

CHAPTER 10

How William Jennings Bryan Captured the 1896 Democratic Nomination for President

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Grover Cleveland was finishing his second non-consecutive term as president as the 1896 election approached. The Panic of 1893 and Cleveland's strong-arm tactics during the Pullman Strike of 1894 had made him wildly unpopular. The Democrats could not—and would not—endorse Cleveland for an unprecedented third term. And that meant that the Democratic field was wide open. Although William Jennings Bryan, a former two-term congressman and unsuccessful Senate candidate, wound up capturing the nomination, he was not considered a serious contender for the Democratic nomination in 1896. A cartoon that appeared in the July 5, 1896, edition of *The Chicago Tribune* was entitled “Ready For the Word ‘Go’ in the Grand Democratic Free-For-All Sweepstakes.” It showed seven potential nominees for the Democratic nomination, dressed in running clothes, warming up at the starting line of a race, waiting for the gun to fire. The contestants depicted were former Pennsylvania governor Robert Pattison,¹ Republican Senator Henry Teller of Colorado², Senator Joseph Blackburn of Kentucky,³ newspaper publisher John R.



Figure 10.1: This cartoon, entitled “Ready for the Word ‘Go’ in the Grand Democratic Free-for-all Sweepstakes,” depicts candidates lined up at the starting line in the race for the Democratic nomination for president. Conspicuously absent from the line-up is William Jennings Bryan. The cartoon appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, on July 5, 1896, p. 21.

¹ Robert Emory Pattison (1850–1904) served as governor of Pennsylvania from 1891 to 1895.

² It is interesting that Henry Moore Teller (1830–1914) was depicted as one of the contenders. Teller was a Republican senator from Colorado. A devotee of silver, he walked out of the Republican National Convention when the party adopted a plank that strongly supported the gold standard. Several leaders of the Populist Party were touting Teller as the perfect Democratic nominee. Stan M. Haynes, *President-Making in the Gilded Age: The Nominating Conventions of 1876-1900* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2016), 218. Even some in the Democratic Party were singing Teller's praises. Arkansas Senator James K. Jones, when asked about Teller, said “I have the highest admiration for him...and if he should happen to be the nominee of the convention he will receive my loyal support.” Richard Franklin Bense, *Passion and Preferences: William Jennings Bryan and the 1896 Democratic National Convention* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 36. One of the Kansas at-large delegates, John Martin, reported that “every Democrat” in the state “feels warm toward Teller.” Bense, *Passion and Preferences*, 37. Teller received eight votes on the first and second ballot at the 1896 Democratic National Convention. McKee 1906: 291.

³ Joseph Clay Stiles Blackburn (1838–1918), U.S. Senator from Kentucky, was a supporter of free silver.

McLean of Ohio,⁴ Indiana Governor Claude Matthews,⁵ Horace Boies, governor of Iowa,⁶ and Richard P. Bland, US representative from Missouri.⁷ Bryan was nowhere to be seen.⁸

So who was William Jennings Bryan and how did he wind up capturing the Democratic nomination for president? Bryan was born in Salem, Illinois on March 19, 1860, the fourth child and second son of Silas Lillard Bryan and Mariah Jennings Bryan.⁹ As a boy he was described as “sturdy, round-limbed and fond of play.”¹⁰ From an early age he announced his determination to become a lawyer like his father.

Until he reached the age of ten, William was schooled at home. His mother “gladly and diligently served as schoolmistress.”¹¹ He learned to read early, and after memorizing his lessons, he would stand on a little table to recite them, “with Mariah elaborately encouraging him in the art of declamation.”¹² When he turned ten, William entered the public school at Salem. His performance as a student was undistinguished—he never failed an examination, but neither was he ever at the head of the class.¹³ It was here that he developed “an interest in the work of literary and debating societies.”¹⁴

At the age of fifteen he entered the Whipple Academy, the preparatory department of Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois. He studied Greek and Latin and seized the opportunity to join the academy’s leading literary society, Sigma Pi. Unlike many literary societies of the day, the ones at the Whipple Academy stressed speaking and debating, rather than literature.¹⁵ Bryan excelled in this atmosphere. In his junior and senior years at Whipple he entered declamation contests, winning third place in his final year of primary education.¹⁶

In the fall of 1877, Bryan entered the freshman class of Illinois College. He continued his studies of Latin and Greek, supplemented with courses in rhetoric, algebra, trigonometry, chemistry, geology, economics, political science and American history.¹⁷ During his four years at Illinois College he received multiple prizes for his oratorical skills.¹⁸ At the time of his graduation from college he was elected class orator and gave the valedictory address.¹⁹

In the fall of 1881, Bryan entered the Union College of Law in Chicago, Illinois. While in law school he developed a special interest in constitutional law.²⁰ He was elected president of the

⁴ John Roll McClean (1848–1916) represented Ohio at several Democratic conventions.

⁵ Claude Matthews (1845–1898), a farmer, was governor of Indiana from 1893 to 1897.

⁶ Horace Boies (1827–1923) served as governor of Iowa from 1890 to 1894.

⁷ Richard P. Bland (1835–1899) represented Missouri in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1873 to 1895 and again from 1897 to 1899. His support of bimetallism earned him the nickname “Silver Dick.”

⁸ *Chicago Tribune*, July 5, 1896, 21. Boies and Bland were depicted in the two innermost lanes, signifying their status as the front runners.

⁹ Koenig 1971: 17.

¹⁰ Bryan 1896: 36.

¹¹ Koenig 1971: 20.

¹² Koenig 1971: 20.

¹³ Koenig 1971: 22.

¹⁴ Bryan 1896: 37.

¹⁵ Koenig 1971: 26.

¹⁶ Koenig 1971: 26–27.

¹⁷ Koenig 1971: 27–28.

¹⁸ Koenig 1971: 30–31.

¹⁹ Bryan 1896: 39.

²⁰ Bryan 1896: 46.

junior class and class orator.²¹ He graduated from law school in 1883 and on July 4th of that year, hung out his shingle in Jacksonville, Illinois.²² In October of 1884, Bryan married Mary Elizabeth Baird. In October of 1887 he moved his young family to Lincoln, Nebraska and entered into a law partnership with Adolphus R. Talbot.²³

Bryan built up a thriving law practice in Lincoln and soon immersed himself in Democratic politics. In 1890, Bryan was the Democratic nominee for Congress in Nebraska's 1st district. He won the election by a plurality of 6,713 votes.²⁴ When he arrived in Washington, D.C. he was appointed to the House Ways & Means Committee.²⁵ His youth and exceptional speaking skills soon had newspapers referring to Bryan as the "Boy Orator of the Platte."²⁶ Bryan ran for re-election in 1892 and won by a mere 140 votes.²⁷ Bryan declined to run for re-election to the House in 1894, choosing instead to stand as the Democratic candidate for the United States Senate. The Republicans obtained a large majority in the Nebraska legislature in the fall of 1894 and chose Republican John Thurston as Nebraska's next senator.²⁸

In the fall of 1894 Bryan became the chief of the editorial staff of the Omaha *World-Herald*.²⁹ At the beginning of 1895, he started touring the country advocating for the cause of free silver, speaking in multiple states, meeting with newspaper editors and getting to know the possible delegates to the upcoming convention.³⁰ Before each state convention was held in 1896 he wrote to the state party chairman, bringing his name to each chairman's attention. He sent every state chairman a copy of the Nebraska silver delegates' platform, asking that it be adopted by their own conventions. Not only was he "calling attention to himself as a potential leader, he was providing a platform on which to run."³¹

At the time of the 1896 Democratic National Convention, Bryan's political resume consisted of two short, non-descript terms in the U.S. House of Representatives and a failed bid for the US Senate. He was only 36 years old (just a year beyond the constitutional age requirement to hold the office). Few people, other than, maybe, Bryan himself, thought he had a chance of seizing the Democratic nomination. As one Midwest governor told him, "You are young yet. Let Bland have the nomination this time. Your time will come."³²

Bryan wouldn't listen. He was telling his friends and supporters that he was going to be the Democratic nominee—he believed that when the time came, "the logic of the situation"

²¹ Koenig 1971: 40.

²² Bryan 1896: 47.

²³ Bryan 1896: 47.

²⁴ Bryan 1896: 50, 53.

²⁵ Bryan 1896: 53.

²⁶ Haynes 2016: 218.

²⁷ Bryan 1896: 54.

²⁸ Bryan 1896: 58; Koenig 1971: 154. At that time senators were chosen by the state legislature, not by a popular vote of the state's citizens.

²⁹ Bryan 1896: 60.

³⁰ Haynes 2016: 219.

³¹ Eaton 1964: 159. As one historian has noted, "Bryan's prenomination activities made him a significant figure within the silver movement, even though he was less well known as a party leader in the regular Democratic organization. He entered the convention with little direct support for the presidency, but his long work for the cause generated his credentials among silver delegates." Klinghard 2010: 185.

