

# AMERICAN POPULISM

A SOCIAL HISTORY  
1877-1898

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# The Crisis of Populism, 1893–98

On May 1, 1893, the newly inaugurated President of the United States, Grover Cleveland, opened the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago with the press of a button. Touching an ivory telegraph key, President Cleveland turned on the Exposition's 10,000 electric lights and started up the machinery in buildings throughout the "White City" that had been built on the shores of Lake Michigan to commemorate the 400th anniversary of Columbus' voyage to the New World.

The fair, with its technological marvels, cultural beauty, and commercial vitality, proclaimed the bright promise of America's future. Even Populists and other critics of industrial capitalism were captivated by the fair. Eugene Debs called it "the sublimest testimony the world has ever heard or seen . . . of the civilizing, elevating, liberalizing force of labor." Henry Demarest Lloyd thought that it "revealed to the people possibilities of social beauty, utility, and harmony of which they had not even been able to dream." In far-off Texas, veterans of the Lampasas Farmers' Alliance disassembled the cabin in which they first met for shipment to Chicago, anticipating that it would be part of their state's exhibit at the fair. And after touring the Exposition, Hamlin Garland dashed off a note to his father back on the Dakota

farm: "Sell the cook stove if necessary and come. You *must* see this fair."

Four days after Cleveland opened the Exposition, the New York stock exchange crashed, signaling the onset of a depression that was, until the 1930s, the nation's worst. By the end of 1893, 15,000 businesses had failed—including five of the nation's largest railroads—and as many as 20 percent of the nation's industrial workers were unemployed. In Chicago alone, 75,000 were out of work by winter, and a young reporter named Ray Stannard Baker wrote to his parents from Chicago, "There are thousands of homeless and starving men in the streets. I have seen more misery in this last week than I ever saw in my life before."

At harvesttime farm prices in the rural South and West dropped below the costs of production, and on the Great Plains drought added to the misery. The desperation on the western Plains jumps out at us from this matter-of-fact message of a Kansas farm woman to Populist governor Lorenzo D. Lewelling in 1894:

I take my pen in hand to let you know that we are starving to death. It is pretty hard to do without anything to eat here in this God forsaken country. . . . My husband went away to find work and came home last night and told me that we would have to starve. He has been to 10 counties and did not get no work.

A century removed from this human tragedy we can analyze the systemic sources of this collapse: the ripple effect of a European depression underway since 1890, the cumulative impact of declining farm prices that had racked the South and West since the late 1880s, frenzied speculation and unsound borrowing on the part of industrial and railroad giants, and a currency system that lacked the volume and elasticity to meet the demands of a growing economy. But for those who experienced the depression firsthand, a more immediate explanation came to mind: Cleveland and the Democrats were to blame.

Imagine what the reaction of that Kansas woman would have been to Cleveland's Secretary of Agriculture, who proclaimed: "The intelligent, practical, and successful farmer needs no aid from the Government. The ignorant, impractical, and indolent farmer deserves none." In California, unemployed men began referring to the soup kitchens that kept them from starving as "Cleveland cafes." In South Carolina, Governor Ben Tillman bellowed, "Send me to the Senate, and I'll stick a pitchfork in Grover Cleveland's old fat ribs." In Colorado, where free silver was a matter of local jobs before it was a plank in the Populist platform, Governor Davis Waite promised to fight Cleveland on the currency issue through the ballot box and with stronger means if necessary: "If the money power shall attempt to sustain its usurpation by the 'strong hand,' we will meet that issue when it is forced upon us, for it is better, infinitely better that blood should flow to the horses' bridles than our national liberties should be destroyed."

Unemployed workers and destitute farmers—and the millions of Americans who feared they might soon join them—threatened to sweep the Democrats from power. Who stood to benefit from the Democrats' misfortune? The Republican Party, though weakened by Cleveland's victory in 1892 and by Populist gains in the West, was still a national power to be reckoned with, particularly since Republicans had the good fortune of being out of power when the depression hit.

But the depression seemed tailor-made for the Populists. It was their platform that had spoken of "a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin," and had outlined a program of governmental action to curtail the special privileges of the wealthy and protect the equal rights of working people.

If hard times alone make Populists, then the economic collapse of 1893 would most assuredly usher in the Populist moment. But the fate of the Populist crusade depended on other forces as well, including (as the elections of 1890 and 1892 attest) the interplay among political parties and programs and the credibility of Pop-

ulist officials in those states where they had actually won office.

The response of President Cleveland to the economic crisis of 1893 seemed to play into the Populists' hands, but in the long run it would create for them a profound dilemma. Cleveland called Congress into special session on August 7 to repeal the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890. The President's action riveted national attention on an issue that, up until that time, had been of secondary interest to the Populists. To understand how the battle over the Sherman Act affected the career of the People's Party, let us step back from the political combat of 1893 to review the history of the silver issue.

The question at hand was whether the government would purchase and coin silver and at what price (expressed as a ratio of silver to gold). From the founding of the Republic until 1873, both gold and silver had been theoretically part of the money supply, at a traditional ratio of 16:1. But since the 1830s the high price of silver relative to gold had encouraged silver miners to sell their product on the open market rather than present it to the mint for coining. In 1873 the little-noted Coinage Act removed silver from the list of U.S. coins, but by the mid-1870s increased silver production had dropped prices to the point where coinage was profitable. The Coinage Act was denounced as a monstrous conspiracy, and political demands were heard for the remonetization of silver.

By the 1890s the demand for free and unlimited coinage of silver at a ratio of 16:1 was a standard part of the Populist platform and was championed by many Republicans and Democrats from the South and West. The silver issue had become, in the eyes of some farmers and other debtors, a panacea for increasing the money supply and (they believed) for reversing America's long deflationary slide. Free-silver advocates appropriated some of the same arguments for a flexible and expansive currency that greenbackers had employed for two decades. Populists from the anti-monopoly greenback tradition, however, would contend that any specie-based currency—even one based on silver—would afford

only palliatives, as compared to the fiat money that they proposed as part of the subtreasury or land-loan plans.

Radical antimonopolists had a point, but in the 1880s the silver issue largely supplanted greenbackism as a rallying point for advocates of inflation. The Bland-Allison Act of 1878 and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890 appeased the silver forces somewhat by allowing the government to purchase silver, but their actual effect on silver prices and the money supply was modest. Government had not gone far enough, silverites argued, and repeal of the Sherman Act would make a bad situation worse.

