

From Bryan to Trump: The Legacy of Populism and the 1896 Presidential Election

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Abstract: The following research paper compares the populism of William Jennings Bryan during the Presidential election of 1896 with that of Donald J. Trump during the Election of 2024. The aim of this paper is to show that Trump’s populist campaigning style is an inheritance of Bryan’s. In addition, it shows that there is a long tradition of American political leaders that were influenced by Bryan, who in turn were influential to Trump’s victory in the Elections of 2016 and 2024. To compare the two figures, the paper is divided into two main chapters. The first examines American populism in the late 19th century, represented by Bryan, and how Bryan in 1896 foreshadowed Trump in 2024. The second chapter examines populism in the 21st century and draws a line connecting Bryan to Trump, via 20th century populist leaders such as George Wallace and Patrick Buchanan. While the first chapter examines populism through the lens of silver and the standards debate, the second chapter looks into populism through the debate on immigration. In their respective times, both Bryan and Trump were able to capitalize on a controversial issue, and frame it in the context of a long-standing battle between the people and the elites. The paper concludes by showing that the study of 19th century populism is important to understanding Trump’s victory, and how Trump appeals to the enduring concerns of Americans who felt underrepresented and unfairly treated by the political establishment, much like Bryan two centuries before him.

For they did the most unpopular thing that men can do; they started a popular movement. A man who dares to make a direct appeal to the populace always makes a long series of enemies—beginning with the populace.

- G.K. Chesterton, St. Thomas Aquinas.¹

Introduction

Witnessing the historic re-election of Donald Trump in 2024, former White House speechwriter and Grover Cleveland biographer Troy Senik wrote: “The current state of American politics is aggressively *precedented*; it’s just that the historical touchstones lie in one of the most

¹ G.K. Chesterton, “St. Thomas Aquinas.” Project Gutenberg Australia, published December 2001, accessed December 27, 2024, <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks01/0100331.txt>.

poorly understood periods of American history: the so-called Gilded Age that followed the Civil War and endured into the early twentieth century.”² The historical parallels between our current era and the Gilded Age are many: until Donald Trump, Cleveland was the only American President elected in two non-consecutive terms; in 1888, Cleveland lost the presidency to Republican challenger Benjamin Harrison despite winning the popular vote, in the same fashion that Hillary Clinton lost to Trump in 2016; Trump was nominated for the White House by his party three times - in 2016, 2020, and 2024 - like William Jennings Bryan - in 1896, 1900, and 1908. These similarities, however, do not end there. This research paper aims to contribute to the scholarly study of this time period in American history, while showing that we are living in a time not so different from that of the Gilded Age.

This paper focuses on the Populist revolt that culminated in Bryan’s 1896 presidential campaign, and how this upheaval in late nineteenth-century America influenced Donald Trump’s modern-day populist appeal. While Western liberal democracy often places ideologies in a left-right political spectrum, populism defies such categorization. As Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser suggested, populism is a “thin-centered ideology”, meaning that it “seldom exists in pure form. Rather, it appears in combination with, and manages to survive thanks to, other concepts.”³ For example, Bryan’s populism is a combination of agrarianism, progressivism, and Free Silver advocacy, while Trump’s populism is based on immigration restrictionism, social conservatism, and Tea Party libertarianism. Restricting immigration was also part of the 19th century Populist platform, which condemned the “pauper and criminal classes of the world” earning less wages than native-born laborers.⁴ However, following the Panic of 1893, the People’s Party shifted its focus towards agrarianism and bimetallism. Despite Bryan being often put in the left wing of the liberal-democratic political spectrum, his campaign had elements which appealed to the American Right. In the same way, while Trump is perceived to be on the

² Troy Senik, “Revenge of the Gilded Age.” *City Journal*, published November 8, 2024, accessed December 18, 2024, https://www.city-journal.org/article/revenge-of-the-gilded-age?utm_source=virtuous&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=cjdaily. (emphasis in original)

³ Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, *Populism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 6 - 7.

⁴ “The ‘Omaha Platform’ of the People’s Party (1892).” *The American Yawp Reader*, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/16-capital-and-labor/the-omaha-platform-of-the-peoples-party-1892/>.

political right, his brand of anti-establishment resistance has attracted followers who are not traditionally conservative. Instead of placing society into the left and right wings, populists divide the polity into two camps: “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite.”⁵ Because of populism’s ideological contingency, there are multiple ways to separate “the pure people” from “the corrupt elite.” Therefore, this paper claims that Trump’s political program in 2024 is not only consistent with, but is also an inheritance of Bryan’s in 1896.

