

Nebraska Law Review

Volume 86 | Issue 1

Article 6

1-2007

Bryan in History: Liberal, Celebrity, Social Gospeler

Michael Kazin
Georgetown University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nlr>

Recommended Citation

Michael Kazin, *Bryan in History: Liberal, Celebrity, Social Gospeler*, 86 Neb. L. Rev. (2007)
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nlr/vol86/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law, College of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Nebraska Law Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Michael Kazin*

Bryan in History: Liberal, Celebrity, Social Gospeler

Sometimes, a great speech can obscure the larger significance of the man who makes it. On the afternoon of July 9, 1896, William Jennings Bryan stepped up to the podium at the Democratic convention in Chicago and secured his spot in the headlines of history.

'Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere,' he declared, before raising his hands to his temples and stretching his fingers out along his forehead for the penultimate phrase, '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, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.'

As he spoke the final words, Bryan stunned the crowd with an inspired gesture of melodrama. He stepped back from the podium, pulled his hands away from his brow, and extended them straight out from his body—and held the Christlike pose for perhaps five seconds.¹

The speech thrilled the huge crowd packed into the sweltering Chicago Coliseum and helped convince the delegates to award him the presidential nomination. Yet, it was not enough to lift the 36-year-old former congressman from Nebraska into the White House against William McKinley, the well-financed candidate of the GOP. In 1900 and 1908, the Democrats again nominated Bryan for the presidency. He did not come close to victory on either occasion. Republicans dominated the big industrial states which made for a sturdy majority in the Electoral College. The Cross of Gold speech thus looms in popular memory as the high-point of Bryan's political life.

But that oratorical triumph was just the overture to a long and influential career in both national politics and American culture. Bryan helped change U.S. society in three significant ways. First, he was a progressive reformer, the pivotal figure in transforming the Democrats from the more conservative of the two major parties into the more liberal one—particularly on using federal power to (1) aid

© Copyright held by the NEBRASKA LAW REVIEW.

* Michael Kazin is a professor of history at Georgetown University. This article is adapted, in part, from his book, *A GODLY HERO: THE LIFE OF WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN* (2006).

1. MICHAEL KAZIN, *A GODLY HERO: THE LIFE OF WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN* 61 (2006).

small farmers and wage-earners and (2) to strictly regulate large corporations.

Second, Bryan was a celebrity politician and a new type of campaigner. He was the first major-party presidential nominee to travel around the country throughout the whole campaign. Further, he kept speaking for the next thirty years before huge audiences at every possible venue and in nations around the world. This oratorical career made Bryan a small fortune and won him the admiration, as well as the love, of millions of Americans.

Finally, Bryan was a grassroots exponent of the Social Gospel. In and out of election campaigns, he preached that progressive politics and altruistic religion should complement one another. For Bryan, the only true Christianity was what he called "applied Christianity," which meant using one's faith in Jesus and in Scripture to denounce the big industrialists and financiers he believed were exploiting the meek. It did not matter to him whether an individual magnate was himself a pious Christian. Commenting on John D. Rockefeller, a devout Baptist who helped finance the building of churches, Bryan wrote, "It is not necessary that all Christian people shall sanction the Rockefeller method of making money merely because Rockefeller prays."² Bryan's faith also led him to hate war, and he spoke frequently under the auspices of the peace movement.

Bryan was a national leader of his party until his death in 1925—long after he had stopped running for president. In critical ways, Woodrow Wilson, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Bill Clinton all stood on the shoulders of this three-time loser with the resonant voice and inspirational stagecraft.

Before the rise of Bryan, leading Democrats preached the kind of liberalism that today would be called "libertarian." From Andrew Jackson to Grover Cleveland, party bigwigs cherished states' rights, favored severe limits on taxes and federal spending, and opposed moral crusades such as the redistribution of wealth and the prohibition of the liquor business. For instance, William Collins Whitney was a leading Democrat during the Gilded Age. A wealthy New York lawyer and street-railway magnate, Whitney owned vast forests and prized race-horses, and he traveled to the 1896 convention in a private rail car stocked with gourmet food and wine. Whitney had spent lavishly to lift Grover Cleveland, an apostle of the old liberalism, into the White House. Then, during his second term in office, President Cleveland, confronted by the worst depression in U.S. history, rebuffed the demands of small farmers for debt relief and of unemployed workers for temporary jobs. Echoing party tradition, he intoned, "Though the

2. *Id.* at 125.

people support the government; the government should not support the people."³

Bryan departed sharply from that credo in one of the less celebrated passages in his Cross of Gold speech. He declared,

There are two ideas of government . . . There are those who believe that if you just 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 that rests upon them.⁴

Bryan backed up that bottom-up vision with a flurry of proposals for economic reform and persuaded his fellow partisans to endorse them. Under his guidance, the Democratic platform called for jailing businessmen who violated anti-trust laws, supported measures to limit working hours and set minimum wages, promoted crop subsidies for farmers, championed federal protection for union organizers, and urged passage of a progressive income tax (which they intended to impose only on the wealthy). Until World War I, Bryan's loyalists in the South and West composed the largest faction in his party.