³² Haynes 2016: 219.

would demand it.³³ Bryan was convinced that “Silver Dick” Bland would not be nominated because Northern Democrats were not ready to support a southerner for president. Horace Boies was not well known, came from a traditionally, Republican state, and was generally opposed by the labor interests. There was no chance that the Democrats would nominate the Republican Henry Teller. In Bryan’s mind, of the remaining candidates, he alone had contributed the most to the free silver cause and, accordingly, the party would turn to him as their standard bearer.³⁴

On the first day of the Democratic National Convention, July 7, 1896, William F. Harrity³⁵ called the convention to order at 12:30 p.m. Immediately after the opening prayer, Harrity presented the report of the Democratic National Committee to the delegates. When he read the name of Senator David Hill³⁶ of New York as temporary chairman, “the delegates and spectators responded with applause lasting several minutes. Rising *en masse*, the New York delegation led the cheering. Massachusetts, Maryland, and all the other gold states immediately joined in. The gold men in the Michigan delegation unfurled and waved flags, ‘shouting and cheering at the top of their voices.’ Standing on their chairs, the Pennsylvania delegates waved flags as well.”³⁷

Once he presented the report to the delegates, Harrity recognized Henry D. Clayton,³⁸ who presented a minority report that recommended that Senator John W. Daniel³⁹ of Virginia be chosen as temporary chairman in lieu of Senator Hill.⁴⁰ Clayton noted that Daniel had been favored for temporary chairman by twenty-three members of Harrity’s own committee and that he was favored “by the great majority of this convention.”⁴¹ At the mention of Daniel’s name, every silver delegate in the convention hall “hopped into his seat and cheered lustily.”⁴² Following this demonstration, which went on for several minutes, a motion was made to substitute the minority report for the majority proposal and Clayton demanded a roll call on its adoption.⁴³

Prior to taking this vote a series of formal speeches were delivered in favor of either the minority or the majority report. Allen L. McDermott⁴⁴ gave an impassioned speech in support of Hill. He urged the delegates to ratify the choice of the majority of the Democratic National Committee. He pleaded with the delegates to respect party traditions:

³³ Haynes 2016: 223. Bryan’s good friend John Atwood provided Bryan with the following appraisal of Bryan’s candidacy a month before the convention: “Boies is too new a convert; Bland is too old and not brilliant enough. Blackburn is too far south; you alone have every quality that goes to make up my ideal of the candidate; you are young, clean and brilliant. . . .” Koenig 1971: 181.

³⁴ Haynes 2016: 223.

³⁵ William F. Harrity (1850–1912) was chair of the Democratic National Committee from 1892 to 1896.

³⁶ David Hill (1843–1910) served as governor of New York from 1885 to 1891 and as U.S. Senator from 1892 to 1897.

³⁷ Bensel 2008: 67.

³⁸ Alabama delegate Henry D. Lamar Clayton, Jr. (1857–1929) was serving as a district attorney in 1896.

³⁹ John Warwick Daniel (1842–1910) was U.S. Senator from Virginia from 1887 to 1910.

⁴⁰ *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention* 1896: 72. Going forward, this reference is shortened to *Official Report*.

⁴¹ *Official Report* 1896: 71.

⁴² Bensel 2008: 68.

⁴³ Bensel 2008: 68.

⁴⁴ Allen Langdon McDermott (1854–1908) was chairman of the New Jersey State Democratic Committee from 1885 to 1895 and was a delegate at large at the 1896 convention.

Don't begin your Convention by violating a tradition. Don't begin your Convention by violating a rule. If you have the strength of giants, use it, not as giants do, but reserve that strength and all the spirit that is in it for the battle that will come in November. You have not, even in the moment of exultation, because of a majority in this assembly, any reasonable right to attack the minority by setting aside traditional rule.⁴⁵

Thomas M. Waller⁴⁶ of Connecticut followed McDermott and described Hill as the rightful candidate "according to the immemorial usage of your party" and Daniel as a challenger brought forth "by the exercise of a power never before invoked."⁴⁷ He argued that Hill should be elected temporary chairman and Daniel ought to be elected permanent chairman.⁴⁸

Charles Thomas⁴⁹ of Pennsylvania gave the first speech in favor of the minority report. He began by praising the Democratic pedigree of Hill and then urged his fellow silver delegates to show their strength: "Let it not be said that in the first skirmish the pickets which you yourselves threw out were driven back into the lines."⁵⁰ Thomas was followed by delegates Charles E. Waller⁵¹ and M. F. Tarpey.⁵² They argued that it was the national committee who had violated tradition by failing to honor the clear wishes of the majority. John Fellows,⁵³ a short, pudgy New Yorker with gold predilections swung the debate back to Hill, arguing that the proponents of the minority report "are going back on [the Democratic Party's] old traditions; you are violating its time-honored usages, and you are accepting a thing that was done for the first time in the history of parties in this Republic by a Republican Convention."⁵⁴ He also took askance with Thomas's claim that this was not a personal attack on Hill, noting that every other temporary officer, save Hill, was acceptable to the authors of the minority report.⁵⁵

After Fellows finished, the silver supporters once again took to the podium. Bulow Ward Marston⁵⁶ opened his remarks by saying, "It is not that we love David Hill less, but we love Democracy more."⁵⁷ Marston's comment drew cheers, as did his follow-up remark, "It is us that you would trample upon two-thirds of this Convention; we ask you in the name of two-thirds of this Convention to give us the temporary chairmanship."⁵⁸ Marston closed his remarks with an

⁴⁵ *Official Report 1896*: 74.

⁴⁶ Governor of Connecticut from 1883 to 1885, Thomas MacDonald Waller (1839–1924) was a prominent member of the gold faction at the 1896 convention.

⁴⁷ *Official Report 1896*: 75.

⁴⁸ *Official Report 1896*: 75.

⁴⁹ Charles W. Thomas (1860–1907) was serving as a member of the Pennsylvania Senate in 1896.

⁵⁰ *Official Report 1896*: 79.

⁵¹ Charles E. Waller (1849–1920) was a delegate from Alabama.

⁵² M. F. Tarpey (1847–1925) was a member of the Democratic National Committee from California.

⁵³ John R. Fellows (1832–1896) served as New York County District Attorney from 1888 to 1890 and from 1894 to 1896.

⁵⁴ *Official Report 1896*: 83.

⁵⁵ *Official Report 1896*: 83.

⁵⁶ Bulow Ward Marston (1841–1917) a Louisiana planter and steamboat man who served as a delegate from his state at the 1896 convention.

⁵⁷ *Official Report 1896*: 86.

⁵⁸ *Official Report 1896*: 86.

undisguised attack on his eastern brethren, “We knew that you intended to capture the chairmanship of the Convention, and we were to be held up to scorn and ridicule throughout the length and breadth of this land; we are forcing the issue, we are meeting the enemy in their own den; we are killing them.”⁵⁹ The eastern gold men, understandably, did not appreciate Marston’s remarks.⁶⁰

John Duncan⁶¹ followed Marston in an uninspiring silver speech in favor of John Daniel as the temporary chairman. Duncan was followed by C. K. Ladd.⁶² who attempted to explain why the silver men, despite their admiration for Hill, simply could not let him serve as temporary chairman:

The issue is this: By a majority of four the National Committee presents a candidate for Chairman here that is not in accord with the wishes of a majority of the Democrats in the United States. He would preside fairly; no man doubts it. He would make a speech; no man doubts it. It would be an able speech; no man doubts that. It would be a New York speech, and no man doubts that; and the Democratic party—the majority of it—would have to explain that speech to our Republican enemies during the whole campaign. They would say to us “you are divided amongst yourselves.”⁶³

The remainder of Ladd’s speech was moderate in tone and he appealed to the gold men to join their silver colleagues in battling the real enemy—the Republican Party.⁶⁴

J. W. St. Clair,⁶⁵ who was one of the few delegates who supported both free silver and David Hill, gave the last speech in favor of Hill’s candidacy. His basic argument was that the supporters of the gold standard deserved to be heard and that Hill could do little harm by addressing the convention as its temporary chairman.⁶⁶ Henry Clayton, who placed Daniel’s name in nomination for the temporary chairmanship, had the last word. His relatively short speech was “very moderate in tone and elicited little response” from the assembled delegates.⁶⁷

Once Clayton concluded his remarks, Harrity directed the secretary to call the roll of states on the minority report. As soon as Iowa was reached, an interesting point of parliamentary procedure occurred. This maneuver had little to do with who would serve as temporary chairman and everything to do with attempting to hurt one of the front runners for the nomination:

⁵⁹ *Official Report 1896*: 87.

⁶⁰ Bensel 2008: 75.

⁶¹ John Duncan (1851–1917) was a Texas delegate to the convention.

⁶² An Illinois lawyer, Charles Knox Ladd (1839–1908) was a close friend of William Jennings Bryan.

⁶³ *Official Report 1896*: 89.

⁶⁴ Bensel 2008: 77.

⁶⁵ J. W. St. Clair (1853–1906) was a delegate from West Virginia.

⁶⁶ *Official Report 1896*: 91–92; Bensel 2008: 77.

⁶⁷ Bensel 2008: 78.