Populism - whether left- or right-leaning - always works within a democratic context, as suggested by John B. Judis.⁶ The ongoing debate among political analysts is whether it is a force subversive or contributive to democracy. In the context of American politics, this paper takes the latter view. As said by Irving Kristol, American populism is far from an enemy to good, constitutional government, but instead an effort to “bring our governing elites to their senses.”⁷ Indeed, populist movements in American history often follow serious crises of confidence in the government to fulfill its twin promise of defending liberty and delivering prosperity.

For Bryan’s campaign in 1896, it was the Panic of 1893 and President Cleveland’s mismanagement of the ensuing crisis. Having already faced low crop prices before the economic downturn, the Southern farmer had the most to lose following the 1893 crisis. As the agrarian faced mounting debts, calculated not just in money but in the crops produced, he looked to the Eastern creditor who lectured him on the importance of “sound money” as little more than a thief who enriched himself off the farmer’s hard labor. In contrast, he would likely find his concerns represented in the People’s Party, or the Populists, an agrarian political movement that was growing in popularity since the Presidential election of 1892. Having included in their platform a demand for free and unlimited coinage of silver, the Populists’ viewed Cleveland’s preservation of the monometallic gold standard in the wake of the 1893 crisis as a sign of betrayal of agrarian interests to the creditors of the East, as argued by Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz.⁸ Their grievances against the present administration were transposed into provocative rhetoric by William Jennings Bryan, who proclaimed with vigor his sympathy towards the

⁵ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 6. This distinction between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” will be a recurring theme throughout the paper.

⁶ John B. Judis, *The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics* (Columbia Global Reports, 2016), 15.

⁷ Irving Kristol, “The New Populism: Not to Worry,” in *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea* (The Free Press, 1995), 363.

⁸ Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz, *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867 - 1960* (Princeton University Press, 1963), 116.

struggling agrarian in a 1893 address to Congress: “The poor man who takes property by force is called a thief, but the creditor who can by legislation make a debtor pay a dollar twice as large as he borrowed is lauded as the friend of a sound currency. The man who wants the people to destroy the Government is an anarchist, but the man who wants the Government to destroy the people is a patriot.”⁹

Similar to Bryan, Trump’s public addresses are provocative, but reflective of his supporters’ concerns. The Covid-19 pandemic, economic instability, and heightened anxiety over mass immigration all served as grounds to divide those who feel disadvantaged by the status quo, and those who prefer to maintain the present order. In his speech at the 2024 Republican National Convention, the former President voiced these concerns with fighting words:

We have an inflation crisis that is making life unaffordable, ravaging the incomes of working and low-income families, and crushing, just simply crushing our people like never before. They’ve never seen anything like it. We also have an illegal immigration crisis, and it’s taking place right now, as we sit here in this beautiful arena. It’s a massive invasion at our southern border that has spread misery, crime, poverty, disease, and destruction to communities all across our land. Nobody’s ever seen anything like it.¹⁰

It is worth noticing that during this address - his first following an assassination attempt - Trump used the phrase “our people” seven times, while “the people” was used just four times. This further emphasized his combative style of politics, his appeal to nativist opinion, and his proclaimed allegiance with “the pure people” against “the corrupt elite.” Immigration, while previously a third-rail political issue, was thrust into national discourse when Trump first ran as a Republican in 2016. Having made it central to his campaigns in 2020 and 2024, the former President views immigration as a crisis which harms the poor and working class, while leaving the elites enriched and satisfied.

In both campaigns, Bryan and Trump gave public addresses in the wake of an economic downturn. While Bryan focused his attacks on the gold standard, Trump took particular aim at

⁹ William Jennings Bryan, *The First Battle: A Story of the Campaign of 1896* (W.B. Conkey Company, 1897), 81.

¹⁰ “Transcript of Donald J. Trump's Convention Speech.” *The New York Times*, published July 19, 2024, accessed December 19, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/19/us/politics/trump-rnc-speech-transcript.html>.

mass immigration. This is because while these issues impact the economic lives of all Americans, they can be either beneficial or harmful to an individual's financial status depending on his interests and social class. Following an economic crisis, this divide between the winners and losers of public policies becomes more and more apparent. From the examples of figures from Bryan to Trump, we can conclude that to be a successful populist leader means to frame a divisive issue as a battleground between "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite." And if we measure political success in terms of electoral victory, Trump succeeded in ways that the populist figures who came before him can only dream of.

