¹²⁵ Cooper, *Pivotal Decades*, 197.

could name some of the directors of the regional reserve banks and hold their deposits in them. Still, the president retained the right to name all central board members and the balance of the regional directors. Even the centralized privately owned model for the Fed, which would seem to be the only party not significantly heeded by the president (perhaps because he himself was neither a conservative nor a Republican), would in the fullness of time, find many of their desires largely accommodated by the way the new system functioned in practice. The New York reserve bank in the shadow of Wall Street soon assumed a dominant position over all the other regional units.

Although the revised bill had something to please most everyone, it inhered around a fragile balance that could not hold together under much Congressional meddling. Wilson himself unwittingly revealed as much in his address urging Congress to pass it, describing it in terms which were sometimes confusing if not contradictory, such as when he claimed that control of the proposed reserve system “must be public, not private, must be vested in the Government itself, so that the banks may be the instruments, not the masters of business, and of individual enterprise and initiative.”¹²⁶ Interestingly, in passages such as these, it almost sounds as if the Wilson and Roosevelt of 1912 are both attempting to express themselves at the same time and practically through the same utterance, a telling indication of how thoroughly Wilson had synthesized Roosevelt’s approach into his program. Despite the efforts of the aforementioned

¹²⁶ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 233-234.

factions of opinion to alter the bill to better suit their own preferences, Wilson remained patient yet firm in his resistance. At one point he shrewdly dispatched his Secretary of State to help bring some of his more obstreperous followers into line. When the act was finally passed, Wilson had achieved a reform that was an unalloyed triumph in Bryanite terms. It sought to make credit more available throughout all regions of the country, especially the credit-starved West and South. It was also a success in Rooseveltian terms in that it introduced a new modicum of order and control into the nation's financial system and promised to possibly prevent and contain the damage of future panics. And finally the measure was a crowning achievement in his own terms in that it promised to liberate small banks from the tyranny of Wall Street's hegemony. No wonder even the staunchly Republican *New York Tribune* effusively praised the president's deft stewardship of the new law as "a great exhibition of leadership."¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality*, 75.

EPILOGUE:

THE WAR AND THE BREAKDOWN OF PROGRESSIVISM

When the long-anticipated general war finally erupted in Europe in the summer of 1914, the reform momentum of the New Freedom was just coming to a crest. Indeed, Eric F. Goldman has even gone so far as to describe the years immediately preceding the outbreak of the First World War as the “Honeymoon” period of the progressive era. Therefore, the coming of the war came as a surprise to many progressives, for in their excitement they had assumed that the world in general must also be going their way. As William Allen White remarked at the time, “[t]he same stirring to lift men to higher things, to fuller enjoyment of the fruits of our civilization, to a wider participation in the blessings of modern society” which was then currently remaking American politics and society, “is almost world-wide.”¹²⁸ The war in Europe came as a rude shock to this kind of whiggish triumphalism, and progressives, along with the rest of the country, would spend the next two and half years vigorously debating amongst themselves what America’s proper response to the conflagration should be. And, as in reform politics Bryan and Roosevelt would each come to articulate a starkly different response to the conflict raging in Europe, which they strongly urged on the American people and—both from within his administration and in opposition to it—the president, who again tried to pursue a middle course between them.

¹²⁸ Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny*, 229.

From the very first, Bryan was appalled by the war, deeming it “so horrible that no one can afford to take responsibility for continuing it a single hour.”¹²⁹ And to that end, the months following the outbreak of hostilities found him using every iota of his considerable influence as the nation’s chief diplomat to keep the country at peace. Among other things, Bryan tried to prohibit foreign loans to belligerent governments, pushed Wilson to offer arbitration treaties to all the nations in the war, sent out a feeler offering a peace mediated by the United States to the German ambassador Count Johann von Bernstorff, and even staged a photo-op in which he ostentatiously accepted a huge peace petition signed by 350,000 children from around the country on the steps of the State Department building, all to little or no avail. Finally, when the President tasked him to send a stern note admonishing Germany for its sinking of the *Lusitania* and the resulting deaths of 128 Americans in May 1915, Bryan resigned in protest from the Cabinet, lest his actions contribute toward what he saw as the administration’s dangerous drift toward war. Moreover, while he studiously refrained from publicly attacking his former chief once out of office, Bryan remained vocal in his condemnation of what he considered the “causeless” war in Europe and the “scaredness” (i.e. preparedness) program he feared might inexorably draw America into it, once even engaging in a newspaper debate with noted preparedness advocate William Howard Taft.