Iowa was both a silver state and the home delegation of Horace Boies, one of the leading candidates for the presidential nomination. When the chairman reported the delegation as casting 26 votes for the minority report, one of the gold delegates, W. H. Stackhouse, rose and addressed the chair, saying, "I protest against the vote of Iowa as reported." Harrity responded, "The vote of Iowa is challenged, as I understand it?" Stackhouse answered, "Yes, sir." At that point the clerk was directed to poll the delegation, asking each of the members how they cast their vote. When the polling was completed, Harrity announced that Iowa had cast 19 yeas and 7 nays. Because the unit rule required that the entire state's vote be cast on the side that the majority favored, all 26 of Iowa's votes were then recorded in favor of the minority report. . . .

The object of the challenge was to provide an opportunity for the gold minority on the delegation to dissent publicly from the delegation's majority. Without the challenge and the ensuing poll of the delegation, their dissent would simply have been smothered by the unit rule. The challenge thus did not change the outcome, but it did reveal that over a quarter of the delegation would have voted for Hill if they had been given the opportunity. And the political fallout with respect to the Boies candidacy was substantial.

Because the silver men were deeply suspicious of any covert understanding that might emerge between one of the ostensibly silver candidates for the nomination and that third of the convention that supported gold, the fact that seven men on the Iowa delegation had voted for Hill was interpreted as either a calculated overture to the gold men (in the form of paying the New York senator a compliment without formally affecting the outcome) or an insult to Boies himself (by publicly breaking ranks with the silver majority of the convention, the dissenters intentionally undercut the former governor's standing with the silver faction, which, after all, was going to determine who was nominated for the presidency). . . .

Despite [issuing a statement explaining how it was that the gold men were permitted to be on the Iowa delegation and exposing their promise pre-convention to quietly submit to the unit rule and not oppose Boies or free silver], Boies was severely damaged by this public demonstration that had relied on a parliamentary device to reveal the distribution of preferences within the state delegation.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Bensel 2008: 79–80.

In the end, the eloquence of Hill's supporters failed to carry the day and the tally at the conclusion of the roll call vote was 556 votes for the minority report and 349 against.⁶⁹ John Daniel would be the temporary chairman of the convention. Once the result was formally announced, an explosive demonstration broke out, lasting "nearly twenty minutes during which no business could be transacted, on account of the applause, cheers, noise and confusion."⁷⁰ The chasm between the gold men and the silver men continued to widen, further damaging the chances that they would be able to work together in the fall to elect a Democratic president.

As the temporary chairman, Daniel gave the opening speech of the convention. He began with a strong statement: "The birth of the Democratic party was [coequal] with the birth of the sovereignty of the people. It can never die until the Declaration of American Independence is forgotten, and that sovereignty is dethroned and extinguished."⁷¹ In paying tribute to the silver movement, he noted:

It begins with the sunrise in Maryland, and spreads into a sunburst in Louisiana and Texas. It stretches in unbroken line across the continent from Virginia and Georgia to California. It sends forth its pioneers from Plymouth Rock and waves over the wheat fields of Dakota. It has its strongholds in Alabama and Mississippi and its outposts in Minnesota, Florida and Oregon. It sticks like a tar-heel in the old North State, and writes sixteen-to-one on the saddlebags of the Arkansas traveler. It pours down its rivulets from the mountains of West Virginia and makes a great lake in New Mexico, Arizona, Wyoming and Idaho, Nevada, Montana and Colorado. It stands guard around the National Capitol, in the District of Columbia, and camps on the frontiers of Oklahoma. It sweeps like a prairie fire over Iowa and Kansas, and lights up the horizon in Nebraska. It marshals its massive battalions in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois and Missouri.⁷²

He made a direct appeal to the eastern Democrats, stating that there was no "North, South, East or West" in the uprising of the American people for "American emancipation from the conspiracy of European Kings led by Great Britain, which seeks to destroy one-half of the money of the world, and to make American manufacturers, merchants, farmers and mechanics hewers of wood and drawers of water."⁷³ He quoted the Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—and he urged his eastern brethren to "acquiesce . . . in the will of [the] great majority of your fellow Democrats, who only ask you to go with them as they have often times gone with you."⁷⁴ He reminded the eastern Democrats that for thirty years the Democrats in the South and in the West had supported the men that the eastern Democrats had nominated for

⁶⁹ Bryan 1896: 188.

⁷⁰ *Official Report* 1896: 97.

⁷¹ *Official Report* 1896: 99.

⁷² *Official Report* 1896: 99.

⁷³ *Official Report* 1896: 100.

⁷⁴ *Official Report* 1896: 100.

president—Seymour,⁷⁵ Greeley,⁷⁶ Tilden,⁷⁷ Hancock⁷⁸ and Cleveland⁷⁹—that they had “submitted cheerfully” to their compromise platforms and repeated pledges for bimetallism and that they had “patiently borne repeated disappointments as to their fulfillment.”⁸⁰

Daniel spent the remainder of his speech extolling the virtues of bimetallism and condemning those who stood in the way of a monetary policy based on the use of both gold and silver as standard money.⁸¹ He excoriated the Republican adoption of the gold standard, which he argued would result in higher taxes, lower consumer confidence and significantly less money in circulation.⁸² He closed with a call to arms: “We maintain that this great Nation . . . is fully capable of restoring its constitutional money system of gold and silver at equality with each other, and as our Fathers in 1776 declared our National Independence, so now has the party founded by Thomas Jefferson, the author of that declaration, met here to declare our financial independence of all other nations and to invoke all true Americans to assert it by their votes and place their country where it of right belongs as the freest and foremost nation of the earth.”⁸³

Once Daniel concluded his remarks, the membership of the convention’s committees was announced. As noted in the *Official Report*,⁸⁴ The Committee on Resolutions, which would be responsible for drafting the Democratic platform, contained some Democratic heavyweights, including George Gray,⁸⁵ Francis Cockrell,⁸⁶ David Hill, and Benjamin Tillman.⁸⁷

The convention adjourned for the day after the make-up of the committees was announced. The Committee on Permanent Organization met for the first time immediately after adjournment and the gold men on the committee wanted to proceed directly to the nomination of the permanent officers of the convention. But the silver men on the committee discovered that they did not know who their leaders favored for permanent chairman of the convention, and they demanded that the committee stand in recess until eight o’clock that evening. Unbeknownst to the gold men, the silver members of the committee agreed to meet a half hour earlier and decide who should be the permanent chairman before the gold men arrived for the reconvened meeting.⁸⁸

⁷⁵ Horatio Seymour (1810–1886) was the unsuccessful Democratic nominee for U.S. President in 1868.

⁷⁶ Horace Greeley (1811–1872) was the unsuccessful Democratic and Liberal Republican nominee for U.S. President in 1872.

⁷⁷ Samuel Jones Tilden (1814–1886) was the unsuccessful Democratic nominee for U.S. President in 1876.

⁷⁸ Winfield Scott Hancock (1824–1886) was the unsuccessful Democratic nominee for U.S. President in 1880.

⁷⁹ Grover Cleveland (1837–1908) was the successful Democratic nominee for U.S. President in 1884, the unsuccessful candidate in 1888, and the successful candidate in 1992.

⁸⁰ *Official Report* 1896: 100.

⁸¹ *Official Report* 1896: 103.

⁸² *Official Report* 1896: 105.

⁸³ *Official Report* 1896: 107–08.

⁸⁴ *Official Report* 1896: 111.

⁸⁵ George Gray (1840–1925) served as U.S. Senator from Delaware from 1885 to 1899. Gray was nominated for president at the 1904 Democratic convention.

⁸⁶ Francis Marion Cockrell (1834–1915) served as U.S. Senator from Missouri from 1874 to 1905. Cockrell was nominated for president at 1904 Democratic convention.

⁸⁷ Benjamin Tillman (1847–1918) was governor of South Carolina from 1890 to 1894 and U.S. Senator from 1895 to 1918.

⁸⁸ Bensel 2008: 85.

At the meeting of the silver delegates, it was decided that Senator Stephen White of California⁸⁹ should serve as the permanent chairman of the convention. Once the slate of other officers was finalized, they sent out “scouts . . . to round up” the gold men and “invite them” to a meeting of the full committee. The gold men knew before they entered the meeting that they had been railroaded and “treated the whole proceeding as a huge joke.” They went through the motions of nominating David Hill as an alternative to White, but White easily prevailed thirty-three to eighteen.⁹⁰ White’s nomination as permanent chairman meant that he was now no longer a “dark horse” in the presidential race.⁹¹

The second day of the convention dawned with not a single committee prepared to report to the delegates. As a result, the assembled crowd listened to a series of speeches from some of the Democratic heavyweights, including John Peter Altgeld⁹² and Joseph C. S. Blackburn.⁹³ Shortly after noon, the Committee on Credentials announced that it had a partial report, “which recommended seating the silver delegation from Nebraska headed by William Jennings Bryan, thereby reversing the decision of the Democratic National Committee, which had seated the gold delegation from Nebraska.”⁹⁴ The committee also recommended that each of the territories (Alaska, Arizona, Oklahoma, New Mexico and the Indian Territory) and the District of Columbia be permitted six delegates each (up from the customary two). It was not lost on anyone that this increase in delegates would inure to the benefit of the silver forces since the territories were all pro-silver.⁹⁵ The partial report of the committee was approved by a voice vote.⁹⁶ Bryan was now an official delegate and immediately took his delegation’s seat on the Committee on Resolutions, which had already begun drafting the party platform.⁹⁷

The evening session on the second day of the convention was spent arguing over the final report of the Committee on Credentials, which concerned four delegate seats from Michigan.⁹⁸ A majority of the committee recommended that four silver delegates, Henry Chamberlain,⁹⁹ Hannibal Hart,¹⁰⁰ H. J. Hoyt¹⁰¹ and J. S. White,¹⁰² be seated as part of the Michigan delegation, in place of four gold delegates who had originally been seated.¹⁰³ A minority of the committee recommended that the original gold delegates be allowed to retain their seats.¹⁰⁴ Three hours of

⁸⁹ Stephen Mallory White (1853–1901) served as U.S. Senator from California from 1893 to 1899.