The big issue of the 1896 election—whether to adhere to the gold standard or inflate the currency by basing it on both gold and silver—soon faded from prominence. But the idea that the federal government should routinely intervene on the side of wage earners and other citizens of modest means grew in popularity. "The power of the government to protect the people is as complete in time of peace as in time of war," Bryan later declared.⁵ "The only question to be decided is whether it is necessary to exercise that power."⁶

Not surprisingly, conservatives in Bryan's party tried to reverse what he had done. In 1904, Cleveland's disciples wrested control of the Democratic convention and nominated Alton Parker for President. Parker was a respected New York judge, and he was one of their own. But that fall—when the colorless Parker had to run against Theodore Roosevelt—the magnetic incumbent, Parker suffered a crushing defeat. Indeed, he won fewer states and more than a million fewer popular votes than Bryan had in either 1896 or 1900. The old breed would never control the party again.

In 1908, when chastened Democrats again turned to Bryan, he coupled his support for a limited welfare state with support from a new constituency: organized labor. Increasingly, federal judges, most of whom were appointed by Republicans, had been cracking down on strikes and boycotts. Samuel Gompers, longtime chieftain of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), promised the Democrats that

3. *Id.* at 37-38.

4. *Id.* at 65.

5. *Id.* at 268.

6. *Id.*

they would have the firm support of two million union members if the party would seek to reverse the hostile actions of unelected men in black robes. Bryan, no fan of judicial power, was glad to oblige. However, the AFL was too poor, and Gomper's leadership was too weak to deliver the bloc vote he promised. But, the bond forged that year between union leaders and liberal Democrats has endured, with few pauses, into the postindustrial age.

Bryan's party did not accept all his ideas for reform. In his zeal, he advocated several causes that sounded radical in his era and remain controversial in ours. He wanted, for example, to repeal most laws that treated women differently than men. In particular, Bryan—whose wife Mary was a vocal suffragist—called for punishing the male clients of prostitutes as harshly as the women they patronized.

Angered by the Teapot Dome scandal,⁷ he urged a complete ban on private donations to political campaigns. "Big contributions from those who are seeking Government favors," Bryan warned in 1924, "are a menace to honest government."⁸ His alternative was public financing—10 cents for each vote an established party received in the last federal election and the same amount for each certified member of a new party. "This would . . . prevent the obligating of parties or candidates to the predatory interests," Bryan predicted.⁹ Contemporary party leaders might not endorse his particular plan, but many voters would certainly applaud his desire to get the big money out of politics altogether.

In one significant way, Bryan remained a Democrat mired in the past. His zeal for reform didn't extend across the color line. As leader of a party anchored in the "Solid South," Bryan never denounced the cruel system of Jim Crow. Neither did he protest when Democrats from Dixie enacted state laws to steal the vote away from black citizens. During his 1908 campaign, Bryan rebuffed an overture of support from W.E.B. DuBois, fearing it would anger and splinter his base. His racist position, one echoed by most white Democrats until the late 1930s, damaged his liberal image and crippled his soul. It also left intact the gulf of mistrust between his white followers and black evangelicals—groups that would only rarely be found in the same organizations in the decades to come.

7. An issue in the 1924 Presidential election, the Teapot Dome scandal concerned Senator Albert Fall, President Warren Harding's Secretary of the Interior, accepting bribes from major oil companies to lease oil fields to them which were designated as reserves for the United States Navy. For a full analysis, see J. Leonard Bates, *The Teapot Dome Scandal and the Election of 1924*, 60 AM. HIST. REV. 303 (1955).