On the other side of the coin, President Cleveland blamed the Silver Purchase Act for the panic and for a sharp decline in the nation's gold reserves. Treasury notes, with which the government paid for the silver it bought, were being redeemed in gold, thus pushing the gold reserve below the \$100 million level that financiers believed necessary to maintain the nation's international credit.

Both sides framed the issue in moral terms. Silverites blamed a conspiracy of politicians and international bankers for the "Crime of '73" which kept the nation in poverty, while goldbugs (so called by their opponents) spoke of an "honest dollar." J. Laurence Laughlin, a leading academic economist of the day, recoiled in indignation: "The eagerness of the advocates of free silver is founded on an appeal to dishonesty and cheating on the part of those who would like to repudiate and scale one-half of their obligations."

This, then, was the climate of opinion when President Cleveland called Congress into special session. Setting aside tariff reform and other issues dear to him, Cleveland backed the repeal effort with the full authority of his office, including the threat to withhold patronage appointments from congressmen who voted the wrong way. The repeal measure easily passed the House of Representatives, even though a third of the Democrats and all of the Populists voted against it. One of the principal speakers in opposition to repeal was thirty-three-year-old William Jennings

Bryan of Nebraska, who asked his fellow Democrats: "Does any one believe that Mr. Cleveland could have been elected President upon a platform declaring in favor of the unconditional repeal of the Sherman law? Can we go back to our people and tell them that, after denouncing for twenty years the crime of 1873, we have now at last accepted it as a blessing?"

In the Senate, where the rules provided for unrestricted debate, opponents managed to delay a vote until October. Then, angrily brushing aside a compromise measure proposed by his own floor leader, Cleveland pushed for outright repeal, and got it.

Cleveland's decision to focus his response to the depression on repeal of the Sherman Act and the acrimonious congressional debate that followed clothed the silver issue with greater importance than it deserved and forced it to the center of policy debates within the People's Party. Advocates of the Omaha platform and other radical reformers argued that even free coinage of silver would leave unresolved the structural ills confronting the nation's economy. Silver's champions within the party were equally quick to note the persuasive way in which the issue rhetorically framed the conflict between "the money power" and the people. They noted as well that the silver issue seemed to offer a common ground for political cooperation with those in the South and West who had felt threatened by the Omaha platform, not the least of whom was the young Nebraska congressman who had spoken so eloquently in opposition to repeal.

In 1896, Henry Demarest Lloyd, social reformer and architect of a Populist-labor coalition in Illinois, would denounce the silver issue as "the cow-bird of the Reform movement," which "waited until the nest had been built by the sacrifices and labours of others, and then laid its eggs in it, pushing out the others which lie smashed on the ground." More recently the historian Lawrence Goodwyn has called the silver crusade a "shadow movement," an opportunistic collection of office seekers that mimicked and finally supplanted genuine Populism. If free silver was a

shadow movement, then Grover Cleveland was as much its father as William Jennings Bryan; if a cowbird, then it was hatched in 1893 in the debate over repeal of the Sherman Act.

Concentration on free silver and cooperation with silverites in one or both of the major parties marked one option for the People's Party. A very different path would put the Populists in step with the small armies of the unemployed then converging on Washington and with industrial workers who were challenging not only their employers but the power of the federal government.

As the depression deepened in 1894, urban and industrial protest escalated, seemingly increasing the prospect of forging the coalition of farmers and laborers that had eluded the Populists in 1892. In the late spring and summer "industrial armies" of the unemployed converged on Washington by rail and on foot from New England, the Midwest, and the Pacific coast to petition Congress for relief. The San Francisco contingent included an eighteen-year-old Jack London and an Alliance lecturer named Anna Ferry Smith. The most highly publicized group, calling itself the Commonwealth of Christ, left Massillon, Ohio, on Easter Sunday under the command of Jacob S. Coxey, a well-to-do businessman and greenbacker.

While visiting the Columbian Exposition the previous year, Coxey had met up with a West Coast radical named Carl Browne, who introduced him to the idea of industrial armies. A marching protest movement was the perfect vehicle for publicizing Coxey's scheme to end the depression: a massive public works program to engage the unemployed in building roads at a rate of \$1.50 per day, to be financed through congressional issue of \$500 million in legal-tender notes.

Coxey's army never included more than 600 of the faithful (among them Kansas Populist Annie Diggs and Coxey's wife and their infant son, Legal Tender Coxey), but that was not the point. "What Coxey and Browne did," notes historian Carlos Schwantes, "was to create an unemployment adventure story that the press

found irresistible." As they made their way across the depressed industrial belt of western Pennsylvania, the colorful band of true believers drew huge crowds of well-wishers and a contingent of reporters almost as large as the army itself.

Once in Washington, the Commonwealth of Christ paraded through the city to the Capitol, with Coxey's seventeen-year-old daughter riding on a white horse and the "General" and his wife following in their carriage. Coxey mounted the Capitol steps and prepared to speak. He was arrested for trespassing and sentenced to twenty days in jail. Other "armies" arrived in the capital by midsummer, but they were brutally dispersed by the authorities. Coxey returned home to Ohio to run for Congress as a Populist.

Coxey would never win a congressional seat, but his dramatization of the plight of the unemployed helped focus the attention of the small band of Populist congressmen on this new and disturbing feature of industrial America. Though their ability actually to pass legislation was nil, Populist congressmen had already introduced bills to enact much of the Omaha platform, including banking and currency reform and nationalization of the railroads. By 1894 they were also introducing bills aimed directly at the effects of the depression. Congressman John Davis of Kansas introduced a major public works program similar to Coxey's scheme. Senator Peffer supported a system of old-age pensions that anticipated the Social Security system. And Populist congressmen took the lonely but courageous view that Coxey and his followers had every right to petition Congress in person. A reading of the Populists' record in Congress during the depression of the 1890s led historian Gene Clanton to identify them as early champions of the idea "that in an advanced urban-industrial society the federal government has a role to play in cushioning the impact of economic collapse and in restoring and maintaining prosperity."

Within days after Coxey's arrest on the Capitol steps, a labor struggle broke out in Illinois that would dramatize the Cleveland administration's reflexive support for big business and create a

new opportunity for a Populist-labor coalition. On the southern edge of Chicago, George Pullman had laid out a model town to provide both shelter and culture for the workers who built railroad sleeping cars for the Pullman Palace Car Company. All was not well in Pullman. Workers chafed at the social control of the planned community, and when Pullman cut wages by 25 percent with no corresponding reduction in rents, they went out on strike.