⁹⁰ *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 1896.

⁹¹ Bensel 2008: 86.

⁹² A leader of the Progressive wing of the Democratic party John Peter Altgeld (1847–1902) served as governor of Illinois from 1893 to 1897.

⁹³ Joseph Clay Stiles Blackburn (1838–1918) served as U.S. Senator from Kentucky from 1885 to 1897 and again from 1901 to 1907.

⁹⁴ Haynes 2016: 222.

⁹⁵ Haynes 2016: 222.

⁹⁶ *Official Report* 1896: 134.

⁹⁷ Haynes 2016: 222.

⁹⁸ Haynes 2016: 222.

⁹⁹ A Michigan farmer, Henry Chamberlain (1824–1907) was a Michigan delegate to the convention.

¹⁰⁰ A Michigan lawyer and judge, Hannibal Hart (1839–1900) was a delegate from his state to the convention.

¹⁰¹ No biographical information has been found for H. J. Hoyt except that he was a delegate from Michigan.

¹⁰² No biographical information has been found for J. S. White except that he was a convention delegate from Michigan.

¹⁰³ *Official Report* 1896: 136.

¹⁰⁴ *Official Report* 1896: 136–37.

debate ensued. Following a rollcall vote of the states, the four silver delegates were seated as part of the Michigan delegation.¹⁰⁵ The effect of this vote was to change the majority of the Michigan delegation from gold to silver. Under the unit rule then in effect, that change “would likely shift all of Michigan’s twenty-eight votes to the silver cause.”¹⁰⁶ The defeat of the minority position resulted in a wild thirty-minute demonstration, as the silver men yelled and waved hats and handkerchiefs and displayed pictures of Bland.¹⁰⁷

Day two of the convention ended with the receipt and approval of the report of the Committee on Permanent Organization, which named Stephen White as the permanent chairman. White gave a speech emphasizing party harmony, but it mostly fell on deaf ears—it was becoming abundantly clear that the silver forces held the majority of convention strength.¹⁰⁸ After his remarks, White was presented with a ceremonial gavel. Fittingly, it was made of solid silver, from a mine in Butte City, Montana.¹⁰⁹

The party platform was the first item of business on the agenda for day three of the convention. Members of the Committee on Resolutions, after meeting again that morning, had finalized the proposed platform. It called for greater regulation over corporations, monopolies and trusts by the Interstate Commerce Commission. It opposed the issuance of interest-bearing bonds in times of peace. It called for a fair and honest revision of the tariff. It condemned reckless government spending and federal interference in local affairs. It supported the admission of the Territories of New Mexico, Arizona and Oklahoma as states. It warned against dangerous court injunctions to end labor disputes, objected to presidential third terms, proclaimed support of the Monroe Doctrine and offered sympathy for Cuba’s struggle for independence.¹¹⁰

Most importantly, the proposed Democratic platform called for the free coinage of silver. The money plank in the platform proclaimed that “the money question is paramount to all others at this time. . . .”¹¹¹ According to the proposed platform, “We demand the free and unlimited coinage of both silver and gold at the present legal ratio of 16 to 1, without waiting for the aid or consent of any other nation. We demand that the standard silver dollar shall be full legal tender, equally with gold, for all debts, public and private. . . .”¹¹² When the money plank was read aloud, the silver-intoxicated crowd roared with approval and then demanded that the plank be read again so that they could celebrate once more.¹¹³ One reporter said that the scene was like “bringing a new mess of playthings into the violent wards of the insane asylum.”¹¹⁴

The gold men on the Committee on Resolutions offered a minority report after the proposed platform was read to the convention. The minority report argued for the gold standard and sought to replace the free silver plank with a gold one. According to the minority report:

¹⁰⁵ *Official Report 1896*: 166–67.

¹⁰⁶ Haynes 2016: 222.

¹⁰⁷ Bensel 2008; 153; *Official Report 1896*: 167.

¹⁰⁸ Sautter and Burke 1996: 91.

¹⁰⁹ Haynes 2016: 222; *Official Report 1896*: 173.

¹¹⁰ Sautter and Burke 1996: 91–92; McKee 1906: 294–97.

¹¹¹ McKee 1906: 294.

¹¹² McKee 1906:293–94.

¹¹³ Sautter and Burke 1996: 92.

¹¹⁴ Sautter and Burke 1996: 92.

We declare our belief that the experiment on the part of the United States alone of free silver coinage and a change of the existing standard of value independently of the action of other great nations would not only imperil our finances, but would retard or entirely prevent the establishment of international bimetallism, to which the efforts of the government should be steadily directed. It would place this country at once upon a silver basis, impair contracts, disturb business, diminish the purchasing power of the wages of labor and inflict irreparable evils upon our nation's commerce and industry.

Until international co-operation among leading nations for the coinage of silver can be secured we favor the rigid maintenance of the existing gold standard as essential to the preservation of our national credit, the redemption of our public pledges and the keeping inviolate of our country's honor. We insist that all our paper and silver currency shall be kept absolutely at parity with gold.¹¹⁵

The convention leaders allotted two hours and forty minutes for the debate over the competing planks, equally split, eighty minutes for each side. The silver advocates would open the debate, the gold men would offer their arguments and the silver proponents would close the debate with their rebuttal.¹¹⁶ Bryan was asked by James Jones¹¹⁷ to take charge of the platform debate.¹¹⁸ Jones believed that Bryan's "prominence and long devotion to the silver cause . . . entitled him to the honor."¹¹⁹ Bryan, for his part, was shocked and surprised by Jones's request, but after protesting politely that Jones should be in charge of the debate, Bryan gladly accepted the position that would thrust him into the center spotlight.

"Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, who had requested to be part of the debate, informed Bryan that he wanted to talk for fifty of the eighty minutes and that he wanted to present the closing argument. Bryan told Tillman that he did not believe that the gold men would agree to such an extensive rebuttal. He was correct. David Bennett Hill, the leader of the gold men, refused to agree to such a lengthy rebuttal. When Tillman was apprised of that fact, he informed Bryan that the greater time was more important to him. He announced that he would take fifty minutes and deliver the opening remarks. It was agreed that Bryan would get thirty minutes to deliver the closing argument. Bryan intended to use the last word in the platform debate as an opportunity to create a groundswell of support for his candidacy that would propel him to the party's presidential nomination.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ *Official Report* 1896: 197.

¹¹⁶ Haynes 2016: 223.

¹¹⁷ James Kimbrough Jones (1839–1908) U.S. Senator from Arkansas and chair of the Democratic National Committee in 1896.

¹¹⁸ Haynes 2016: 223.d

¹¹⁹ Koenig 1971:189.

¹²⁰ Haynes 2016: 223–24.

As planned, Senator Tillman began the debate in favor of the free silver plank. The decision by the silver forces to let him be their primary spokesman in the platform debate was a mistake. From the start, his comments were an unmitigated disaster. As one commentator noted,

Tillman opened his remarks by stating the convention would see him ‘as I am, and not as the lying newspapers have taught you to think of me.’ He then proceeded to confirm the criticisms of him in the press. Tillman proudly stated that he was from South Carolina, ‘the home of secession,’ which elicited hisses and jeers from the crowd. . . . He then compared South Carolina’s leadership in the cause of secession with its leadership in the cause of free coinage of silver and stated that, in 1896 as in 1860, southern Democrats had for too long been subservient to their northern Democratic brethren. . . . Like secession, the silver battle was ‘a sectional issue,’ he cried, drawing more hisses from the crowd...He rambled on, citing obscure economic statistics that he claimed proved his point, but which confused the audience even more . . . Tillman [then] went on to accuse the president of despotism, bad faith, and of actions that had deserved impeachment. It was too much, even for a crowd that mostly despised Grover Cleveland.¹²¹

Hill was the first orator to speak on behalf of the minority report—and it was apparent that the silverite platform filled him with contempt. “It smacks of Populism and Communism,” he had written in an article that appeared in the July 9, 1896 issue of the *New York World*. He told the delegates, “I am a Democrat, but I am not a revolutionist.” On the monetary issue, he stated that it would be foolish to move to a system of free coinage of silver before there was an international agreement fixing the value of silver and gold in relation to each other.¹²² He questioned whether the delegates really wanted to force longtime stalwarts out of the party “to make room for a lot of Republicans and Populists and political nondescripts who will not vote your ticket at the polls.” No Democrat, Hill suggested, could be elected without carrying New York; only one ever had (James Buchanan in 1856). According to Hill, the Democrats would surely taste defeat in 1896 if bimetallism became “a question of patriotism” or “bravery” instead of a question of “business” and “economics.”¹²³ Said Hill, “In your zeal for monetary reform you have gone out of the true path . . . and in your anxiety to promote and aid the silver currency you have unnecessarily put in this platform provisions which cannot stand a fair discussion.”¹²⁴ He closed with the following words of warning:

My friends, I thus speak more in sorrow than in anger. You know what this platform means to the East; you know that we who are

¹²¹ Haynes 2016: 225–26.