8. Michael Kazin, *The Forgotten Forerunner*, WILSON Q., Autumn 1999 at 24, 27.

9. KAZIN, A GODLY HERO, *supra* note 1, at 268.

During the Great Depression, however, Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) and the Democrats who controlled Congress seized a splendid opportunity to enact bottom-up measures that Bryan would have cheered. With such programs as Social Security, the Wagner Act, and the Fair Labor Standards Act, they dethroned the GOP as the majority party. After losing the White House, Herbert Hoover snapped that the New Deal was "Bryanism under new words and methods," proving that bitterness need not impair one's historical judgment.¹⁰

On going to war—the most important decision a politician can make—Bryan left far less of a legacy. He regarded war as a pointless, brutal exercise that rational men and women should and could avoid. In his 1900 campaign, Bryan spoke out eloquently against the U.S. war to conquer the Philippines and received support from William James and other prominent anti-imperialists. After being appointed Secretary of State by Woodrow Wilson in 1913, Bryan rushed to sign bilateral peace treaties with thirty nations—none of whom posed a threat to attack the United States.

Both Wilson and FDR, the Democrats' two great wartime presidents, considered Bryan's near-pacifism to be foolishly quixotic. Not long after World War I began in Europe, Wilson and his Secretary of State clashed bitterly over the nation's apparent drift towards intervention. In the spring of 1915, after a German U-Boat sank the *Lusitania*, killing hundreds of American passengers, Bryan refused to sign an angry note to the Kaiser's government. He then resigned his office. No Secretary of State had left the cabinet on a matter of principle before.

FDR was then a young assistant secretary of the Navy, and he sided emphatically with Wilson. Later, as president, Roosevelt led the nation into a larger and far bloodier struggle to save the world for democracy. After Roosevelt's death, Harry S. Truman continued the liberal mission by containing the USSR in Europe and waging the conflict in Korea.

But, the debacle in Vietnam during the late 1960s persuaded most liberal Democrats to reject that legacy of aggressive idealism. Without realizing it, they began to echo Bryan's hatred of "imperialism" and mistrust of the military establishment. In 1900, Bryan had warned that the war in the Philippines would encourage future "wars of conquest" and "turn the thoughts of our young men from the arts of peace to the science of war."¹¹ "The question is not what we can do," to Americanize the world, "but what we *ought* to do. This nation can do whatever it desires to do, but it must accept responsibility for what it

10. *Id.* at xix.

11. *Id.* at 103.

does.”¹² Neither George McGovern in 1972 nor John Kerry in 2004 said it as well.

Bryan was not simply a pioneer of liberal policy and rhetoric. He also showed his fellow Democrats—and, later, their rivals—how to run a new type of presidential campaign, one in which personality and personal organization reigned supreme. Before the contest of 1896, it was thought unseemly for a nominee to crisscross the nation, proclaiming his ideas and burnishing his reputation. With George Washington as their model, civic moralists in the 19th century insisted that “the office should seek the man” and considered major-party nominees who stumped for votes to be demagogic panderers. Two men who violated the canon—Horace Greeley in 1872 and James G. Blaine in 1884—were branded as desperate figures, and both were defeated. Third-party candidates felt less restraint, since their main reason for running was to promote an alternative agenda.

But in 1896, the Republican Party organized the most sophisticated and expensive campaign to that point in U.S. history. The GOP distributed pamphlets in nine European languages; distributed millions of American flags and flag buttons (and organized hundreds of marches to display them); and hired cameramen to film McKinley strolling and chatting in front of his front porch in Canton, Ohio. Campaign impresario Mark Hanna raised at least \$3.5 million to pay for it all. Much of the war-chest came from leading manufacturers; John D. Rockefeller alone donated \$250,000 of his profits from Standard Oil.

The Democrats’ campaign treasury that year roughly equaled what the oil tycoon spent on McKinley all by himself. So, Bryan was forced to turn necessity into a virtue. He organized a speaking tour of the nation by rail which lasted, save a few days of rest, from the first week of August until the eve of Election Day. His journalistic entourage calculated the miles he traveled—just over 18,000—and tried to count the number of speeches he gave. He made approximately 250 scheduled stops in twenty-six states, averaged about 80,000 words a day, and spoke to as many as five million people.

Bryan acknowledged that “it might be more dignified for [him] to stay at home and have people come to see [him];” however, he argued that the people did “not have money to spare . . . [I]f they could come all the way to Nebraska to see [him], it might show that they have money enough now.”¹³ Moreover, while Bryan focused on promoting himself, Theodore Roosevelt quipped that Mark Hanna “advertised McKinley as if he were a patent medicine.”¹⁴

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.* at 68.

14. *Id.* at 94. Patent medicines were drugs of dubious value that were marketed with exaggerated claims.