A Note on Methodology

The paper is formatted as an exercise in political history and comparative politics. It is divided into two sections: one examining the populism of William Jennings Bryan in 1896, and the other examining the populism of Donald Trump in 2024. Because of this, the key primary sources used will be speeches and public addresses from both candidates leading up to their respective elections. Bryan, in particular, had his public speeches in 1896 collected in a volume titled *The First Battle: A Story of the Campaign of 1896* (W.B. Conkey Company, 1897). From 1891 to 1895, Bryan served as the U.S. representative from Nebraska's First District. Because of this, the paper also used as a source the Congressional Record archives during these years. In addition to examining Trump's speeches in 2024, the research would also examine some of his speeches in the campaigns of 2016 and 2020 that carry the same populist rhetoric. Transcripts of these speeches are available in the Trump White House Archives, as well as in mainstream news outlets such as the New York Times.

For secondary literature, sources are consulted based on their relevance to the topic of populism, their scholarly credentials, as well as their authors' objectives. For Bryan's role in the campaign of 1896, Michael Kazin's biography *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Anchor, 2006) proved to be a reliable source. The works of John D. Hicks is an excellent, pro-populist secondary source on the history of the People's Party, in particular his book *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (University of Minnesota Press, 1931). By contrast, the works of Richard Hofstadter, in particular *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1955) and *The Paranoid Style in American*

Politics and Other Essays (Vintage Books, 1967), are anti-populist in their historiography. This ensures the balance of viewpoint when it comes to assessing the significance of populism in American politics.

To understand the economic factor behind the two populist movements - 1896 and 2024 - the research consulted works of economic history from Chicago School economists, in particular Milton Friedman and Anna Jacobson Schwartz (*A Monetary History of the United States, 1867 - 1960*, Princeton University Press, 1963) and Carola Binder (*Shock Values: Prices and Inflation in American Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, 2024).

Finally, to understand how Trump fits into the American right-wing and populist contexts, Matthew Continetti's *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism* (Basic Books, 2022) is an excellent historical guide. And to obtain a balanced understanding of the working class politics that form Trump's support base, the paper relied on works that examine this subject from two different perspectives. From a Republican standpoint, Ross Douhat and Reihan Salam's *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* (Doubleday, 2008) predicted a realignment of the Republican Party. And from a Democratic view, John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira's *Where Have All the Democrats Gone? The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes* (Henry Holt and Company, 2023) is an excellent analysis on how the Democratic Party can adjust to this realignment.

The authors and scholars interviewed - namely Carola Binder, Matthew Continetti, and Michael Kazin - provided helpful information to the research of this paper. Finally, Dr. Dániel Cseh's consultation during the writing process provided invaluable insight into shaping the paper's form, content, and style.

I. The Populist Candidate: William Jennings Bryan and the Realignment of America

The 1896 Presidential election is considered one of the pivotal moments in American politics, and is one of five elections that brought out a realignment in the American electorate. Following 1896, R. Hal Williams observed, "[n]ew voting patterns replaced the old, a new majority party arose to govern the country, and national policies shifted to suit the new

realities.”¹¹ And it is thanks to the candidacy of a junior Congressman from Nebraska that the Democratic Party in 1896, per Michael Kazin, “embarked on a voyage, of ideology and policy, that would remake governance in America during the Progressive Era.”¹² With an aim to wrestle control of the Democratic Party from Grover Cleveland, Bryan in turn remade the party into a more populist political organization. This could not be achieved without the formation of a diverse political coalition that shared his intense dissatisfaction with the status quo.

It is hard to imagine, in our days of digital currency and fiat money, that the key electoral divide during 1896 was whether gold or silver should be the standard metal for the American dollar. According to Kazin, by the time Bryan was elected to Congress, “few politicians could avoid taking a stand on the matter [...] [T]he money debate split each of the parties along regional lines: within the northeast quadrant, hub of the nation’s industry and commerce, gold sentiment reigned supreme, but everywhere else, most politicians backed a currency based on both precious metals.”¹³ It is even harder to imagine that during this period in American history, a candidate could gain popular support for being pro-inflation. The Free Silver platform, which Bryan lent his support, was both a progressive and reactive stance against the prevailing gold standard. It is progressive because it advocated for the increase in the money supply, which would allow indebted farmers to pay off what they owed to the creditors. It is reactive because it was a backlash to past anti-silver legislations, namely the Coinage Act of 1873 and the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890.