The Pullman workers were persuaded by the increasingly powerful American Railway Union, headed by Eugene V. Debs, to declare a boycott of all trains containing Pullman cars. The General Managers Association, representing all Chicago-based railroads, met the boycott with a well-coordinated plan to fire and blacklist all railroad workers who refused to handle Pullman cars. But when the boycott spread beyond the Chicago region and virtually paralyzed rail traffic in most of the West, the GMA was powerless to stop it. Railroad officials then turned to Washington for help, knowing they had friends in high places.

Cleveland's Attorney General, Richard Olney, was former legal counsel to the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy Railroad. Olney secured a federal injunction against Debs and the ARU that forbade the union from interfering with the U.S. mail or with interstate commerce. Responding to exaggerated reports of strike violence, President Cleveland ordered federal troops to Chicago over the objections of Illinois's prolabor Democratic governor, John Peter Altgeld. When troops marched into the city on Independence Day there *was* violence, much of it involving mobs of nonstrikers. Railroad equipment was destroyed, and six buildings on the grounds of the closed Columbian Exposition were burned to the ground.

Federal authorities broke the strike and arrested Debs and other ARU leaders, charging them with contempt of court for ignoring the injunction and with violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act. (Cooperation among labor unions was interpreted as a conspiracy in restraint of trade.) Debs was quickly convicted, but

his case was appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The argument presented there by his young attorney, Clarence Darrow, was addressed not only to the learned justices (who to no one's surprise upheld the guilty verdict) but also to potential adherents of a radical labor-Populist coalition.

Darrow's argument combined the familiar principles of producerism and equal rights with advanced arguments about the need for class solidarity under the new conditions of large-scale industrialization. Although laborers are theoretically equal to their employers, he said, "the present system of industry," in which thousands of workers are beholden to one employer who controls both capital and technology, makes it imperative for workers to cooperate as a class, regardless of their particular craft or occupation. The immediate point of the argument was to defend the ARU against charges that it had illegally "conspired" with Pullman's workers, but the larger point was an appeal for the "industrial classes" (including farmers) to join in political alliance. Before surrendering to authorities to serve his sentence, Debs urged ARU members to support a broadly based coalition with the People's Party, and from jail he predicted a Populist victory.

The central figure in the effort to forge an electoral alliance of farmers and laborers in Illinois was Henry Demarest Lloyd, a professional reformer of the same generation and background as Henry George and Edward Bellamy. Lloyd is best remembered for his muckraking attacks on big business, most notably the 1894 exposé of Standard Oil, *Wealth Against Commonwealth*. As an editorial writer for the *Chicago Tribune* in the 1870s Lloyd gained a reputation as an ardent antimonopolist. Contact with the Independent Labour Party and the Fabian Society in England gave him a frame of reference for developing his own brand of morally grounded moderate socialism.

Throughout the 1880s Lloyd's spacious home in suburban Winnetka had been a haven for reformers of all stripes: Jane Addams and her fellow social workers from Hull-House, Chicago labor

leaders like Debs and Tommy Morgan, Populists like Donnelly and Weaver, reform-minded social scientists like Richard T. Ely and John R. Commons, and black leaders including Booker T. Washington. Although initially skeptical of the farmer-dominated People's Party and convinced that the Omaha platform did not go far enough, by 1893 Lloyd was seeking to forge a coalition of reformers as broad as his guest list.

Populism had made little headway in Illinois in 1892, but with the onset of the depression the tiny People's Party redoubled its effort. Henry Vincent, of Kansas Populist fame, moved to Chicago and began publishing a Populist newspaper, *The Searchlight*, which joined the ranks of the sizable reform press in the city. Lloyd, Vincent, and their associates began the delicate task of forging an alliance among rural Populists, craft unions of the American Federation of Labor (whose president had no use for Populism), socialist unions (heavily German in membership), Single Taxers (whose leader had no use for socialists), and Bellamyite Nationalists.

The goal was to field unified slates of candidates for legislative and local office in 1894 on the People's Party ticket. Two statewide Populist conferences actually coincided with the Pullman boycott (delegates to the second were stranded in Springfield by the boycott), a circumstance that added a sense of urgency to the enterprise. After once failing to agree on a platform, delegates adopted the Omaha platform and papered over their differences on the socialists' demands for "the collective ownership by the people of all means of production and distribution."

Although downstate farm support for the labor-Populist coalition was always shaky and cooperation between socialists and Single Taxers tenuous, it appeared that the new party might do well in Chicago and Cook County. As the campaign headed into its final weeks, Ignatius Donnelly, Eugene Debs, and other coalition leaders spoke to a massive rally of enthusiastic supporters at the Central Music Hall. A second and climactic rally two weeks later featured Clarence Darrow, Illinois's revered former senator

Lyman Trumbull (a venerable champion of the equal rights tradition), and Henry Demarest Lloyd.

Lloyd spoke, as historian Chester M. Destler put it, "as the chief architect of the labor-Populist alliance." Focusing on the moral imperative of their movement and ranging from Jefferson to the new socialist parties of Britain and Germany in search of analogies for this new movement, Lloyd "sought to define the common meeting ground of the old, antimonopolistic democratic tradition of America with the newer, non-Marxian Socialism of the British Fabians and labor leaders, and of such American writers as Edward Bellamy and Laurence Gronlund." Lloyd appropriated the title of Gronlund's non-Marxian socialist tract *The Cooperative Commonwealth* (1884) to articulate the new vision of America represented by the union of republican farmers and socialist industrial workers. Once in power, Lloyd proclaimed, the People's Party would wipe away the "centralized corporate despotism" of Cleveland's administration and would use the powers of eminent domain and public control over financial policy to usher in the cooperative commonwealth.

But Lloyd's stirring rhetoric could not hold the fragile coalition together. On October 10, Henry George himself spoke in Chicago, and instead of endorsing the coalition as anticipated, he expressed his "indifference or even hostility" to the Populists, whereupon many of the Single Taxers broke ranks. Equally damaging was the opposition of Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor, who warned trade union leaders against becoming embroiled in partisan politics.