Despite his loss in 1896—and perhaps because of it—the once-and-future candidate rapidly became a cross between a celebrity and a folk hero. *The First Battle*, a digest of campaign reports and speeches he and Mary assembled, became a best-seller. Bryan received bushels of adulatory mail, and thousands of supporters named their baby sons after him. An 1899 article in the *Denver Post* described the first day that the Bryans spent in Denver, first informing the reader of Bryan's "deep-voiced but gentle" laughter over breakfast and next describing how good it was "to just sit there and look at him and note his grand virility, his turns of the head that showed the pillar-like neck that upbore the magnificent head . . . a modest, unaffected man who caressed his leg and talked and acted like anybody else."¹⁵

Bryan was not the first American politician to adopt a populist style. But for millions of Americans, he made a stirring contrast with the stiff figures of Cleveland and McKinley, with their unsmiling recititude and distaste for public speaking. Bryan honed his common-man persona to perfection and showed his party how to combine it with anti-elitist politics. In 1925, Will Rogers eulogized: "Bryan was just a plain citizen, holding no office. Yet this country holds hundreds and thousands of people who feel they haven't got a Soul now who will conscientiously fight for them, the plain people."¹⁶

An innovative personal organization built on and simultaneously strengthened that image. Bryan's brother Charles sifted through the mountain of letters his older sibling received and created a huge card file of admirers. Charles jotted down every bit of information he could find about a correspondent: party affiliation, job, religion, and even income. He updated the file constantly and used it to send out regular mailings to the Bryan network. The index grew to some half-a-million names by 1912. In addition, the Bryan brothers edited a weekly newspaper, *The Commoner*, whose circulation of over 100,000 rivaled that of any other political organ at the time. All this represented, in embryo, the type of candidate-centered machine that would become routine by the last decades of the 20th century.

Following Bryan's 1896 campaign, major-party candidates learned to engage in the same kind of aggressively affable, go-to-the-people campaign—to demonstrate that theirs was the cause of the common American. Theodore Roosevelt was the first Republican to do so. In 1900, as a candidate for vice-president, he made a point of besting Bryan's mileage total from the previous contest. Later, as chief executive, Roosevelt continued in the same fashion, becoming the first president who routinely traveled around the country to speak to the public. His great popularity as a "rhetorical president" was built on

15. *Id.* at 94.

16. *Id.* at 299.

the same friendly but vigorously anticorporate image Bryan had pioneered.

But, in content as well as style, Democratic nominees were the Great Commoner's most consistent disciples. From Al Smith in 1928 to John Kerry in 2004, every Democratic nominee, with the exception of the diffident Adlai Stevenson in the 1950s, has tried his hand at playing the happy populist warrior by cracking jokes, beaming for the cameras, and flailing the privileged before audiences of the insecure. Even after its party's candidates stopped bashing "economic royalists," Democrats tried their best to appear friendly, optimistic, and down-to-earth. The ubiquity of the ever accessible, loquacious approach reassures ordinary citizens and mobilizes partisan ones.

As the federal government grew in size and complexity over the past century, Americans increasingly hankered for leaders who could make the enterprise of governing seem more personal and comprehensible. The electorate thus struck an implicit bargain with the political class: if we can no longer understand or control much of what you do, at least give us men, and perhaps women, at the top who can comfort us and, on occasion, provide a thrill. Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and Bill Clinton were the Democratic masters of this Bryanesque style. But Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush also learned their lessons well.

There is one major element of Bryan's politics and public manner that, since his death, most liberals have not adopted: his evangelical Protestantism. Throughout his career, Bryan was as much preacher as politician. He routinely drew on Christian verities and quoted the King James Bible to justify his worldly stands. For Bryan, the theory of evolution was no more than *social* Darwinism, a hateful, "merciless law by which the strong crowd out and kill off the weak."¹⁷ He called on his listeners to practice the Golden Rule if they sincerely wanted to banish war and economic exploitation from the earth. He believed that Christians should read the Scriptures as a political document, "learning that to follow in the footsteps of the Master we must go about doing good."¹⁸

It was in this spirit that Bryan decided, in 1925, to help prosecute John Scopes for teaching evolution to his students in Dayton, Tennessee. The politician had never made a religious matter into a public issue before. But, World War I had shredded the Christian ideal of peaceful progress and brotherhood, giving materialist doctrines like Darwinism the benefit of the doubt when it came to explaining why mass violence intensified and inequality endured. The disciples of Darwin, charged Bryan, had "plunged the world into the worst of

17. *Id.* at 140.

18. *Id.*

wars, and [are] dividing society into classes that fight each other on a brute basis.”¹⁹ He believed that a “Christian counter-offensive was needed to save the coming generation.”²⁰ However, Bryan stumbled famously under Clarence Darrow’s cross-examination and died five days after the Scopes trial ended.

