“Cross of Gold”—William Jennings Bryan (1921)

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Essay by Robert Cherny (guest post)*

William Jennings Bryan

“William Jennings Bryan and the ‘Cross of Gold’ Speech”

When television coverage begins at a presidential nominating convention, it is only a matter of time before some commentator alludes to William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech at the 1896 Democratic convention as the leading example of an orator's ability to sway listeners. More than a century after Bryan delivered that speech, his words still have power, and some of his metaphors still appear in political speeches and platforms.

Born in Salem, Illinois, in 1860, Bryan grew up in a devoutly religious household. After graduating from Illinois College and Union Law School and marrying Mary Baird, Bryan and his family moved to Lincoln, Nebraska. A Democrat, he won election to the House of Representatives in 1890. His campaign had concentrated on tariff issues, but he also endorsed "free coinage of silver on equal terms with gold." Soon, Bryan emerged as a prominent spokesman for silver. "Silver" was, in fact, an argument for a federal currency policy to counteract the deflation of the post-Civil War era. From 1865 onward, most prices had fallen, due to more efficient production in agriculture and manufacturing, a persistent federal surplus, and the failure of the money supply to grow as rapidly as the population.

Deflation especially affected farmers in the western Midwest and the South. They had greatly increased their harvests of corn, wheat, and cotton, but, as production rose, prices fell. Farmers had accomplished much of their expansion on borrowed money, and falling crop prices magnified their debts. For example, a farmer in 1881 who borrowed $1,000 expected to pay interest each year and to repay the full amount at the end of five years. (Loans then were not amortized.) Corn sold for 63 cents per bushel in 1881, so $1,000 was equivalent to 1,587 bushels of corn; in 1886, when the loan came due, corn sold for 36 cents per bushel, so $1,000 required 2,777 bushels. Ten percent interest (not unusual in the western Middle West) would have cost $100 per year--159 bushels of corn in 1881 but 312 in 1885. As Bryan put it in 1893, deflation meant that "a man [had to] pay a debt with a dollar larger than the one he borrowed.”

Bryan was among many who became convinced that deflation occurred because the currency supply failed to grow as rapidly as the economy. What was needed, they concluded, was a currency that grew in proportion to the population. In 1894, Bryan argued that the government should "make the dollar so stable in its purchasing power that it will defraud neither debtor nor creditor."

In 1873, Congress had specified that the Mint could coin only gold into dollars, thereby putting the United States on a de facto gold standard. As prices continued to fall, currency reformers argued that unlimited silver coinage might stabilize prices.

In the 1892 presidential election, the Populist party carried several western states. Populists argued that the huge and powerful corporations that emerged since the Civil War posed dangers to economic opportunity for the individual as well as to political liberty. To control such corporate giants, Populists called for governmental action, including federal ownership of the railroads. They also demanded expansion of the currency (through paper money or silver or both) and argued for a graduated income tax as the fairest way to finance the federal government. Populists also proposed a range of reforms that, they hoped, would give voters more control over government.

Will and Mary Bryan formed a strong team on Capitol Hill. They collaborated on his speeches, delivery as well as content. When Bryan spoke on the floor of the House, Mary sat in the visitors's gallery, coaching him by nodding her head or signaling disapproval.

During his second term in Congress (1893-95), Bryan emerged as silver's most eloquent defender. He also identified silver as offering common ground with Populists, whom he viewed as potential allies. In 1893, he persuaded the few Democrats in the Nebraska legislature to help elect a Populist to the U.S. Senate. In 1894, he convinced Nebraska Democrats to endorse the Populist candidate for governor. Both Populists won. In 1895, at the end of his second term in Congress, Bryan joined the "Omaha World-Herald" (the state's leading Democratic newspaper) as an editorialist and reporter. He also traveled the nation speaking on the silver issue.

By early 1896, Bryan had begun to think he might win the Democratic nomination for president. Though he never announced as a candidate, he traveled the country making speeches and working to elect Democratic convention delegates pledged to silver but not committed to any candidate.