Proponents of Free Silver - including Bryan - dubbed the Act of 1873 as the “Crime of ‘73”, for the legislation did not permit the coinage of the silver dollar, resulting in the demonetization of silver and a *de facto* gold standard. Because bimetallism and the silver dollar were the standard during the Founding Era, the Free Silver platform also contained a sense of conservatism. Carola Binder, writing in *Shock Values*, noted that the adoption of a bimetallic standard was recommended by Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, wherein “each dollar was assigned the value of 371.25 grains of pure silver or 24.75 grains of pure gold. This implied a ratio of 15 to 1 between the value of gold and the value of silver.”¹⁴ Thus the Free Silver

¹¹ R. Hal Williams, *Realigning America: McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896* (University Press of Kansas, 2010), xi.

¹² Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Anchor Books, 2007), 79.

¹³ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 35.

¹⁴ Carola Binder, *Shock Values: Prices and Inflation in American Democracy* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), 39.

platform, which advocated for a 16 to 1 ratio, appeared as a return to Hamilton and the Founding. And the “Crime of ‘73”, Kazin remarked, “became a rallying cry for a disparate congeries of outsiders - labor unionists, Populists, self-taught economists, and romantic pamphleteers.”¹⁵ One such pamphleteer was Sarah E.V. Emery, whose tract *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People* first published in 1887. With 1873 looming large throughout the text, Emery attributed the demonetization of silver as the central conspiracy to undermine ordinary Americans. Quoting from a letter attributed to Abraham Lincoln, she alleged that following the Civil War, “corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow, and the money power in this country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands, and the Republic is destroyed.”¹⁶ Although this Lincoln quotation is fabricated, Emery gave voice to a growing coalition of Populist supporters which included agrarians struggling to pay off their debts, silver men and women advocating for a return of bimetallism, and laborers fighting against the profiteering of Big Business. It is no coincidence that *Seven Financial Conspiracies* - which was dedicated to “the enslaved people of a Dying Republic” - was reprinted in 1894, when all these political tensions came to a head.¹⁷

During the Panic of 1893, supporters of bimetallism reacted with utmost fervor when President Cleveland called an emergency meeting in Congress on August 7th that year, resulting in the repeal of the 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act and an effective return to the gold standard. Although John Sherman - the Senator from Ohio who signed the bill into law - was not a silver advocate, he had anticipated that the law would act as a compromise towards the growing popularity of the Free Silver movement. “I assented to that compromise,” reflected Sherman in a Senate meeting on May 25th, 1892, “with the utmost hesitation and with long delay; but [...] I finally assented to what was believed to be a measure of relief for silver, expressing at the same time my strong desire to bring silver up to the standard of gold.”¹⁸ On July 14th, 1890, the Act was passed in both the House and the Senate, allowing for the Treasury

¹⁵ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 35.

¹⁶ Sarah E.V. Emery, *Seven Financial Conspiracies Which Have Enslaved the American People* (Robert Smith & Co., 1894), 59.

¹⁷ Emery, *Seven Financial Conspiracies*, Dedication.

¹⁸ Senator Sherman of Ohio, speaking on the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, on May 25, 1892, 52nd Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 23, pt. 5: 4649.

to purchase up to 4.5 million ounces of silver on a monthly basis.¹⁹ Cleveland, having always been a skeptic of the law, used the economic crisis of 1893 to repeal it. In his message to Congress on August 8th that year, the President proclaimed: “The people of the United States are entitled to a sound and stable currency and to money recognized as such on every exchange and in every market of the world. Their Government has no right to injure them by financial experiments opposed to the policy and practice of other civilized states, nor is it justified in permitting an exaggerated and unreasonable reliance on our national strength and ability to jeopardize the soundness of the people's money.”²⁰

In 1894, in a further attempt to preserve the gold standard against the increasingly vocal Free Silver movement, the Cleveland administration solicited Wall Street bankers and business tycoons such as J.P. Morgan to sell some of their excess gold in exchange for \$50 million in government bonds. Earlier that year, the President sent federal troops to break up a labor strike that pitted the workers belonging to the American Railway Union against the management of Pullman Company, a major railway car manufacturer.²¹ These actions further damaged Cleveland’s image among the silver men and women, who viewed him as a lackey of the Eastern financial establishment, and tarnished his image amongst the working class, who saw him as an enemy of organized labor.