By that time, most liberal intellectuals viewed Bryan as an intolerant scourge of learning and scientific truth. The young American Civil Liberties Union had financed Darrow and his associates on the Scopes defense team. It didn’t help Bryan’s image among liberals that he crusaded for prohibition and refused to purge members of the Ku Klux Klan from Democratic ranks—even though he did denounce their religious and racial bigotry. When big-city liberals rose to national power with FDR, they spurned Bryan’s Bible-thumping populism as a remnant of an era of white Protestant supremacy that should have passed. Some quoted H.L. Mencken who, in a famous post-mortem, wrote that Bryan was “deluded by a childish theology [and] was a peasant come home to the barnyard.”²¹

Such secular self-confidence is difficult for liberals to sustain today. After several decades in retreat, white evangelicals re-entered politics in the 1970s and recruited millions of new churchgoers, who gradually became pillars of the Republican Party. Like Bryan, they preach that only a Christian nation can be a truly moral one; many urge biology teachers to teach creationism alongside Darwinism in public schools.

Yet, few members of the religious right would echo those elements of Bryan’s Social Gospel which went beyond attacks on amoral science and personal immorality. He was, after all, a stern critic of armed intervention abroad. He once asked: “If true Christianity consists in carrying out in our daily lives the teachings of Christ, who will say that we are commanded to civilize with dynamite and proselyte [sic] with the sword?”²² He also believed citizens should organize to ensure a decent life for the working-class majority. “God made all men,” Bryan once remarked in a plea for higher wages, “and he did not make some to crawl on hands and knees and others to ride upon their backs.”²³

For contemporary liberals and Democrats, Bryan presents a mixed legacy. Until quite recently, his faith in government action to aid labor and the poor seemed out of fashion in an age of tax-cutting and privatization. Candidates who echo his jibes at “plutocrats” and “monopolists” get blamed for seeking to pit class against class, when the

19. *Id.* at 264.

20. *Id.*

21. *Id.* at 298.

22. Kazin, *The Forgotten Forerunner*, *supra* note 8, at 28-29.

23. *Id.* at 28.

path to economic success is, at least in theory, open to all. Bryan's moralism about the "traffic" in liquor and women can sound like an excuse to stop people from enjoying themselves. And nearly every progressive activist recoils at the creationists whose beliefs, if polls are correct, may be shared by a plurality of Americans. So it is hardly surprising that liberals, in their search for a usable past, have not found their way back to Bryan.

However, most Americans still want and expect the federal government to address their basic needs—jobs, education, health care, and housing. Bryan pioneered the notion of a caring, protective state, and liberals who have abandoned that idea have found nothing so powerful to replace it.

Moreover, many Americans may again be receptive to a new Social Gospel, if its advocates are able to shed the condescension many liberals have long exhibited toward avid church-goers. "When you hear a good democratic speech it is so much like a sermon that you can hardly tell the difference between them," Bryan declared a century ago.²⁴ Senator Barack Obama's keynote speech at his party's 2004 convention and his subsequent addresses reaffirmed the truth of that remark. Furthermore, the popularity of Jim Wallis's book, *God's Politics*, and the eagerness with which, in 2006, Democratic candidates such as Ted Strickland in Ohio and Harold Ford in Tennessee spoke about their faith suggests that evangelical progressivism may not be an oxymoron after all.

Current Democrats who lack a commitment to a reforming vision might also learn from Bryan. While he fell short in his three tries for the presidency, his words have long outlived anything said by William McKinley and William Howard Taft, the lackluster Republicans who defeated him.

The poet Vachel Lindsay wrote in 1915:

When Bryan speaks, the sky is ours,
The wheat, the forests, and the flowers.
And who is here to say us nay?
Fled are the ancient tyrant powers.
When Bryan speaks, then I rejoice.
His is the strange composite voice
Of many million singing souls
Who make world-brotherhood their choice.²⁵

Critics from Mencken onward have failed to appreciate what drew millions of Americans to Bryan and what our own era of non-stop satire and 24-hour commerce lacks: the yearning for a society run by and for ordinary people who lead virtuous lives. As everyone who heard him could attest, Bryan made significant public issues sound urgent,

24. KAZIN, A GODLY HERO, *supra* note 1, at 121.

25. *Id.* at 305-06.

dramatic, and clear; and he encouraged citizens to challenge the motives and interests of the most powerful people in the land. That is a quality absent among our current leaders, for all their promises to leave no man, woman, or child behind. Bryan's sincerity, warmth, and passion for a better world won the hearts of people who cared for no other public figure in his day. Perhaps we should take their reasons seriously before we decide to mistrust them.