¹²⁹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 232-233.

And yet it might have been more fitting had Bryan debated the preparedness movement's real leader and paramount spokesman, Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt had long taken an expansive view of international affairs, and had as President devoted much energy to increasing America's influence (and consequently its role) in the world, whether through armed interventions in Latin American under his famous Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, the building of the Panama Canal, the intervention to mediate an end to the Russo-Japanese War, or the bold advertisement of the nation's burgeoning naval strength through the worldwide tour of the Great White Fleet. These convictions, coupled with his lifelong attraction toward anything martial, motivated Roosevelt to advocate a substantial military buildup and a greater participation in international affairs. At one point the former President even declared that the "great civilized nations of the world which do possess force, actual or immediately potential, should combine by solemn agreement in a World League for the Peace of Righteousness," which might then create an "international judiciary" with an "international police force" at its command to preempt or squelch any future wars as if, drawing upon a metaphor from his cattle-wrangling days out on the frontier, "through the action of a posse comitatus of powerful and civilized nations."¹³⁰ Despite the fact that Wilson would eventually heed certain of the Colonel's recommendations, building up America's military capacity in "preparedness" of war, and even erecting an international body roughly analogous to what

¹³⁰ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 281.

Roosevelt described, Roosevelt and his like-minded friend Henry Cabot Lodge remained implacable critics of the resident's foreign policy, with the former castigating it as "a timid and spiritless neutrality," and the latter leading the effort to defeat the Treaty of Versailles and thus keep America out of Wilson's League of Nations.¹³¹

At the height of the controversy over what America's response to the war should be, the *New York World* published a cartoon by Rollin Kirby entitled "Helping the President" which illustrates Wilson's position *vis-à-vis* Bryan and Roosevelt beautifully. The cartoon depicts Wilson, looking burdened yet stern, flanked on either side by caricatures of Bryan and Roosevelt who hold out initialed handbills for the president to take. Bryan, with a hang-dog, weepy expression and crowned by an ersatz halo made of wire, holds forward a bill reading "Let us avoid unnecessary risks." Roosevelt, his mouth agape as if in mid-yell, is meanwhile absurdly kitted out in his old khaki Rough Rider uniform and aggressively pumping his fist in the air, while his bill counsels "Let us act without unnecessary delay."¹³² Throughout his first administration, Wilson would often play the man in the middle between Bryan's pacifism and Roosevelt's militancy, at first following his Secretary of State in declaring the United States strictly neutral, but gradually coming to accept a need for some measure of preparedness before the war and permanent international engagement after it. By the beginning of his second term, however, Wilson concluded that this

¹³¹ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 282-283.

¹³² Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, insert.

balancing act of keeping American interests safe and at peace had become unsustainable, and that consequently it was time to intervene on the side of the Allies.

One of the factors that restrained the president from this momentous step for so long was his awareness that wars have historically been typically fatal to reform movements. As he prophetically explained to the journalist Frank Cobb, “[t]o fight you must be brutal and ruthless, and the spirit of ruthless brutality will enter into the very fibre of our national life, infecting Congress, the courts, the policeman on the beat, the man in the street.” Moreover, Wilson expressed fears that the economic measures necessary to mobilize for the war effort would fatally undermine the anti-monopolistic thrust of his New Freedom reforms, remarking to Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels just as he was making up his mind to ask Congress for a declaration of war that “if this country goes into war...you and I will live to see the day when the big interests will be in the saddle.”¹³³ And, in waging the war effort the Wilson administration very soon did in fact come to rely upon the very creeping corporatism it had once treated as its avowed *bête noire*. This compromise would have dramatic and enduring consequences, for, as David M. Kennedy has explained “[f]or the remainder of the century, government in America would be in large measure an affair conducted of, by, and for special-interest groups of that [corporate] type, to the frequent neglect of the