While Bryan bent all his efforts toward keeping the Democratic convention open, William McKinley was tightly locking up the Republican nomination. McKinley blamed the Democrats for the depressed economic conditions since 1893 and presented the protective tariff as the cure. He also supported "the existing gold standard," which provoked Republican supporters of silver to bolt their party.

The Democratic convention met in Chicago, where the platform committee drafted a majority report in favor of silver. A minority report opposed silver, and the convention was to decide between them after a debate. Bryan was chosen as the final speaker. The first speaker, supporting silver, harangued for nearly an hour. Then came three speakers opposing silver.

Finally, Bryan sprang from his seat and bounded to the platform. A wave of anticipation swept the hall as silver delegates eagerly waited for Bryan to put their emotions into words. He did not disappoint them.

As he developed his major points, Bryan later recalled, "the audience seemed to rise and sit down as one man. At the close of a sentence it would rise and shout, and when I began upon another sentence, the room was as still as church." He defended the full range of reforms in the platform, giving special attention to the income tax. The silver issue, he insisted, was only the starting point for economic reform. He called upon his party to stand with the people rather than "the idle holders of idle capital," and he presented a metaphor that Democrats have since repeated many times: "There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that, if you will only legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea, however, has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up through every class which rests upon them."

Bryan's conclusion was highly dramatic. "Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns." Bryan raked his fingers down his temples. "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." He stretched his arms straight out from his sides as if on a cross and stood silent for a moment, then dropped his arms and took a step back.

The delegates sat in stunned silence, then the demonstration came, shaking the hall for a half hour. Delegates carried Bryan around the hall on their shoulders, and others came to him to shout their support for the nomination. His "Cross of Gold" speech achieved instant immortality.

Bryan later described the need of the moment as "to put into words the sentiments of a majority of the delegates," and he proved ideal for the task. His voice, a carefully cultivated and powerful instrument, could reach into every part of the great convention hall, a crucial ability before electronic amplification. Many of his most striking phrases had been tested, revised, and retested in earlier speeches. The speech transformed Bryan from a presumptuous youngster into a top contender for the nomination.

In addition to the Democratic nomination, Bryan realized his hope for uniting the silver forces when the Populists and Silver Republicans also nominated him. The marvelous speaking voice that gave him the nomination became his major campaign instrument, as he and Mary traveled 18,000 miles by train, visited 26 states, and spoke to as many as five million people.

Bryan got almost 6.5 million votes, more than any previous candidate, and he carried 22 of the 45 states. McKinley, however, received more than 7 million votes, carried 23 states, and accumulated a large electoral majority. For the previous 20 years, neither political party had commanded a national majority. Now McKinley's victory initiated a third of a century of Republican dominance in national politics. Bryan again ran for president, and lost, in 1900 and 1908, but he remained the most significant leader of the Democratic party until the nomination of Woodrow Wilson in 1912.

Bryan's sincere and unshakable confidence in the ability of the people to govern themselves gave him a popular following with few parallels in American politics. Between 1896 and his death in 1925, Bryan played a significant role in passing such reforms as the income tax, direct election of senators, the Federal Reserve System, prohibition, and woman suffrage. "A private monopoly," he never tired of repeating, "is indefensible and intolerable." As Bryan argued passionately for using federal authority to defend ordinary citizens from the powerful corporations of his day, he laid the basis for the activist, twentieth-century Democratic Party--the party of Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Lyndon Johnson.

Though Thomas Edison patented the first phonograph in 1878, there was no recording of the "Cross of Gold" speech until 1921, when, at the age of 61, Bryan recorded the speech in a studio. While Bryan, in 1896, referred to the concerns of farmers, wage-earners, and small business owners, he also followed the expectations of the day when he included allusions to history ("the crusaders who followed Peter the Hermit," "Cicero . . . who saved Rome"), cited notable Democratic party leaders from the past (Jefferson, Jackson), and drew upon Biblical imagery (the crown of thorns, the cross). In listening to this speech, imagine it being spoken in a huge convention hall filled with hundreds of people, on a July day in Chicago, at a time before air conditioning or amplified sound, and imagine that the speaker is an energetic 36 year-old with a magnificent, baritone voice capable of being heard in every corner of that huge, hot, crowded room.

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