¹²² Haynes 2016: 226.

¹²³ Michael Kazin 2006: 56–58.

¹²⁴ *Official Report* 1896: 217.

identified with the fortunes of the party there must suffer the result. But calamitous as it may be to us, it will be more calamitous to you if, after taking all these risks, you do not win this fight. My friends, we want the Democratic party to succeed. We want to build it up. We do not want to tear it down. We want our principles—the good old principles of Jefferson, of Jackson, of Tilden, of hard money, of safe money . . . We want to stand by the principles under which we have won during the history of the country, and made it what it is. If we keep in the good old paths of the party, we can win. If we depart from them, we shall lose the great contest which awaits us.¹²⁵

William F. Vilas¹²⁶ and William E. Russell¹²⁷ took to the stage after Hill. Both men argued in favor of gold. Neither man was particularly effective in making his arguments. All three, Hill, Vilas, and Russell, had given fine speeches in support of gold, “but there was no suspense in them and nothing that would make the silver delegates change their minds.”¹²⁸ The minority spokesmen had used all of their allotted time. One speaker remained: William Jennings Bryan. He would have the last word. He knew he had to make it count.

Bryan bounded up the steps to the platform, two at a time. Tall, slender, “every inch an Apollo,” Bryan threw his head back, thrust his foot forward and rested his left arm on the speaker’s podium.¹²⁹ Said Chicago journalist Ray Stannard Baker,¹³⁰ “I thought I had never seen a handsomer man—young, tall, powerfully built, clear-eyed, with a mane of black hair which he occasionally thrust back with his hand.”¹³¹ Looking and sounding like some kind of Democratic god, in a loud, forceful voice, Bryan delivered what has been considered by many historians and political scientists as one of the best political speeches ever given. Known as the “Cross of Gold” speech, Bryan began with a self-deprecating remark, portraying himself as young and inexperienced, especially compared to the political heavyweights who had just spoken:

I would be presumptuous, indeed, to present myself against the distinguished gentlemen to whom you have listened if this was a mere measuring of abilities; but this is not a contest between persons. The humblest citizen in all the land, when clad in the armor of a righteous cause, is stronger than all the hosts of error. I come to speak to you in defense of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty - the cause of humanity.¹³²

¹²⁵ *Official Report* 1896: 219.

¹²⁶ William Freeman Vilas (1840–1908) was U.S. Senator from Wisconsin from 1891 to 1897.

¹²⁷ Governor of Massachusetts from 1891 to 1894, William Eustis Russell (1857–1896) was a strong advocate for the gold standard.

¹²⁸ Bensel 2008: 222.

¹²⁹ Koenig 1971: 195.

¹³⁰ Ray Stannard Baker (1870–1946) was a journalist for the *Chicago News-Record* in 1896.

¹³¹ Sautter and Burke 1996: 92.

¹³² *Official Report* 1896: 227.

A hush fell over the crowd as Bryan continued with a history of the silver movement over the last year:

Never before in the history of this country has there been witnessed such a contest as that through which we have just passed. Never before in the history of American politics has a great issue been fought out, as this issue has been, by the voters of a great party.

On the fourth of March, 1895, a few democrats, most of them members of congress, issued an address to the democrats of the nation, asserting that the money question was the paramount issue of the hour; declaring that a majority of the democratic party had the right to control the action of the party on this paramount issue; and concluding with the request that the believers in the free coinage of silver in the democratic party should organize, take charge of, and control the policy of the democratic party. Three months later, at Memphis, an organization was perfected, and the silver democrats went forth openly and courageously proclaiming their belief, and declaring that, if successful, they would crystallize into a platform the declaration which they had made. Then began the conflict. With a zeal approaching the zeal which inspired the crusaders who followed Peter the Hermit, our silver democrats went forth from victory unto victory until they are now assembled, not to discuss, not to debate, but to enter up the judgment already rendered by the plain people of this country.

The supporters of gold argued that free silver would unfairly disrupt business interests in the country. Bryan argued that it was the gold men who had interfered with the business interests of those who supported free silver:

When you come before us and tell us that we are about to disturb your business interests, we reply that you have disturbed our business interests by your course.

We say to you that you have made the definition of a business man too limited in its application. The man who is employed for wages is as much a business man as his employer; the attorney in a country town is as much a business man as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis; the merchant at the cross-roads store is as much a business man as the merchant of New York; the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, who begins in the spring and toils all summer, and who by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of the country creates wealth, is as much a business man as the man who goes upon the board of trade and bets upon the price of grain; the

miners who go down a thousand feet into the earth, or climb two thousand feet upon the cliffs, and bring forth from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured into the channels of trade are as much business men as the few financial magnates who, in a back room, corner the money of the world. We come to speak for this broader class of business men.¹³³

Unlike Tillman, Bryan did not attack the East. But he had special words for those from the West. In a passage reminiscent of the Declaration of Independence, Bryan declared:

We do not come as aggressors. Our war is not a war of conquest; we are fighting in the defense of our homes, our families, and posterity. We have petitioned, and our petitions have been scorned; we have entreated, and our entreaties have been disregarded; we have begged, and they have mocked when our calamity came. We beg no longer; we entreat no more; we petition no more. We defy them!¹³⁴

By this time the pro-silver delegates were on their feet shouting approval. One enraptured farmer thrashed a vacant seat with his coat, exclaiming, "My God! My God!"¹³⁵ As Bryan later remembered, "the audience seemed to rise and sit down as one man . . . like a trained choir."¹³⁶ Bryan turned to a forceful defense of the majority platform:

They tell us that this platform was made to catch votes. We reply to them that changing conditions make new issues; that the principles upon which democracy rests are as everlasting as the hills, but that they must be applied to new conditions as they arise. Conditions have arisen, and we are here to meet those conditions. They tell us that the income tax ought not to be brought in here; that it is a new idea. They criticize us for our criticism of the Supreme Court of the United States. My friends, we have not criticized; we have simply called attention to what you know. If you want criticisms, read the dissenting opinions of the court. There you will find criticisms.

They say that we passed an unconstitutional law; we deny it. The income tax law was not unconstitutional when it was passed; it was not unconstitutional when it went before the supreme court for the first time; it did not become unconstitutional until one of

¹³³ *Official Report* 1896: 228–29.

¹³⁴ *Official Report* 1896: 229.

¹³⁵ Koenig 1971: 196.

¹³⁶ Sautter and Burke 1996: 94.

the judges changed his mind, and we cannot be expected to know when a judge will change his mind.

The income tax is a just law. It simply intends to put the burdens of government justly upon the backs of the people. I am in favor of an income tax. When I find a man who is not willing to bear his share of the burdens of the government which protects him, I find a man who is unworthy to enjoy the blessings of a government like ours.

He says that we are opposing national bank currency. It is true. If you will read what Thomas Benton said, you will find he said that, in searching history, he could find but one parallel to Andrew Jackson; that was Cicero who destroyed the conspiracy of Cataline [*sic*] and saved Rome. Benton said that Cicero only did for Rome what Jackson did for us when he destroyed the bank conspiracy and saved America.¹³⁷

We say in our platform that we believe that the right to coin and issue money is a function of government. We believe it. We believe it is a part of sovereignty, and can no more with safety be delegated to private individuals than can the power to make penal statutes or levy laws for taxation.

Mr. Jefferson, who was once regarded as good democratic authority, seems to have differed in opinion from the gentleman who has addressed us on the part of the minority. Those who are opposed to this proposition tell us that the issue of paper money is a function of the bank, and that the government ought to go out of the banking business. I stand with Jefferson rather than with them, and tell them, as he did, that the issue of money is a function of the Government, and that the banks should go out of the governing business.

They complain about the plank which declares against life tenure in office. They have tried to strain it to mean that which it does not mean. What we oppose in that plank is the life tenure that is being built up in Washington which establishes an office-holding class and excludes from participation in the benefits the humbler members of society.¹³⁸

Bryan urged the Democratic Party to stand with the people:

¹³⁷ Bryan here makes reference to a parallel made by Thomas Hart Benton (1782–1858), a U.S. Senator from Missouri, between President Andrew Jackson’s so-called “Bank War” against the Second Bank of the United States and the overthrow of the Catilinarian Conspiracy of 63 B.C. by Cicero, who was Roman consul at the time. Unfortunately, the name of the chief conspirator, Catiline, was misspelled in the *Official Report* of the convention.