Cleveland’s notion of “sound money” is rebutted by Bryan’s idea of the “honest dollar”, which the Nebraska Congressman articulated in an address at the Madison Square Garden: “What is the test of honesty in money? It must certainly be found in the purchasing power of the dollar. An absolutely honest dollar would not vary in its general purchasing power; it would be absolutely stable when measured by average prices. A dollar which increases in purchasing power is just as dishonest as a dollar which decreases in purchasing power.”²² As Binder explains, when the currency is stabilized via a gold standard, “[c]hanges in the supply or demand of gold lead to changes in its relative price, and thus to changes in the amount of other goods and services that the currency can buy.”²³ Bryan, however, believed that the dollar’s value should be stabilized based on its overall purchasing power, i.e. what amount of goods and commodities it

¹⁹ *Sherman Silver Purchase Act*, Chap. 708, 51st Cong., 1st sess, *U.S. Statutes at Large* 56 (July 14, 1890): 289 - 290.

²⁰ President Cleveland, speaking on the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act, on August 8, 1893, 53rd Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* 25, pt. 1: 206.

²¹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 40 - 41.

²² Bryan, *First Battle*, 321.

²³ Binder, *Shock Values*, 81.

can afford. Thus, he was convinced that a period of inflation caused by a departure from the gold standard would not only increase the money supply - it would also help stabilize prices following deflation and the 1893 crisis. Furthermore, the Congressman viewed the adoption of a bimetallic standard as taking back American sovereignty from the whims of international trade, as England and other European nations had also adopted the gold standard: “[I]nstead of having a gold standard because England has, we will restore bimetallism, and then let England have bimetallism because the United States has it. If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we will fight them to the uttermost.”²⁴ This invocation of England signifies that the ‘battle of the standards’ in 1896 is no less important to American nationhood than the battle for American independence fought by the Founders in 1776.

The American populist tradition, from Bryan to Trump, is greatly inspired by the American Revolution and the Spirit of 1776. Not only does the *Declaration of Independence* assert that government should derive its legitimate power “from the consent of the governed” - it also states that when government becomes despotic or destructive, the people have the right and duty “to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.”²⁵ In his historic address at the 1896 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, the would-be Democratic nominee for President invoked 1776 and the American Revolution to signify the importance of his campaign: “Our ancestors, when but three millions in number, had the courage to declare their political independence of every other nation; shall we, their descendants, when we have grown to seventy millions, declare that we are less independent than our forefathers? No, my friends, that will never be the verdict of our people.”²⁶ This speech would later be known as the “Cross of Gold” address, because of the concluding lines: “You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.”²⁷ Bryan’s theatricality and rhetorical power forecasted a succession of populist leaders who are also captivating performers, including Donald Trump. In an interview with the author, Kazin recounted the Congressman’s memorable body language upon the conclusion of the speech: “[H]e stood at the platform and stretched out his arms to both sides, then put his head down on the side and waited for the applause as if he were Christ on the

²⁴ Bryan, *First Battle*, 206.

²⁵ “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” *National Archives*, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

²⁶ Bryan, *First Battle*, 206.

²⁷ Bryan, *First Battle*, 206.

cross.”²⁸ Given how adept populist leaders can work with media, one can only imagine Bryan’s soaring popularity had radio and television been present during the Election of 1896.

The “Cross of Gold” address was instrumental in gaining Bryan the nomination from the Democratic Party. His nomination was also significant in that it gave him two running mates at the same time. One is Arthur Sewall, a shipbuilder from Maine and a supporter of Free Silver. As speculated by Leslie H. Southwick, Sewall seemed to have been selected by the Democrats as an attempt to balance the “radical” Bryan with a conservative businessman who appealed to the Cleveland-led establishment of the party: “Sewall was [...] a millionaire businessman, opposed to free trade and in favor of the high tariff, unabashedly American and almost imperialistic in his foreign policy views. Thus on most issues other than the monetary one, Bryan and Sewall did not see alike.”²⁹

In contrast, Bryan’s other running mate - the People’s Party leader Thomas Edward Watson - was much more similar in political outlook to the Nebraska Congressman. When the Democrats Bryan, the Populists ran a fusion ticket with Bryan as the Presidential candidate, and Watson as his running mate. Watson had crossed paths with Bryan in Congress: both men were victorious in the 1890 Midterm Elections - Bryan representing Nebraska, and Watson representing Georgia. As recorded by C. Vann Woodward, Watson told Bryan “that he would have to abandon his principles or leave the Democratic Party,” hoping that “this brilliant young man will choose principle - even though he lose office by it. There is such a thing in life as paying too much for office.”³⁰ However aligned their political outlook may be, their political interests were different: Watson represented a nationwide agrarian rebellion against industry and commerce, while Bryan was concerned with Nebraska’s down-trodden constituency.