¹³³ Cooper, *The Warrior and the Priest*, 320.

unorganized, and of the 'public interest,' a concept that would come to be regarded as a quaint vestige of a more innocent era."¹³⁴

Indeed, despite the potentially reactionary effects that war might engender on the domestic front, most progressives chose to follow the President in 1917, although not without some real misgivings. They largely did so because Wilson erected what Merrill Peterson has described as a kind of "moral bridge" to belligerence by painting the conflict as essentially the latest and greatest progressive crusade. With his Fourteen Points, his League of Nations, and most of all his noble, moralistic rhetoric, Wilson was once more playing the role of the Great Reformer; only this time, it was not Princeton, nor New Jersey, nor even the United States that Wilson and the other progressives sought to deliver from the ruthless and corrupt, but the entire world. But Europe could not have been less like America than in 1919. Battered by four years of unprecedented destruction and slaughter, shaken by the precipitate collapse of seemingly immortal dynasties and empires, and reeling from wrenching national sacrifices, the European powers distinctly lacked the luxury of idealism and had no myths of national innocence left to lose. All the old shibboleths about "American exceptionalism" were perhaps never more apposite than in that immediate postwar period, as Wilson and the other progressives would eventually learn to their detriment.

¹³⁴ David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 142.

Another reason most progressives initially opted to support the war was that, while in the long run Wilson's fears about the war killing progressivism would prove justified, in the short run his efforts to mobilize the American economy for the struggle seemed to fulfill many long-term progressive aspirations, particularly in the New Nationalist, top-down vein. As David M. Kennedy has explained,

[e]ntire industries, even entire economic sectors, as in the case of agriculture, were organized and disciplined as never before, and brought into close and regular relations with counterpart congressional committees, cabinet departments, and Executive agencies.¹³⁵

The War Industries Board under Bernard Baruch allocated natural resources and coordinated massive purchases of materiel for the federal government while attempting to infuse an unprecedented level of what he considered to be economic rationality into the American economy through industrial combination, standardization and the spread of mass-production techniques. The railway system was nationalized from 1917 to 1920 under the aegis of the newly created United States Railroad Administration directed by Secretary of the Treasury (and Wilson's son-in-law) William Gibbs McAdoo, thus briefly realizing an old Populist goal of several decades' standing. Moreover, the war effort was a windfall for organized labor, with government-sponsored organizing drives which ballooned union membership nationwide by more than fifty percent to over four and a half million by the Armistice.

¹³⁵ Kennedy, *Over Here*, 141.

The impetus of war collectivism had carried progressive state building far beyond the wildest dreams of even Herbert Croly and the New Nationalists, which raised dauntingly high expectations for reforms to be pursued after the war was won. A few progressives like Vernon Louis Parrington and Randolph Bourne may have fretted about the how the newfound empowerment of the state portended regulatory capture or a dangerous, unthinking mob mentality, but these were minority voices little heeded at the time. Frank Walsh, who as co-chairman of the National War Labor Board with William Howard Taft had a front-row seat for the social reforms engendered by the war effort, doubtless spoke for by far the greater portion of progressive sentiment when he diagnosed the mood of the country around the time of the Armistice as “a perfect hurricane of reconstruction conferences and plans, projected by every group imaginable, highbrow, reactionary, labor and every other hand.”¹³⁶ Among those offering up plans for postwar reconstruction were Theodore Roosevelt, increasingly confident that he would win the Republican presidential nomination and desirous of an early start in putting together a platform for himself, and William Jennings Bryan, who published a comprehensive reconstruction program of his own in his periodical, *The Commoner*. And, while the president himself was too busy with the diplomatic settlement in Versailles to devote much attention to domestic affairs in the months following the Armistice, several figures in his administration,

¹³⁶ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 299.

including McAdoo, head of the Federal Fuel Administration (which controlled the price of coal throughout the war) Harry Garfield, and Wilson's personal secretary Joseph Tumulty) advocated continuing or extending the government's economic controls into peacetime and a new round of sweeping social legislation, including among other things, old-age pensions, government housing, a national health insurance program, minimum wage and maximum hours laws, and even federal "control" of certain basic natural resources.¹³⁷ In other words, Louis Hartz's observation that "[t]he Progressive mind is like the mind of a child in adolescence, torn between old taboos and new reality, forever on the verge of exploding into fantasy" was never quite so apt as now, and it would never be so again.¹³⁸