In 1892, James B. Weaver had won about 22,000 votes in Illinois, less than 3 percent of the total and fewer than even the Prohibitionist candidate. In 1894, Populist totals in local and statewide elections improved only slightly on Weaver's total, and no Populist actually won office. Even allowing for some of the creative ballot counting for which Cook County was famous, this was not enough to make a serious impression on state politics. What had gone wrong?

To begin with, few farmers had joined the ranks of the People's Party. This has been attributed, variously, to the lack of effective Alliance organizing in the state and to the relative prosperity of Illinois farmers. While both explanations have some merit, it is also likely that most of them had no use for the internecine squabbles of Chicago's socialists and trade unionists and saw no serious prospects of a victory for the fractured People's Party in Illinois. In spite of significant support among members of the ARU, relatively few industrial workers had voted Populist either. For some of them, the *state* Democratic Party, under pro-labor Governor Altgeld, was still a safe haven. But the big winner in Illinois, as elsewhere, was the Republican Party, which reaped the harvest of farmers' and wage earners' disgust with Cleveland's administration. A reform paper's postelection assessment applied equally well to Chicago and to downstate Illinois: "The people turned to the republicans for relief from hard times . . . with a unanimity . . . scarcely ever paralleled in political history."

Lloyd and his associates had believed their labor-Populist coalition could provide the basis for a national coalition of farmers and laborers. In Wisconsin, Minnesota, Missouri, and New York and even Oklahoma Territory there were signs in 1894 that this might actually happen. Oklahoma Populism, shaped largely by the leaders of the movement in neighboring Kansas, was now blessed with two outstanding Populist-labor editors, Leo Vincent, brother of Henry and former editor of *The American Nonconformist*, and Ralph Beaumont, the onetime architect of the Knights of Labor's national political strategy. But the disastrous results in Illinois demonstrated the implausibility of such an alliance. The world had changed since the pre-Haymarket days when grand coalitions of producers were at least imaginable. In the new industrial America, both the new Republicanism and socialism constituted "modern" alternatives for labor, but it was not clear that Populism could play such a role.

"There ought to be two first-class political funerals in this country in 1896," Lloyd had told the cheering throngs at the Central

Music Hall, meaning, of course, the Democratic and Republican parties. Instead, it now appeared, one might well be that of Populism.

Likewise, in the Populist heartland of the Great Plains states and the Mountain West the returns in 1894 gave little comfort to the champions of the new party. Populists were badly beaten everywhere, and Republicans were the big winners. In Kansas, Governor Lewelling and all but one of the Populist congressional candidates went down to defeat, as did Governor Waite in Colorado. In Nevada, where the Silver Party had cooperated with the Populists in 1892, silverites went their own way and swept the state. In Nebraska, William Jennings Bryan, elected to Congress with Democratic and Populist backing, chose not to seek reelection and lost all hope for a Senate seat when Republicans captured the legislature. In Iowa, James B. Weaver lost badly in his bid for Congress.

What happened to western Populism? One explanation is that, unlike 1892, the Populists fielded their own slates of candidates rather than cooperating with the Democrats. But in bellwether states like Kansas, the Republicans would have won even if the Populist votes had been combined with those of the Democrats, who were now saddled with the unpopular Cleveland. As in Illinois and the Midwest, the Republican Party of the Plains states regained its traditional position of dominance by making itself the serious alternative to the party of Cleveland.

Another explanation for the poor showing of western Populists is that in several states they now had a record of their own to defend. It was not an altogether attractive record. To be sure, in no state did the Populists control both houses of the legislature, and much of the Populists' record was interpreted for the voters by a partisan Republican press, but in Kansas, Colorado, and a handful of other states, the highly visible and controversial acts of Populist elected officials in 1893-94 became a liability.

In Colorado, where shrill rhetoric and radical politics were commonplace, many voters were frightened by the Populist gov-

ernor (whose remarks about repeal of the Sherman Act had given him the nickname "Bloody Bridles Waite"), and while his support for striking miners at Cripple Creek won him renewed labor support, it stirred mine owners to redouble their attacks on him. In North Dakota, where Populists had promised that if elected they would establish state-owned terminal elevators, Populist legislators won passage of such a bill, but it was so clumsily drawn that the elevator was never built. A similar Populist plan in Minnesota met with the same fate.

These setbacks paled in comparison with the disasters that befell the Populists in Kansas, where the People's Party had won the governorship, a majority of the state Senate, and enough seats in the House of Representatives to challenge the Republicans for control. With both Republicans and Populists claiming a majority in the House, conditions deteriorated into what the papers quickly labeled a "legislative war." In its early stages the struggle resembled a comic opera (Republicans occupied the legislative chamber in the mornings, Populists in the afternoons), but the situation turned nasty when Republicans forcibly drove the Populists from the hall.

Governor Lewelling ordered the militia to oust the Republicans, but the commander, a loyal Republican, positioned his troops and Gatling guns to support the small army of Republican "deputies" in and around the capitol. Bloodshed was averted through a compromise that left the Republicans in control of the House, but the political damage fell largely upon the Populists, thanks to the Republican press through which most Kansans received their news of the events.

Leaving aside the legislative war, Kansas Populists did not cover themselves with glory. Infighting was intense (including a highly publicized feud between Governor Lewelling and Mary Lease), and the governor's attempts to hold the Populist-Democratic coalition together with the glue of patronage opened the People's Party to charges that it was now no better than the old corrupt parties it had sought to replace.

Intraparty strife was so fierce among Kansas Populists (who had no leaders approaching the statesmanlike stature of Lloyd, Darrow, or Debs in Illinois) that Democratic and Republican editors often simply reprinted their attacks on each other verbatim. James C. Malin, pioneering student of Kansas Populism, noted half a century ago, "No one outside the Populist party said any harsher things about [the] Populist leadership than the Populists themselves."

After the 1894 elections, Kansas Republicans held a mock funeral to mark the death of Populism. Indeed, as historian Peter Argersinger has noted, "Populism in its original form, creative nature, and radical motivation was dead. . . . Populism, as Kansas had known it in the days of its pentecostal fervor to remake society, was no more."

But what of the South? The economic and political events of 1893 seemed to bode well for Dixie Populism. The depression ravaged the cotton belt, afflicting not only farmers but also the tradesmen who handled and marketed the crop. In Alabama and elsewhere, strikes of miners, railroad workers, and dockhands echoed the upheavals of the Midwest and drew similar expressions of solidarity from the Populists.