It is apt to compare Bryan’s two running mates with those of Donald Trump. Mike Pence, the 50th governor of Indiana and Vice President from 2017 and 2021, was a conservative pick by the Republican Party to balance the New York businessman’s outsider status. Meanwhile J.D. Vance, the Senator from Ohio who ran with Trump during the Election of 2024 and (as of this writing) the current Vice-President-elect, is much more aligned with Trump’s populism. A key

²⁸ Michael Kazin, interviewed by the author, *Unlicensed Philosophy with Chuong Nguyen*, published April 3, 2024, accessed January 1, 2025, https://open.substack.com/pub/musicallyspeaking/p/interview-with-michael-kazin-professor?r=bu2im&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=false.

²⁹ Leslie H. Southwick, ed., *Presidential Also-rans and Running Mates, 1788 Through 1996 - Second Edition* (McFarland & Company), 433 - 434

³⁰ Quoted in C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 196.

divide between the two VPs occurred in 2021, following the divisive Presidential election of 2020. As reported by *CNN*, Pence exercised his Constitutional duties and certified the election in favor of the winner - former Vice President Joe Biden - despite Trump's political pressures.³¹ Vance, on the other hand, said in a 2024 interview with *The New York Times* that he did not believe Trump lost in 2020, and that he would have "voted against certification" due to what he believed to be fraudulent attempts at swinging the Election in favor of Biden.³² However, the fact that Pence was rejected as Trump's running mate in favor of Vance shows that a realignment had taken place in the GOP, wherein the party abandoned conservatism in favor of right-wing populism. A similar realignment happened in the Democratic Party in the late 19th century, where a classical liberal party was overtaken by its populist faction, represented by Bryan and Watson.

As Hicks recounted, Tom Watson found his "cause" in the Farmers' Alliance, accepting "in full" the Alliance's platform of being against "the tariff, the national banks, and the currency system."³³ Representing farmers from the North and South, as well as black and white, the Alliance was a force of resistance against the growing industrialization process which took place following the Civil War, in particular the development of the railway system. The late 1870s, Hicks described, were "years of large crops and low prices... in which the price per bushel, the total value of the crop, and the return per cultivated acre steadily declined," thus fueling agrarian discontent that would give rise to the Alliance.³⁴ The organization's political platform represented the early stages of the Progressive Era, as they combined agrarian opposition to capital with the necessity of public education. According to Charles Postel, Alliance meetings would take place in public schoolhouses, for they served "as a metaphor for the Alliance movement as an educational enterprise, and provided the movement with civic legitimacy."³⁵

Bryan's home state of Nebraska served as one of the important hubs of Alliance activities. Even before the Alliance established its presence, Nebraska farmers had already

³¹ Kevin Liptak, "Pence faces pressure from Trump to thwart Electoral College vote," *CNN*, published January 5, 2021, accessed January 10, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/01/05/politics/mike-pence-donald-trump-electoral-college/index.html>.

³² Lulu Garcia-Navarro, "'The Interview': A Conversation With JD Vance," *The New York Times*, published October 12, 2024, accessed January 10, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/12/magazine/jd-vance-interview.html>.

³³ John D. Hicks, *The Populist Revolt: A History of the Farmers' Alliance and the People's Party* (University of Minnesota Press, 1931), 176 - 177.

³⁴ Hicks, *The Populist Revolt*, 99 - 100.