But first, a just and lasting peace for world would have to be won, and to that purpose the president sailed to Versailles to negotiate with the two major Allied leaders (the United States being legally only an "associated power" in the war just concluded), Prime Minister David Lloyd George of Great Britain and Premier Georges Clemenceau of France. And so, as in domestic politics back home, Wilson found himself once more part of an awkward three-legged stool. As with Roosevelt and Bryan, his major opponents were not ideological opposites but rather parallels. While the dry, idealistic Southerner, the wily, somewhat sybaritic Welshman, and the grizzled old Radical might seem like the most disparate trio imaginable at first glance, in ideological terms Wilson, Lloyd

¹³⁷ Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 301-302.

¹³⁸ Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America*, 237.

George, and Clemenceau were actually cut from rather similar cloth. Like Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau were both “New” liberals and leading lights for progressive reform in their countries before, during, and after the war.

As Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Liberal government before the war, Lloyd George had alongside Prime Minister Herbert Asquith and President of the Board of Trade Winston Churchill instituted a bold program of domestic reforms that Daniel T. Rodgers has rather grandly claimed “was to Britain what the Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson administrations, *rolled into one*, were to the United States” (emphasis mine).¹³⁹ Lloyd George was the predominant personality behind such epochal reforms as public exchanges for employment, the institution of a minimum wage, pensions for the aged, a social insurance system, and free school meals and medical care for the children of the poor. Most important of all perhaps, he had drafted the famous “People’s Budget” of 1909—the first British national budget oriented around progressive schedules of income and land taxation—which precipitated the constitutional crisis leading to the effective political emasculation of the House of Lords. With all this in mind, Rodgers’s comparison (and Lloyd George’s affectionate popular nickname of “The People’s David”) begins to feel merited. Clemenceau, for his part, while not as significant as Léon Bourgeois in implementing social reforms in France, also had an impressive resume of progressive bona fides going into Versailles,

¹³⁹ Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 229.

including his tireless efforts to secularize French schools, and his longstanding support for the rights of trade unions.

Perhaps it was precisely because of their shared progressivism that Clemenceau, Lloyd George and Wilson failed to reach a satisfactory accord at Versailles. Because they had justified the sacrifices their respective publics had made as part and parcel of a larger moral crusade—for Wilson, to make the world “safe for democracy”; for Lloyd George, “to end all wars”; and even for Clemenceau, to, bluntly, emasculate and bleed Germany white for vengeance—none of them could safely return home with half-measures. When they did, inevitably the progressives in all countries lost all faith in them, and through them, progressivism itself at a practical level. Although every country entered the Versailles Conference desiring different, even directly contrary outcomes, somehow the three progressives at its heart had found a way to “break the heart of the world” almost equally all around.

Nor did progressive heartbreak end overseas, as the resumption of domestic reform each man promised upon the end of the war also turned out to be a phantasm. Lloyd George’s clarion call to make Britain “fit for heroes” was largely muffled and watered down, (ironically by the very same conservative elements who comprised the balance of the coalition “Coupon” government he led), and Wilson’s oblique references to political and economic reconstruction after the war seem bitterly ironic in the wake of the Red Scare.¹⁴⁰ And at these

¹⁴⁰ Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 295.

words we confront one of the profoundest ironies of the postwar: that the tide of reaction that drowned the progressive movement around the world in 1919 and 1920 did not just arise in opposition to its supposed failures from the right, but was largely initiated and enabled by progressive leaders themselves. After the war, Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau supported harsh repression of radicalism at home and overseas, with all three men authorizing military expeditions to undermine the fledgling Soviet Union and Clemenceau even calling for a “cordon sanitaire” across Europe to contain the “virus” of Bolshevism, and all three men presiding over red scares of various dimensions in their respective countries.