Meanwhile, the elite leaders of the Democratic Party not only suffered the embarrassment of Cleveland and his policies; they were also faced with explaining why so many southern congressmen and senators had done Cleveland's bidding in the repeal of the Sherman Act, including Speaker of the House Charles Crisp of Georgia. In September 1893, Governor William J. Northen of Georgia, an Alliance Democrat, wrote frantically to the President: "The conditions of this State are fearful and threatening, and are creating a lack of confidence in the party in power. . . . Ex-Congressman Watson, the leader of the Populists, has taken advantage of the conditions, and is speaking over the State to assemblies never less than 2,000, and sometimes as many as 50,000 people."

Across the South, the ranks of the People's Party were swelled

in 1893 and 1894 by angry middle-class Democrats. With little or no understanding of the Omaha platform or of antimonopoly greenbackism, they were simply mad at Cleveland and eager to vote for free silver. In almost every southern state (Texas, the bellwether of greenbackism was an exception), Populists in 1894 concentrated on winning more of these middle-class voters to the cause.

Georgia Populists nominated for governor one such recent convert, Judge James K. Hines of Atlanta. Descended from distinguished Virginia families, Hines was a Harvard-trained lawyer and chairman of the board of trustees of Emory College. For reasons of his own, Hines had endorsed the Ocala platform in 1890, and he was widely considered to be friendly to the agrarian cause. Respected by businessmen and farmers alike, he was the ideal candidate to test the new strategy. (Tom Watson had promoted his candidacy over that of an old-line Alliance leader.) On the campaign trail Hines talked mainly about free silver and the evils of the Cleveland administration, while Watson and others kept alive the tradition of the Omaha platform.

According to the first election returns, Hines appeared to have won a stunning victory, but when the "official" tally was completed he had been counted out by election officials. "We had to do it!" said one Democrat. "Those d— Populists would have ruined the Country." To make matters worse, Watson was again cheated out of his old congressional seat. In Richmond County alone, where 11,240 were registered to vote, 13,740 ballots were cast. Looking beyond the thievery and outright violence of the 1894 elections, Populists in Georgia and elsewhere in the South faced another problem: when Democrats learned how to be for free silver and against Cleveland, who would need to be a Populist?

North Carolina Populists took another road to moderation. There the radical greenback tradition had never been as strong as in Georgia or Texas, and so downplaying certain aspects of the Omaha platform in favor of free silver came rather easily for

leaders like Marion Butler, a youthful lawyer who had left the Democratic Party after the nomination of Cleveland in 1892. Quickly assuming leadership of Tarheel Populists, Butler devised a strategy for attracting middle-class support by cooperating with North Carolina's large Republican Party. The basis of cooperation in North Carolina and elsewhere in the South (similar but less formal measures were adopted that year in Alabama and Georgia) was common hatred of the Democrats and agreement on "a free ballot and a fair count."

The results of fusion in North Carolina were stunning: a Republican and Populist sweep rolled up large majorities in the legislature and sent four Populists and three Republicans to Congress. Governor Elias Carr, another Alliance Democrat, escaped only because he was not up for reelection. The newly installed fusion legislature promptly elected Butler to the U.S. Senate.

In the Byzantine world of fusion politics, Republicans and Populists maintained their own identities at the local level, while agreeing (sometimes) to combine their votes in support of specific candidates. While these arrangements resuscitated black political life in the state between 1895 and 1901, they did not constitute a Populist commitment to racial equality, as Helen G. Edmonds emphatically notes: "Fusion politics was . . . based upon the arithmetic of political bargaining. The Populist movement in North Carolina was not a revolt against 'White Supremacy,' and to think for one moment that the party fused with the Republican party to inaugurate an era of political or social equality for the Negroes . . . is failure to understand the confusion and complexity of the 1890s."

Populists in North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and elsewhere in the South made substantial gains in 1894, in part by trimming their sails on the party's agenda. One can also detect the beginnings of a similar shift in their stance on race. Most southern Populists maintained their support for equal voting rights (although in Alabama they toyed with a proposal for an all-white primary), but to counteract the mounting Democratic attacks they

became more vocal in their denunciation of social equality, claiming, for example, that the hated Cleveland was promoting racial integration. Simultaneously denounced by the Democrats for supposed racial unorthodoxy and crippled by Democratic manipulation of black votes, southern Populists edged away from their commitment to a biracial coalition.

Thus, while it would appear that the People's Party in the South had fared better than elsewhere in 1894, there was a very real question of exactly what Populism had come to mean in the region. In the nation as a whole, Populist votes had increased to almost a million and a half as compared with one million in 1892, but the vitality of the party was waning. In every region but the South, the Republican Party had shown decisively that it, not the People's Party, was the beneficiary of Cleveland's woes.

To be sure, in the aftermath of the 1894 elections Populists did not recognize their party's marginal status or concede national preeminence to the Republicans. Populists spoke bravely of representing two million voters, and they confidently expected their numbers to swell to a majority after the impending collapse of one or both of the major parties. Populists did, however, acknowledge that their party had reached a critical juncture in its struggle for national recognition.

The Populists' dilemma stemmed from a basic fact of politics: the objective of parties and candidates is to win at least 50 percent of the vote. By the time of the Populist crusade there was a diminished opportunity for "minor" parties to influence *national* policy by gaining a foothold in Congress. In contrast to British and European parliaments, Congress by the 1890s had come close to institutionalizing the two-party system by granting enormous powers to the presiding officers and chairmen of the various committees. Populist congressmen were often prohibited even from speaking on the floor, and their chances of actually enacting the planks of the Populist platform were virtually nil.

Even in the South and West, Populism had been able to garner no more than 25 to 45 percent of the vote, and whatever their

other limitations, Populists could count. There seemed only two options, both with serious drawbacks: either fuse with one of the major parties, in hopes of achieving a majority, or go it alone, in hopes that worsening conditions and the intransigence of the major parties would produce a Populist majority.

By 1894, fusion meant agreeing on a platform of the lowest common denominator, and that was free silver. To the core group of true believers—those committed to the Omaha platform and even to more direct support for the cause of labor and to woman suffrage—such an agreement was unacceptable, even though, as they could plainly see, the core had not grown appreciably.