¹³⁸ *Official Report* 1896: 229–30.

Mr. Carlisle said in 1878 that this was a struggle between the idle holders of idle capital and the struggling masses, who produce the wealth and pay the taxes of the country; and my friends, it is simply a question that we shall decide upon which side shall the Democratic party fight? Upon the side of the idle holders of idle capital or upon the side of the struggling masses? That is the question which the party must answer first; and then it must be answered by each individual hereafter. The sympathies of the Democratic party, as described by the platform, are on the side of the struggling masses, who have ever been the foundation of the Democratic party.

There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that if you just legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous that their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous their prosperity will find its way up through every class that rests upon it.¹³⁹

Bryan viewed the nation and the world as a series of struggles between the forces of good and evil. For him, the battle between gold and silver was essentially a battle between rural and urban America.¹⁴⁰ Bryan drove home this point when he stated:

You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.¹⁴¹

Bryan then launched into his dramatic close:

If they dare to come out and in the open defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the Nation and the world. Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands 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.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ *Official Report* 1896: 233–34.

¹⁴⁰ Koenig 1971: 197.

¹⁴¹ *Official Report* 1896: 234.

¹⁴² *Official Report* 1896: 234.

As he spoke the words “crown of thorns,” Bryan touched his hands to his temples; his fingers, spread inward, moved slowly down, compelling his audience to imagine the thorns piercing his flesh. As he uttered the words “cross of gold,” he extended his arms as if being crucified. He held this pose before the crowd of 20,000 people for a few brief seconds, wondering if he had overreached.¹⁴³ There was complete stillness, “a pause while the delegates and spectators came to fully appreciate the image that had just been placed before them.”¹⁴⁴

According to the *Atlanta Constitution*, “For a moment after Bryan’s last words there was a fearful silence. Breathlessly the audience leaned forward, in excited attitude...Then came a murmur of admiration. The murmurs grew into whispers of approving comment; the whisperings swelled into a wave of vigorous hand-clapping; the hand-clapping burst into an uplifting of voices.”¹⁴⁵

And then the crowd went absolutely wild:

Everybody stood up, even the eastern men, who at first were disposed to remain in their seats. Westerners shouted, waved handkerchiefs, hats, flags, canes, umbrellas and anything else conspicuous and portable. Deafening cheers rent the air and articles of every description were thrown high above the surging sea of humanity. The staffs bearing the names of the states were held aloft with flags and other things on top and waved to and fro. When that pastime became too tame...nearly all the silver states and some of the gold states joined in the procession and marched in triumph around the floor. . . . This furor continued for a quarter of an hour and no effort was made by the chairman or sergeant-at-arms to check its tempestuous progress. Away to the west and north and south of the platform in the multitude of spectators the demonstration of the delegates was repeated.

Hundreds of umbrellas were opened by the apparently crazed people. Harmless missiles of paper and other things were hurled through the air on the delegates’ heads. The remarkable feature of this wild outburst was that its spontaneity was apparent and it was so much a personal tribute to Mr. Bryan that eastern delegates who differed from him caught the infection and joined in moderately.¹⁴⁶

A delegate from Tennessee picked up the pole that held the sign designating the Tennessee delegation, began waving it around, and marched toward the Nebraska delegation, where Bryan had resumed his seat. Dr. E. B. Bush of Georgia¹⁴⁷ raced down the aisle toward the

¹⁴³ Koenig 1971: 198.

¹⁴⁴ Bensel 2008: 233.

¹⁴⁵ *Atlanta Constitution*, July 11, 1896.

¹⁴⁶ Bensel 2008: 1.

¹⁴⁷ Elijah Blackshear Bush, Sr. (1850–1914) was a physician from Georgia.

Nebraska delegation, waving the Georgia standard. Joe Lahay¹⁴⁸ leaped across the New York delegation in an attempt to beat Georgia to Bryan's side.¹⁴⁹ A fat man carrying the Kentucky banner marched up the main aisle, and following close behind him were the standards of Alabama, Nebraska, Louisiana and a lengthening string of western and southern states.¹⁵⁰ Only the signs of the gold states remained in place. The Nebraska delegation hoisted Bryan upon their shoulders while the "standard bearers began a ghost dance around him."¹⁵¹

When the commotion finally subsided (the demonstration lasted an hour), a vote was taken on the adoption of the pro-gold minority plank to the platform.¹⁵² To no one's surprise, the minority plank was defeated by a vote of 626 to 303. David Hill then called for a second vote on his proposed addition to the platform commending the "honesty, economy, courage and fidelity" of the Cleveland administration.¹⁵³ Again, to no one's great surprise, Hill's proposed addition to the platform lost by a vote of 357 yeas to 564 nays.¹⁵⁴ For the first time ever, a Democratic convention was on record "as having failed to adopt words of gratitude for the sitting Democratic administration."¹⁵⁵ The majority report of the Committee on Resolutions was then approved by a vote of 628 to 301.¹⁵⁶ The free coinage of silver would be the central issue of the Democratic platform of 1896.¹⁵⁷

After the platform was adopted, the delegates were supposed to immediately move into the presidential nominations. But the campaign managers for Bland, Boies and Blackburn knew that emotions were running high for Bryan after his glorious speech. They needed time to let the delegates cool down and to recommit support for their candidates. As a result, they orchestrated a recess of the convention until later in the evening of July 9th.¹⁵⁸ Accordingly, the delegates reconvened in the Coliseum at 8:26 p.m. to begin the task of nominating their candidate for President of the United States.¹⁵⁹

Richard Bland was the first candidate to be nominated. In making the nomination, George Vest¹⁶⁰ said, in part, "Twenty years ago the battle for silver was begun in the halls of Congress by a modest, unpretending brave man, not an iridescent or meteoric statesman, but of the people and from the people, who has never faltered for an instant in the great struggle. Others doubted and wavered, some yielded to blandishment and patronage, and are now holding office under the gold power; others misrepresented their constituents and have been provided for in the

¹⁴⁸ Joseph M. Lahay (1864–1911) was a convention delegate from the Indian territory.

¹⁴⁹ Eaton 1964: 173.

¹⁵⁰ Koenig 1971: 198.

¹⁵¹ Haynes 2016: 229.

¹⁵² Sautter and Burke, *Inside the Wigwam*, 95.

¹⁵³ Haynes 2016: 229.

¹⁵⁴ Bryan 1896: 208.

¹⁵⁵ Haynes 2016: 229.

¹⁵⁶ Haynes 2016: 229.

¹⁵⁷ To be sure, not all Democrats were in favor of bimetallism. In fact, throughout the Northeast and upper Midwest, Democrats who couldn't stand the party's new platform and the rhetoric of its new leader made plans to defeat them. In early September they convened the National Democratic Party in order to nominate a ticket committed to the gold standard. They nominated Illinois senator John M. Palmer for president and former Kentucky governor Simon B. Buckner for vice-president. Kazin 2006: 63; *Campaign Text Book of the National Democratic Party* 1896.

¹⁵⁸ Haynes 2016: 229–30.

¹⁵⁹ *Official Report* 1896: 257.

¹⁶⁰ George Graham Vest (1830–1904) was U.S. Senator from Missouri from 1879 to 1903.

national infirmity of the present administration; but Richard Parks Bland stands now where he stood then, the living, breathing embodiment of the silver cause.”¹⁶¹ He also reminded his audience that Bland was not just a one trick pony. He discussed Bland’s extensive record in Congress and closed with the following ditty: “Give us Silver Dick, and silver quick, and we will make McKinley sick, in the Ides of next November.”¹⁶²

David Overmyer¹⁶³ and J. R. Williams¹⁶⁴ gave seconding speeches in support of Bland’s candidacy.¹⁶⁵ In a nod to Bryan’s outstanding oratory earlier in the day, Williams described Bland thusly: “A candidate who is not an orator, but a statesman of sound judgment and many years of useful experience; a man whose long and loyal services for free coinage of silver has made his illustrious name a watchword in every home in America.”¹⁶⁶

Following Bland’s nomination, Henry T. Lewis was recognized by the chair. Lewis wasted no time in nominating William Jennings Bryan, claiming, “He needs no speech to introduce him to this Convention. He needs no encomium to commend him to the people of the United States. Honor him, fellow Democrats, and you will honor yourselves; nominate him and you will reflect credit upon the party you represent; honor him and you will win for yourselves the plaudits of your constituents and the blessings of posterity.”¹⁶⁷ Lewis’s nomination of Bryan resulted in a long period of noise, shouting, cheers and confusion.¹⁶⁸ When the demonstration showed no signs of ending, Lewis, who had not finished his nominating speech, left the stage and returned to the Georgia delegation, believing “that he had produced a satisfactory effect. . . .”¹⁶⁹

Once order was restored, T. F. Kluttz,¹⁷⁰ George F. Williams¹⁷¹ and Thomas J. Kernan¹⁷² all gave speeches seconding Bryan’s nomination.¹⁷³ Kernan in particular laid it on thick, stating, “I believe that to nominate him is to elect him; I believe that to elect him is to restore business and to return to prosperity; and when his term of office shall have ended, I believe that we Democrats can truly say what has been so well said of another, that ‘he smote the rock of the public resources and it streamed with revenue; that he touched the portal of the public credit and it rolled open at his feet.’”¹⁷⁴

¹⁶¹ *Official Report* 1896: 259.