Indeed, it is difficult not to agree with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s bitter conclusion that “[a]s Clemenceau slew the liberal dream in Paris, so [Attorney General A. Mitchell] Palmer slew it in America; and, in each case, Woodrow Wilson was the accomplice.”¹⁴¹ Wilson was every bit as “brutal and ruthless” as he claimed he would need to be to Frank Cobb, and much of that brutality and ruthlessness was directed towards dissidents both during and after the war. A raft of legislation passed during the war curtailing free speech and civil liberties, including the Espionage and Trading-with-the-Enemy Acts of 1917 and the Sedition Act of 1918, empowered the president to punish those who willfully obstructed the war effort and expressed “disloyal, profane, scurrilous or abusive”

¹⁴¹ Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 43.

opinions regarding the American government, flag or uniform.¹⁴² In practice of course, almost anyone who deviated very far from the political mainstream could run afoul of such amorphous standards, and among the radicals caught in its dragnet were Eugene Debs, Emma Goldman, and the Industrial Workers of the World. Things only got worse after the war, as fear of radical infiltration from abroad and unprecedentedly widespread and damaging strikes (and a bomb exploding on his own front porch) convinced Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer to conduct a series of raids against anarchists and socialists (both real and suspected) in late 1919 and early 1920. And although Wilson was by this point largely incapacitated by a terrible stroke, he seems to have approved of the raids to the extent to which he was cognizant of them, at one point fearfully commanding Palmer “do not let this country see red.”¹⁴³

In other words, while war may very well have been, as Randolph Bourne put it, “the health of the state,” it was the death of progressivism and, in a slower, more gradual way after his severe stroke in November 1919, Woodrow Wilson.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, it is difficult not to see the shattered, deathly wraith painfully finishing out the remainder of his term in the White House as a pathetic personification of all the once-bright hopes and plans of the progressive movement laid low. If Wilson, more than any other individual, was responsible for giving those visions a tangible form than he was also certainly most to blame for bringing them, along

¹⁴² Blum, *Woodrow Wilson and the Politics of Morality*, 143.

¹⁴³ Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 42.

¹⁴⁴ Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 37.

with himself, so utterly to wreck. He had once boldly sought a New Freedom for America, and eventually even the world, but after it failed to take and America and the world slid catastrophically into chaos and reaction in 1919 and 1920, he was left to languish as a sort of grotesque living ghost, wandering the ruins of his once unrivalled power and influence and bitterly recounting the numberless broken dreams of the past quarter-century. Indeed, Page Smith has memorably said of the last year or so of Wilson's presidency, that "In a curious way the White House became his asylum, a national sanatorium occupied by a tragic remnant of his real self."¹⁴⁵ All of the youthful vigor and roof-shaking oratory of Bryan, all of the robust athleticism and invigorating zest in command of Roosevelt, and all of Wilson's own clarion exhortations for a reformed, even reborn, nation, and eventually, world, had all finally dwindled down into this pathetic invalid, the sight of whom reduced even some of his bitterest opponents to tears. Wilson only seemed to show flashes of his former fire and strength when expressing his ardent desire to crush the "Reds."

Indeed, by the time the next presidential election came around in 1920, all three of the major progressive leaders were either dead or severely diminished men. Bryan never quite managed to recapture his former political influence and following after resigning from office in 1915, and by 1920, although still only sixty years old, seemed like a relic from another era, embarrassingly illustrated by his antediluvian refusal to use (or failure to understand) the new microphones at that

¹⁴⁵ Page Smith, *America Enters the World: A People's History of the Progressive Era and World War I* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1985), 822.

year's Democratic National Convention. Over the next five years, Bryan devoted most of his energy exploiting his fame to shill real estate in Florida and, most damaging of all to his historical reputation, lead the charge against the teaching of evolution, most famously at the infamous Scopes Monkey Trial in Dayton, Tennessee, where he died peacefully in his sleep in 1925. Roosevelt, his body ravaged and prematurely aged by years of strenuous exertion and never entirely recovered from a rather foolhardy sojourn down the Amazon River in 1914, had also died in his sleep in early 1919, leaving the GOP's right flank free to definitely recapture the party and nominate their preferred candidate, Ohio's strongly conservative Senator, Warren G. Harding, in 1920. Wilson, despite his crippling physical incapacity, briefly entertained a pathetic hope that the Democrats would renominate him in 1920, before the Convention disabused him by also selecting an Ohioan, the solidly moderate Governor James M. Cox, who was partially chosen because he had absolutely no ties to the by-now highly unpopular administration to hold him back. With the nation's entry into his beloved League of Nations blocked in the Senate by Henry Cabot Lodge and overwhelmingly rejected by the electorate in the Republican avalanche of 1920, Wilson would linger on a few more painful years before finally dying in 1924.