As soon as the 1894 election results were in, national chairman Herman E. Taubeneck announced that the party would concentrate on the "financial question" (silver), to the exclusion of many of the more radical elements of the Omaha platform. Taubeneck went on to decry the attempted "takeover" of the People's Party by socialists in his home state of Illinois, a direct challenge to the labor-Populist coalition that Lloyd had forged in the preceding elections. Taubeneck's appeal (which carried at least the suggestion of fusion with the Democrats) was echoed by James B. Weaver, by Nebraska's Democratic-Populist senator William V. Allen, and by several other prominent western Populists. Howls of outrage erupted from two overlapping but not synonymous groups: southern Populists (most of whom had recently left the Democratic Party, at great personal cost), and the true believers in the Omaha platform (who rehearsed the familiar explanations of silver's inadequacy as the singular focus of reform).

The struggle between fusionists and mid-roaders would continue throughout the brief and unhappy time remaining to the People's Party, but that internal conflict must be understood in relation to the growth of the free-silver cause in the larger public arena. Although the silver campaign of the 1890s was grounded in the inflationist ideology of an earlier day, it gained focus and power through several well-orchestrated initiatives after the repeal of the Sherman Act.

One such initiative was a well-organized and well-financed lobbying effort on behalf of western silver-mining interests. The American Bimetallic League was the centerpiece of that effort. Through the League, silver interests quietly funded prosilver newspapers, conferences, speaker bureaus, and a public relations office headed by one William H. Harvey. "Coin Harvey" churned out silver tracts in 1894. One, called *A Tale of Two Nations*, depicted in barely fictional form a plot by British bankers with Jewish names to destroy the United States by demonetizing its silver. In another, entitled *Coin's Financial School*, the young Professor Coin confounds the goldbugs by demonstrating, in a series of dazzling lectures, the unassailable logic of free silver and the conspiracy behind the gold standard.

*Coin's Financial School* was an immediate hit, becoming by 1895 the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the silver movement. Harvey's tracts on silver were far more simplistic than the Populist platform, which located free silver within a larger critique of industrial capitalism. But his writings touched a nerve, much like the sensationalist literature of a century later that purports to explain the economic decline of the United States by depicting a Japanese conspiracy. Many Americans, especially in the debt-ridden regions of the rural South and West, were prepared to accept not only the economics of silver but also the conspiratorial underpinnings of the silver campaign.

A second free-silver initiative, not unrelated to the efforts of the American Bimetallic League and its star publicist, was the building up of the silver wing of the Democratic Party. Southern Democrats fleeing the political fallout of Cleveland's unpopularity had championed the cause of silver, often as a way of appeasing the rising Populist forces in their states. Silver was, of course, popular in the Mountain West and increasingly so among Democrats of the Middle Border. Veteran silverites like Richard P. Bland now found themselves sharing the stage with younger converts like William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska.

As late as 1892 Bryan was quoted as saying, "I don't know

anything about free silver. The people of Nebraska are for free silver and I am for free silver. I will look up the arguments later." By 1893 Bryan had looked up the arguments, and by 1894 he was crisscrossing the South and West, speaking for the silver cause and polishing the phrases that would bring more converts to the fold. One that he used often and with great effect was: "I will not help to crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

In 1895 Bryan took part in a giant conference of the Bimetallic League in Memphis, which, though nominally nonpartisan, was managed by Democrats, for the purposes of strengthening the silver wing of the party and of bringing Populists into the silver campaign. The southern participants in the Memphis conference represented a Who's Who of the Democratic establishment in Dixie, the very people whom southern Populists had renounced when they joined the People's Party. The one Populist conspicuously present was Marion Butler of North Carolina.

It was clear to Senator Peffer and other opponents of fusion that Bryan and the silver Democrats had no intention of forsaking their own party to form a new one based on currency reform, and they were cautious about getting too close to them. When the Fifty-fourth Congress convened late in 1895 the six Populist senators held the balance of power between Democrats and Republicans in the upper chamber. Rather than acquiesce in the Democrats' appeals to join them, Peffer and his colleagues refused to vote with either party, thus allowing the Republicans to organize the Senate.

Despite a good deal of maneuvering by fusionist Populists, silver Democrats, and a handful of silver Republicans, it is clear that Peffer and the mid-roaders had it right. The Democrats' idea of fusion, as Tom Watson later put it, is that "we play Jonah while they play whale."

It was against the backdrop of the American Bimetallic League's sophisticated public relations campaign and the growing strength of the silver Democrats that the Populist leadership made a fateful decision. In January 1896, at the urging of Bryan

himself, Taubeneck and Weaver persuaded the Populist National Committee to postpone their nominating convention until after the Republicans and Democrats had met. The idea was that if both nominated opponents of free silver, then the People's Party would reap a windfall of silver support. In the unlikely event that one of them should nominate a silverite, Populists could join in a union campaign on the silver issue. Despite strong protest from mid-roaders, the schedule held. Populists would meet in St. Louis on July 22, after the two major parties had settled on their candidates.

The Republicans behaved as expected, nominating former congressman William McKinley of Ohio. More flexible on issues that mattered deeply to farmers and laborers than most Republican leaders, and certainly more so than Cleveland, McKinley was nevertheless identified with the gold standard. The GOP had followed the script.

The Democrats did not. During the spring and early summer, state Democratic conventions in the South and West committed themselves to the cause of silver and to the defeat of a sitting President. The delegates who gathered in Chicago for the Democratic National Convention ended Cleveland's hopes of renomination by adopting a platform that embraced free silver and rejected most of Cleveland's other policies as well.

The presidential nomination was very much in doubt when the platform was presented. Ben Tillman of South Carolina spoke first, and immediately dashed his own hopes of being nominated. In a rambling speech that mixed free silver with southern vituperation and virulent racism, Tillman managed to offend many of the delegates. William Jennings Bryan followed with a speech that electrified the delegates and helped win him the nomination. It was a recapitulation of the stump speech he had been delivering across the South and West for the past eighteen months, and it ended with this now famous peroration: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns." (Bryan's fingers traced imaginary trickles of blood from his own temples.) "You

shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." (He stood silent, arms outstretched.) The speech alone did not win him the nomination, but it certainly helped, and it identified him as an orator to be reckoned with.

McKinley and his managers were surprised by Bryan's nomination and adjusted their campaign plans to deal with a formidable foe. The Populists were dumbfounded by it and found themselves in an impossible situation. "If we fuse," Lloyd lamented, "we are sunk. If we don't fuse, all the silver men we have will leave us for the more powerful Democrats." The Populist delegates who convened in St. Louis were deeply divided, and the events of the convention would drive even greater wedges between them.