¹⁶² *Official Report* 1896: 260.

¹⁶³ David Overmyer (1847–1907) was the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for governor of Kansas in 1894 and a delegate to numerous Democratic conventions

¹⁶⁴ James Robert Williams (1850–1923) had been a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1889 to 1895 and was a close friend of William Jennings Bryan.

¹⁶⁵ *Official Report* 1896: 260–65.

¹⁶⁶ *Official Report* 1896: 263.

¹⁶⁷ *Official Report* 1896: 266.

¹⁶⁸ *Official Report* 1896: 266.

¹⁶⁹ Bensel 2008: 278.

¹⁷⁰ T. K. Kluttz (1848–1918) was a convention delegate from North Carolina.

¹⁷¹ A Massachusetts lawyer, George Fred Williams (1869–1898) represented his state in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1891 to 1893 and was an unsuccessful candidate for governor in 1896.

¹⁷² Thomas J. Kernan (1854–1911) was a Louisiana delegate.

¹⁷³ *Official Report* 1896: 266–69.

¹⁷⁴ *Official Report* 1896: 269.

David Turpie¹⁷⁵ then moved, and Oscar A. Trippet¹⁷⁶ seconded, the nomination of Claude Matthews.¹⁷⁷

After Matthews was nominated, Frederick White¹⁷⁸ mounted the platform and nominated Horace Boies for president. In doing so he said, in part:

Upon the overshadowing issue of this campaign Governor Boies stands upon an invulnerable platform, the Constitution of his country, inasmuch as the Constitution, in defining what the State shall use as “legal tender in the payment of debts,” designates not gold or silver, but gold and silver. Governor Boies believes that the bimetallic system thus provided for in the fundamental law of the land is the system the Democratic party must indorse and uphold. He believes that so long as the Constitution remains unchanged Congress has no power to demonetize either metal. Hence, in common with the great mass of the American people, he believes that the demonetization of silver was not an ordinary political blunder, but an actual crime, and he can conceive of no condition which can possibly arise that would justify the Democratic party in justifying that crime or in helping to perpetuate its direful result.¹⁷⁹

T. A. Smith¹⁸⁰ seconded Boies’ nomination.¹⁸¹

John S. Rhea¹⁸² then nominated Joseph Blackburn, a former Confederate soldier, for the office of president of the United States.¹⁸³ Delegate William W. Foote¹⁸⁴ seconded Blackburn’s nomination.¹⁸⁵

The last person to be nominated for the presidency on the third day of the convention was John R. McLean. Colonel A. W. Patrick of Ohio¹⁸⁶ moved the nomination.¹⁸⁷ Once the nominations were completed, well after midnight on July 10th, the convention adjourned until later that morning. The convention’s fourth day would be the day of decision.

Throughout the night and into the morning, Bryan’s supporters tried to woo as many votes as possible. They concentrated on trying to convince Ohio to swing its votes to Bryan on the second or third ballot, expecting such a move to trigger a stampede in Bryan’s favor. The Bryan

¹⁷⁵ David Battle Turpie (1828-1909) was U.S. Senator from Indiana from 1887 to 1899.

¹⁷⁶ Oscar A. Trippet (1856-1923) was a California lawyer and delegate to the 1896 convention.

¹⁷⁷ *Official Report* 1896: 275–76.

¹⁷⁸ Frederick Edward White (1844–1920) was an Iowa farmer who served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1891 to 1893.

¹⁷⁹ *Official Report* 1896: 280.

¹⁸⁰ Minnesotan T. A. Smith was not a delegate.

¹⁸¹ *Official Report* 1896: 281–83.

¹⁸² Delegate John Stockale Rhea (1855–1924) was a Kentucky lawyer and prosecuting attorney.

¹⁸³ *Official Report* 1896: 283–86.

¹⁸⁴ William W. Foote (1846–1904) was a California delegate to the convention.

¹⁸⁵ *Official Report* 1896: 286–87.

¹⁸⁶ A. W. Patrick (1829–1909) was a delegate from Ohio.

¹⁸⁷ *Official Report* 1896: 289–91.

enthusiasts agreed that in exchange for Ohio placing her votes squarely behind Bryan, McLean would be awarded the vice-presidency. Dr. Charles Rosser rushed to tell Bryan that victory was in sight. Bryan declared that the deal must be scuttled. According to Bryan, despite McLean's support of silver, he was not politically "straight." Bryan further opined that he could not afford to be nominated as a result of any kind of political deal.¹⁸⁸

Chairman White called day four of the convention to order at 11:00 a.m. Before the voting for the presidential nominees could begin, William Harity nominated Robert E. Pattison for president. M. A. Miller¹⁸⁹ then nominated Sylvester Pennoyer¹⁹⁰ for the presidency.¹⁹¹

As the balloting began, rumors were flying: the gold delegates were going to bolt the convention, the gold men were going to vote as a bloc for Senator Teller, Bryan had momentum in his favor and would capture the nomination on the first ballot, Bland was a shoo-in. Uncertainty was in the air. As one reporter noted, "A few people said there was going to be a nomination right away. Others claimed the barning would occur about the fourth ballot, while more were strenuous in the belief that the blessed thing might tie up for a week."¹⁹²

Under the rules of the convention, a two-thirds vote was necessary to capture the nomination.¹⁹³ Since there were 930 voting delegates at the convention, a candidate would need 623 votes to win the prize. The first ballot showed no clear consensus. Bland was the clear frontrunner with 235 votes. Bryan polled a respectable 137 votes. Pattison came in third with ninety-seven votes. Blackburn received eighty-two votes, Boies received sixty-seven, McLean received fifty-four and Matthews received thirty-seven. "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman (whose name had not even been placed in nomination) received seventeen votes, all from his home state of South Carolina. A handful of other candidates received vote totals in the single digits. One hundred and seventy-eight gold delegates refused to cast a vote.¹⁹⁴

On the second ballot, the race became a two-man contest between Bland and Bryan. Bland still had a commanding lead, garnering 281 votes. Bryan was in second place with 197 votes. Pattison gained three additional votes and stood at an even 100 votes. Most of Bland's and Bryan's gains came at the expense of Boies and Blackburn. All of South Carolina's votes, which had previously been cast for "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, were cast for Bryan. One hundred and sixty gold delegates again refused to cast a ballot.¹⁹⁵

The third ballot showed little movement. Both Bland and Bryan gained votes. Bland was sitting at 291 votes, an increase of ten votes from the second ballot. Bryan gained an additional

¹⁸⁸ Koenig 1972: 201–02.

¹⁸⁹ M.A. Miller (1862–1938) was a drug store owner and Democratic politician from Linn Co., Oregon. He served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention five times. He was an at-large delegate to the 1896 convention.

¹⁹⁰ Sylvester Pennoyer (1831–1902) served as governor of Oregon from 1887 to 1895. He was a member of the Populist party and was elected mayor of Portland in 1896.

¹⁹¹ *Official Report* 1896: 298.

¹⁹² Haynes 2016: 231.

¹⁹³ The two-thirds rule was first adopted at the Democratic National Convention in 1832 and was more or less adhered to at every convention until the 1936 convention. Bensel 2008: 131; "South Bows to Change: Appeased by Promise to Reapportion as Two-thirds Rule Ends," *New York Times*, June 26, 1936, 1.

¹⁹⁴ Haynes 2016: 231; *Official Report* 1896: 312. Most of the gold leaders in the party had decided that abstaining from the proceedings (and particularly the voting) was their best strategy. "Their silent presence would dramatically protest the silver platform without compelling them to either oppose or support the ticket." Bensel 2008: 111.