While the ratification of the long-fought-for Nineteenth Amendment in August of 1920—arguably the crowning reform of the progressive movement—was a source of enormous satisfaction for most progressives, it was almost the one saving grace in an election that otherwise went disastrously for them. To

start with, as Herbert Croly pointed out in a glumly perceptive article published shortly before the election in *The New Republic* entitled “The Eclipse of Progressivism,” this was the first election since 1892 where neither of the two major parties had bothered to field a recognizably progressive candidate. Instead, reform-minded voters this year were forced to choose between a Democrat whose bid for their support, while real, was “low and, considering the record of his party, of more than doubtful cash value,” and a Republican who “not only dares to defy progressivism by being unmistakably reactionary, but he is counting on his partiality for private business and his renunciation of any meddling with it in the public interest to win the election for him.”¹⁴⁶ Moreover, the electorate now seemed largely indifferent to the calls for economic and social reform that initially emanated from the Democratic campaign, and bored by the attempts to ballyhoo the Wilson administration’s record in antitrust, labor and tax legislation. The voters instead handed Harding and his “normalcy” one of the largest landslides in America’s electoral history, with the highest percentage of the popular vote (60%) ever reliably recorded to that point.

While this election was such a debacle for progressives it would effectively kill off the progressive movement at the national level for at least a decade, it did produce at least one figure who showed promise as a future reform leader. This was Cox’s charismatic running mate, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin

¹⁴⁶ Herbert Croly, “The Eclipse of Progressivism,” *The New Republic*, October 27, 1920, accessed December 10, 2012, <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/the-eclipse-progressivism>.

Delano Roosevelt. As a member of Wilson's administration and a cousin to Theodore Roosevelt, whom he idolized, FDR had vital links to both of the major progressive presidencies and, many Democrats no doubt hoped in 1920, the progressive wings of both major parties. And while Roosevelt seemingly failed to significantly buoy what was almost certainly a doomed ticket in 1920, the flurry of proposals and counterproposals for reform roiling American politics as he was coming of age seem to have made an indelible impression on him, inspiring much of his own reform agenda when he was elected president in his own right a dozen years later. Even the name given to this agenda—the "New Deal"—was a portmanteau word of the domestic programs of his former chief and cousin respectively, the New Freedom and the Square Deal.

Specifically, much of the First New Deal took its impetus from the top-down, New Nationalist conception of reform favored by Theodore Roosevelt and Herbert Croly, especially the National Recovery Act and the original iteration of the Agricultural Adjustment Act in that they involved government cooperation with big business, the relaxation of antitrust laws, and greatly strengthened government control over economic planning, working conditions, and production. Other New Deal measures, such as the Public Utility Holding Companies Act, the Glass-Steagall Act and arguably the National Labor Relations Act, inhered around the atomistic, New Freedom conception of reform associated with Woodrow Wilson and Louis Brandeis, in that they all sought to disincentivize bigness and empower the individual as an economic actor. Even Bryan and the

Populists exerted a certain broad influence over the New Deal in their distrust of the excesses of Wall Street and their general convictions that the federal government ought to exert control over the money supply, defend the rights of workers to strike and organize, and set tax schedules according to the ability to pay. Indeed, well over a decade after Bryan, Roosevelt and Wilson had all died and almost a decade since the political movements they led had all petered out, the ideological push and pull between them was continuing to catalyze and influence the development of new and innovative public policy which, considering that the New Deal and its legacy remain the template for mainstream American liberalism, has exerted an influence lasting down to our own day. And, when one concludes that all this was arguably first set into motion by one man invoking a “Cross of Gold,” it is perhaps fitting that John M. Cooper should conclude of this period that “[p]ublic affairs for the rest of the twentieth century would remain in the shadow of this golden age.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Cooper, *Pivotal Decades*, 374.

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