Probably a majority of the delegates came to St. Louis ready to nominate Bryan. They included many Westerners and a substantial number of eastern delegates (the East was overrepresented at the convention, on the basis of Populist strength in the states). A sizable and vociferous minority opposed fusion with the Democrats. They included most of the Southerners, a significant number of western mid-roaders, and a handful of labor delegates and socialists. The fusionists demonstrated their strength by electing as convention chairman Senator Allen of Nebraska, a "Demo-populist," as Peffer called him, and a well-known Bryan supporter.

The mid-roaders showed their own resilience by beating back an attempt to dilute the platform. Instead, the document adopted in St. Louis retained almost all the planks of the Omaha platform (the subtreasury and land-loan programs were not mentioned by name) and added an endorsement of a public works program for the unemployed and a denunciation of "the wholesale system of disfranchisement adopted in some states" (Tillman's South Carolina had already adopted such a system), coupled with an appeal for the states to "secure a full, free and fair ballot and an honest count." Mid-roaders further demonstrated their strength by forcing the convention to vote first on the vice presidential nominee and rejecting Bryan's Democratic running mate, Arthur Sewell,

a banker from Maine, in favor of Tom Watson, who accepted in the mistaken belief that Sewell would be withdrawn from the Democratic ticket.

The vote on the presidential nominee was another matter. Once Debs and Peffer had declined invitations to be nominated, the mid-roaders had no major figure of their own with which to counter the Bryan bandwagon; all they had was their insistence that fusion with the Democrats meant the death of the People's Party. They settled upon S. F. Norton, a little-known green-backer and Populist editor from Chicago.

Amid shouted questions to the chair as to whether Bryan would accept the Populists' nomination without Sewell on the ticket (the morning papers reported that he would not), General Weaver rose to place Bryan's name before the convention. At the close of his speech a parade of Bryan supporters snaked its way around the hall. Mid-road delegates began to coalesce around the large Texas delegation. As the demonstration made its way past their stronghold, a Bryan supporter tried to seize the Texas banner, whereupon a fight broke out among the delegates, and according to one account revolvers were drawn. The party was literally coming apart on the floor of the convention. Once order was restored Bryan easily received the nomination (the vote was 1,042 to 321), but it was a gesture that would probably do him more harm than good in the election.

Small wonder that Bryan managed to avoid acknowledging his nomination on the People's Party ticket. The Democratic national chairman bluntly stated that Sewell would stay on the ticket and that the Populists "could go with the Negroes, where they belong."

It fell to North Carolina's young senator, Marion Butler, to "manage" the Populists' national campaign, Butler having been selected to replace Taubeneck as party chairman. An architect of Populist-Republican fusion in North Carolina and champion of national fusion with the Democrats, Butler at least knew what he was trying to do, but the implausibility of the situation became

clearer as fusion arrangements were hammered out state by state. In some states Democrats and Populists actually divided the presidential electors, leaving open the possibility that Bryan could be elected but his running mate defeated. In Kansas and Colorado, Populists agreed not to challenge the Bryan-Sewell ticket, in return for Democratic support of their state candidates. Watson's name was not even on the ballot in his home state of Georgia!

In several southern states Populists were supposedly fusing with Democrats at the national level and with Republicans for state offices. In the Midwest, where fusion was more widely accepted, the Populist-Democratic alliance was not quite so traumatic, though veterans like Senator Peffer could not bring themselves to endorse it. In Illinois, even the residue of the ill-fated labor-Populist coalition stayed with Bryan, including Eugene Debs, who would announce his conversion to socialism two months after the election. Whatever one can make of the (con)fusion of the Populists in 1896, it was a far cry from the Politics of Pentecost.

And it was also a sideshow. Taking little notice of the Populists, McKinley and Bryan battled it out in a closely contested race in which both men identified the band of industrial states from Ohio to Wisconsin as the ground upon which the election would be won or lost. McKinley's well-organized and lavishly financed campaign triumphed over Bryan, who traveled 80,000 miles and made 600 speeches. In the end, Bryan could not convince urbanites and industrial workers that he understood their concerns, while McKinley successfully presented himself as the "Advance Agent of Prosperity."

In retrospect, the presidential election of 1896 marked the beginning of a Republican ascendancy in national politics that would continue until the 1930s. But in the short run, the elections of 1896 provided for a curious wave of Populist successes and near-successes at the state level. In Kansas and Colorado, Populists traded their party's vice presidential nominee for fusion victories in state and congressional races. Similarly, fusion can-

didates prevailed in Nebraska, South Dakota, Montana, Idaho, and Washington. In Georgia, Alabama, and Texas, Populist-Republican tickets got over 40 percent of the vote, despite massive fraud and considerable violence. In North Carolina, Republicans and Populists made a clean sweep of the elections. Nationwide, fusion in congressional races actually gave Populism—of sorts—its greatest representation in Washington, with a total of seven senators and thirty congressmen who were either Populists, fusionists, or Silver Party members.

But these gains were illusory. Most of the fusion victories lasted only one term. While local pockets of Populism might hold out for another year or two, and in some cases until the end of the century, the party was moribund. In 1898 an agreement between fusionists and mid-roaders collapsed, with disastrous results at the polls. A corporal's guard of Populists renominated Bryan for President in 1900, and in 1904 and again in 1908 Tom Watson was chosen as the standard bearer, winning, in that last year, only 28,000 votes.

By then virtually all of those who had once dreamed of the cooperative commonwealth had drifted to other parties or out of politics. In the West, many found their way back into the Republican Party, although a vigorous socialist tradition sprang up from Populist roots in states from North Dakota to Texas. (In 1912, the high point of the Socialist Party, the largest socialist organization was to be found in Oklahoma.) In the South, while a few Populists stuck with the Republicans, most either returned to the party of their fathers or dropped out of politics, sometimes the victims of the very disfranchising laws that their national convention had abhorred in 1896.