¹⁹⁵ Haynes 2016: 231; *Official Report* 1896: 315.

twenty-two votes and stood at 219. Pattison was still in third place, with ninety-seven votes. Once again, 162 gold delegates had refused to participate in the balloting.¹⁹⁶

On the fourth ballot, the momentum shifted decidedly in Bryan's favor. For the first time, Bryan moved into the lead, with 280 votes. Bland dropped to second place, with 241 votes. Pattison still held on to third place with ninety-seven votes. One hundred and sixty-one gold delegates again refused to vote.¹⁹⁷ As the fourth ballot was being completed, the Illinois delegation (who had consistently cast its forty-eight votes for Bland) left the floor "for consultation."¹⁹⁸ Many saw this as a sign that Illinois was about to switch its votes from Bland to Bryan and help deliver Bryan the nomination.¹⁹⁹

Before the fifth ballot, the convention was in a state of frenzy, "with most suspecting that a Bryan nomination was coming on the next ballot."²⁰⁰ Chairman White then announced a ruling from the platform that all but guaranteed that Bryan would capture the nomination on the fifth ballot. According to White, the two-thirds rule for nomination meant that a candidate had to receive two-thirds of the delegate votes being cast, NOT two-thirds of the total delegates at the convention. Since only 768 votes were being cast, the winning candidate only needed 512 votes to secure the nomination.²⁰¹

Following White's pronouncement, balloting began for the fifth time. Alabama switched to Bryan; Colorado dropped its support of Teller and voted for Bryan; Kansas switched its votes from Bland to Bryan.²⁰² The roll call of states was completed in due course and Bryan still did not have enough votes to win the nomination. The secretary of the convention then returned to call the names of the states that had been passed. Illinois cast all forty-eight of its votes for Bryan. The Ohio delegation switched all forty-six of its votes from John R. McLean to Bryan. The chairman of the Missouri delegation then approached the podium and read a brief letter from Richard Bland. The letter stated, "I wish it to be understood that I do not desire the nomination unless it is the judgment of the free silver delegates that I would be the strongest candidate. If it should at any time appear that my candidacy is the least obstruction to the nomination of any candidate who is acceptable to the free coinage delegates in the Convention, or one more acceptable to a majority of those delegates than myself, I wish my name at once unconditionally withdrawn from further consideration."²⁰³ Bland's name was withdrawn from consideration and Missouri's thirty-four votes were cast for Bryan, finally putting him over the top.²⁰⁴ With the contest over, a motion to make the vote for Bryan unanimous was passed on a voice vote.²⁰⁵

Once Bryan was declared the winner, pandemonium broke out on the convention floor. According to the *Chicago Tribune*:

¹⁹⁶ Haynes 2016: 231; *Official Report* 1896: 320.

¹⁹⁷ Haynes 2016: 231; *Official Report* 1896: 320.

¹⁹⁸ On July 6th the Illinois delegation had voted 43 to 1 to endorse Bland and commit all forty-eight delegates to him under the unit rule. Bensel 2008: 267.

¹⁹⁹ Haynes 2016: 231.

²⁰⁰ Haynes 2016: 231.

²⁰¹ Haynes 2016: 231; *Official Report* 1896: 320.

²⁰² Koenig 1072: 202.

²⁰³ *Official Report* 1896: 323.

²⁰⁴ Haynes 2016: 232; *Official Report* 1896: 324.

²⁰⁵ Haynes 2016: 232.

The air was agitated by thousands of flags and handkerchiefs, banners, umbrellas, and the paper ear-trumpets with which hundreds of the audience had been trying to make the proceedings more audible, all wildly waving back and forth in honor of the victor of the contest. . . .

Down on the floor in the space reserved to the delegates there was equal commotion. The delegates were standing on their chairs watching with interest the efforts of the acres of people around them to make the heavens ring for Bryan and doing all they could to increase the noise. There was a struggle of free silver delegations to reach the standard of Nebraska, and the men of Iowa got there first and hoisted their huge banner of Boies in honor of his successful rival.

The features of the farmer candidate seemed at a distance to have lost some of their benignant expression for the moment, but the tribute to the winner tickled the fancy of the crowd, which recognized it with a stentorian shout which clapped the climax of the pandemonium that had been raging unrestrained from the moment the people knew that Bryan had been nominated.

The standards of the other States waved in the air like cornstalks of a Nebraska farm in a breeze as enthusiastic delegates hurried with them to the common center. They looked like a forest of blue saplings huddled about the seats of the Nebraska delegation, until their bearers started a triumphal procession around the delegates' seats. . . .

Pictures and banners of Bland and the banner representing the Bland silver dollar were carried like captives in the procession to grace the triumph for Bryan. Pictures of Bryan himself pierced and carried aloft on canes or umbrellas dotted the procession of the delegates and waved in the air all over the Coliseum. . . .

The standards of the sound money delegations did not join in the triumphal parade, but remained in their places, though there were indications that their custodians had hard work to keep them from being swept away by the enthusiasm of outsiders.²⁰⁶

The 1896 Democratic National Convention was a bruising affair. The Eastern wing of the party had fought with the Southern and Western portions of the party from the very beginning. The gold men were defeated and the silver men had gained ascendancy. Bryan had emerged victorious, "but his prize was the leadership of a broken party."²⁰⁷ As the Chicago Tribune concluded, "Never has the Democratic Party been so torn to pieces as it is now."²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Bensel 2008: 300.

²⁰⁷ Koenig 1971: 208.

²⁰⁸ Sautter and Burke 1996: 98.

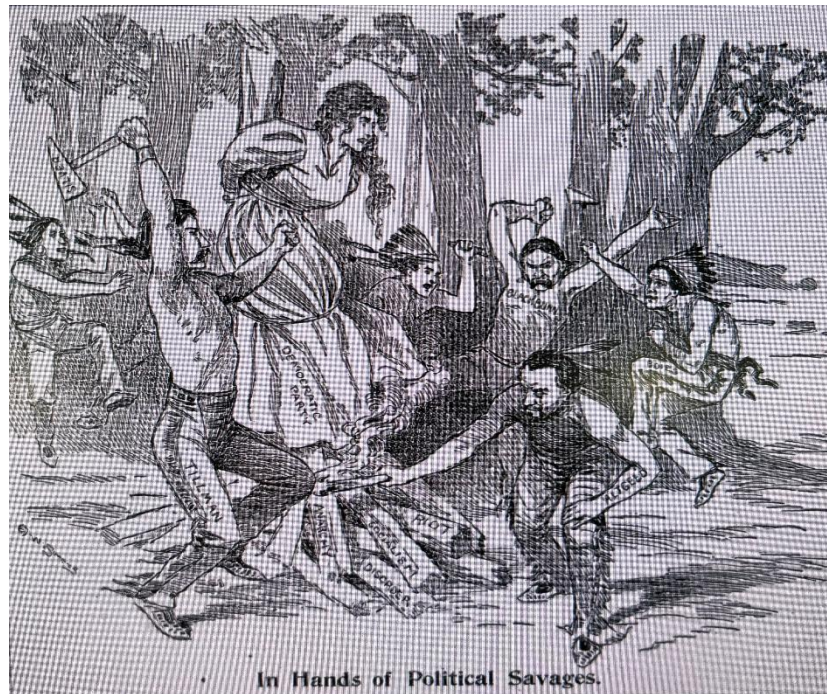


Figure 10.2: This cartoon by W. Simons, entitled "In the Hands of Political Savages," depicts the Democratic Party as a woman being burned at the stake by the "political savages." The cartoon appeared in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on July 5, 1896.

A cartoon appearing in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* on July 5, 1896, showed the Democratic Party, in the form of a beautiful woman, tied to a tree in a forest. "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, John Peter Altgeld, Horace Boies and Joseph Blackburn dance around her, bare chested, dressed as American Indians. Several of them carry silver tomahawks. Altgeld is bent over touching a lit torch to wood piled around the woman's feet. The logs are labeled "anarchy," "disorder," "socialism," and "riot." The message is clear—the silver Democrats were burning the Democratic Party to the ground.

Not surprisingly, Bryan was unsuccessful on election day. McKinley polled 7,107,822 popular votes to Bryan's 6,511,072. In the Electoral College, McKinley bested Bryan 271 to 176. Bryan won most of the western states (McKinley carried Oregon and California) and the solid South, but McKinley captured the industrial northeast, the critical midwestern states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa and carried the traditionally Democratic states of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland and West Virginia.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁹ Sautter and Burke 1996: 101. The Populist movement never recovered from Bryan's failure in the 1896 election. In the Midwest, the Populist Party essentially merged into the Democratic Party before the end of the 1890s. Lawrence Goodwyn 1978: 285–86. Although it continued to operate in the South and the West, by the first decade of the twentieth century it was a dried-out shell of its former self. Thomas E. Watson was the party's nominee for president in 1904—he mustered only 113,258 popular votes and failed to capture a single electoral vote. McKee 1906: 401, 416–17. In 1913, Walter Lippmann wrote, "As I write, a convention of the Populist Party has just taken

The wounds that were opened and exacerbated prior to and during the 1896 Democratic National Convention simply could not be healed in the five months between the convention and the election. Most traditional Democrats—the Gold Democrats—turned their backs on Bryan, who, together with his running mate, Arthur Sewall of Maine,²¹⁰ did not carry a single state where Gold Democrats predominated: Connecticut, Delaware, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Maryland, Pennsylvania. Without two or three of those states in his electoral column, Bryan had no chance of winning. Sectional tensions and mistrust among the Democrats practically guaranteed that the Republicans would capture the White House.



Figure 10.3: 1896 Democratic nominees William J. Bryan of Nebraska for President (l.) and Arthur Sewall of Maine for Vice President (r.).

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Chicago Tribune, July 5, 1896.

place. Eight delegates attended the meeting, which was held in a parlor.” Lippman 1913: 275. This was the last gasp of the People’s Party.

²¹⁰ Arthur Sewall (1835–1900) was a Maine shipbuilder.

Chicago Tribune, July 7, 1896.

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