The role of Populists and former Populists in the disfranchisement of southern blacks is still a matter of debate among scholars. While conservative Democrats took the leading role in the systematic exclusion of blacks from the voting process around the turn of the century, it is clear that Populists were sometimes involved. The difficulty of sorting out how and why this happened

is illustrated by the experience of two nearly contiguous counties in Texas, each of which had a strong Populist organization and a substantial black population. In Grimes County, a biracial Populist coalition survived the collapse of the national party and was rooted out only by the superior firepower of the local Democratic militia. In nearby Milam County, to which Charles Macune had returned after falling from grace in the farmers' movement, Populists decided by 1898 to join with Democrats in establishing an all-white primary. Barely a dozen years after Macune had joined the Farmers' Alliance in Milam County and had gone from there to help fashion American Populism, the movement was dead.

At a crucial point in *Intruder in the Dust*, William Faulkner has one of young Chick Mallison's uncles explain to the Mississippi teenager:

For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence . . . and Pickett himself . . . looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet. . . . [T]hat moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think "*This time. Maybe this time* with all this much to lose and all this much to gain."

For many of us who write about Populism there is a special version of this dream. It's always 1896, or 1892, or 1886. With the success of Populism hanging in the balance, as the cause of the Confederacy did on the eve of Pickett's charge at Gettysburg, we can think, whenever we want: "This time, maybe this time." Could things have turned out differently for the People's Party? And if so, could Populism have altered the direction of American politics?

Some who have studied the movement would answer no to both questions. For Richard Hofstadter and those who viewed Populism as an expression of status anxiety, the natural progression of Populism is toward George Wallace and even David Duke, not toward a sustained critique of industrial capitalism and the liberal welfare state. For some who have examined the crusade of the 1880s and 1890s with one eye on social movements of the late twentieth century that were co-opted by the powers that be, Populism was doomed by an "iron law of oligarchy" to be manipulated and destroyed by leaders who had no common interest with the farmers and working people who believed in the cooperative commonwealth.

Some of the scholars who believe that Populism could have changed the shape of twentieth-century America are at pains to describe the conditions under which the People's Party could have succeeded at the ballot box. For Lawrence Goodwyn, if only the Farmers' Alliance had more thoroughly organized rural America and introduced it to the cooperative ideal, and if genuine Populism had not been undercut by the "shadow movement" of free silver, things could have been different in 1896. For Gene Clanton, if the Republicans had won the presidency in 1892 and were thereby saddled with the liabilities that befell Cleveland and his party when the depression hit, then perhaps the Populists would have had a better shot at national prominence.

Could the Populists' political crusade have turned out differently? The odds of success, it seems to me, were lower than Pickett's. The organizational base of the movement was limited to regions that could not, in themselves, carry a presidential election: the South, the Great Plains, and the Far West. The industrializing states that Bryan and McKinley contested so vigorously in 1896, and upon which hinged one of the great shifts in American politics, were beyond the reach of the People's Party.

Not only was Populism regionally isolated; it was also caught in a cross fire between Democrats and Republicans at a time when the two-party system was being institutionalized. A young

Woodrow Wilson had already documented this crystallization in Congress, and even as the Populist movement spent its fleeting moment on the political stage, election laws were being reshaped in the states in such a way as to make insurgencies far more difficult to mount. At the state level, "wars of maneuver" in which Populists operated between the lines of the two major parties could sustain viable movements for a time, but even there Populists were always at risk of being "counted out" by the party strong enough to control the electoral process.

Furthermore, the very organizational network that allowed Populism to sweep across the rural South and West in 1890-92 did not long survive the birth of the People's Party. The precipitous decline of the Alliance and before that the fall of the Knights of Labor stripped the new party of the protected space within which rural and working-class Americans could congregate and, in the sharing of ritual and ideology and cooperative action, imagine an alternative world.

Finally, and in a related vein, Populism was sustainable only so long as it was perceived to be above the common traffic in partisan bickering and dealmaking that permeated Gilded Age politics. Having identified itself as a Pentecost of Politics, it had no language with which to articulate a sense of itself in the brokered world of partisanship.

If the Populist crusade could not itself survive the tumultuous 1890s, what was its legacy? Early students of the People's Party, most notably John D. Hicks, saw a continuity between Populism and the two great currents of twentieth-century liberalism—progressivism and the New Deal. Populism was, in this telling of the story, the seedbed of liberal reform. We can certainly find among the platforms and resolutions of the People's Party specific ideas that were later enacted into law. But the progressives and New Dealers accommodated themselves to the new corporate order in ways that true believers in the Omaha platform would have had difficulty accepting. Theirs was a movement of producers, rooted in the political and cultural values of the nine-

teenth century. Theirs was a vision of democratic capitalism that did not, in the end, fit well with the political and bureaucratic structures that accompanied industrial capitalism.

One hundred years after the birth of the People's Party, conservative columnist George F. Will took note of a clamorous field of Democratic presidential hopefuls—including one senator from Weaver's home state of Iowa and another from Bryan's Nebraska, along with a governor from Isaac McCracken's Arkansas—and blasted them for appropriating the old name. Entitling his essay "A Pox on Populists," Will anointed George C. Wallace of Alabama as "the most successful populist of this half century."

It is as much a critique of twentieth-century liberalism as of Populism itself that a century after the movement flourished, its name is more readily associated with those who view the liberal welfare state as an irritating repository of "special privilege" than as a bulwark of "equal rights," specifically with a tradition of "conservative" Populism stretching from Wallace and Barry Goldwater to Ronald Reagan and David Duke, a tradition that has gained force during the economic upheavals of the past two decades. To be sure, as with the American Bimetallic League's campaign of 1894–96, this new conservative Populism has been well financed and has addressed only selectively the anger that people feel, but its strength and persistence tell us something about the distance between Populism and liberalism.

Does conservative Populism represent the sum of the movement's legacy? The evidence suggests that it does not. Most studies of the last quarter century have depicted American Populism as a movement that advanced a serious critique of monopolism and offered alternative visions of democratic capitalism. Populism represented "the humane preference" in American politics (Gene Clanton), a search for "the just polity" (Norman Pollock), or America's "democratic promise" (Lawrence Goodwyn).

Neither proto-fascists nor proto-New Dealers, the Populists fashioned a powerful movement out of the cultures of nineteenth-century reform and out of their own shared experiences. In the

end they failed to bend the forces of technology and capitalism toward humane ends, and many of them shared with other Americans of their time a myopic view of equal rights, one still distorted by racism and sexism. But for all their failures and limitations, the Populists fashioned a space within which Americans could begin to imagine alternative futures shaped by the promise of equal rights. Theirs is a legacy waiting to be fulfilled.