³⁵ Charles Postel, *The Populist Vision* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 59.

exhibited discontent regarding the precariousness of their livelihoods. As James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle wrote, the farmers “had become convinced that they worked longer hours, under more adverse conditions, and with smaller compensation for their labor than any other group on earth. Their difficulty, they were sure, lay basically in the low prices for the products they had to sell.”³⁶ Even when the harvest was plentiful, as was the case in 1889, prices were so low that “[s]ome farmers resorted to burning their corn for fuel instead of selling it to buy coal,” as stated by Kazin.³⁷ The growing presence of industry, in the form of the railroads, also posed a significant concern. Although Nebraska benefited much from the railway, its farmers felt that the federal land grant system “had given the railroads the state’s best agricultural lands at the expense of the homesteaders,” wrote Olson and Naugle.³⁸

Due to their status as debtors, many farmers across the United States were concerned with the inadequate supply of money in circulation. This made them sympathetic to measures which aimed to increase the amount of currency available following the Civil War, particularly those advocated by the Greenback Party. As Richard Hofstadter recounted in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, in 1861, “wartime demands forced the country to suspend specie redemption of its currency and to issue United States notes, the ‘greenbacks,’ which were full legal tender... The nation was now on an inconvertible paper standard. Its greenbacks circulated at a substantial and growing discount in terms of gold.”³⁹ However, upon the resumption of the specie standard, there was significant interest from farmers and businessmen, particularly from the West. One such example was Silas Bryan, William’s father, who ran for Congress in 1872 “on a platform that advocated inflating the money supply to rescue farmers and wage earners from the burden of debt. But a former general in the Union army narrowly defeated him,” as Kazin described.⁴⁰ When interviewed by the author, Binder explained that in the years following the Civil War, a period of deflation occurred which was “really harmful, especially to farmers, because they tended to be in debt. If you are in debt, deflation means the real value of your debt goes up. Inflation makes the real value of your debt go down.”⁴¹

³⁶ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska (Third Edition)* (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 217.

³⁷ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 23.

³⁸ Olson and Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 218.

³⁹ Richard Hofstadter, “Free Silver and the Mind of ‘Coin’ Harvey,” in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Vintage Books, 1967), 250.

⁴⁰ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 5.

⁴¹ Carola Binder, interviewed by the author, *Unlicensed Philosophy with Chuong Nguyen*, published July 31, 2024, accessed December 24, 2024,

These interests - agrarian and inflationist - would merge to form the People's Party. Not only were they determined to become a third major political party - they also set out to realize in full Abraham Lincoln's dictum of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people."⁴² Mudde and Kaltwasser view the Populists as part of a powerful tradition of American and international struggles aiming "to give the government back to the people": "[T]he notion of 'the people as sovereign' [...] functions as a reminder of the fact that the ultimate source of political power in a democracy derives from a collective body, which, if not taken into account, may lead to mobilization and revolt."⁴³ Indeed, the 1892 "Omaha Platform" of the People's Party is saturated with the language of popular sovereignty and revolution: "We believe that the power of government—in other words, of the people—should be expanded [...] as rapidly and as far as the good sense of an intelligent people and the teachings of experience shall justify, to the end that oppression, injustice, and poverty shall eventually cease in the land."⁴⁴

In *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, Hofstadter observed that "[t]o the Populist mind there was no fundamental conflict between the farmer and the worker, between the toiling people and the small businessman [...] [P]redatory behavior existed only because it was initiated and underwritten by a small parasitic minority in the highest places of power."⁴⁵ For Bryan and the Populists, the producers of America - farmers, laborers, small businessmen, and silver miners - are pitted in a zero-sum battle against the capitalist class - government, Big Business, Big Finance. Although they advocated for the return of bimetallism as recommended by Alexander Hamilton, they were more in favor of Thomas Jefferson's vision of America as a producers' republic, instead of Hamilton's ideal of a commercial nation. "When the spirit of Jefferson leaves the Democratic party," warned Bryan, "it will be a corpse."⁴⁶

Jefferson, who founded the Democratic-Republican Party, was one of the most prominent opponents of Federalism and the Constitution. For Jefferson, the centralization and expansion of government under the Constitution would result in the entrenchment of private economic interests. Charles A. Beard, a notable historian during the Progressive Era, wrote: "It seems that

https://open.substack.com/pub/musicallyspeaking/p/episode-393-interview-with-carola?r=bu2im&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=false.

⁴² Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg address delivered at Gettysburg Pa. Nov. 19th, 1863." Library of Congress, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbpe.24404500/?st=text>.

⁴³ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 10.

⁴⁴ "The 'Omaha Platform' of the People's Party (1892)."

⁴⁵ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 64.

⁴⁶ Bryan, *First Battle*, 126.

as Jefferson watched the progress of Hamilton's measures in Congress, he became more and more convinced that the members who supported them represented their own personal interests rather than the mass of the voters - particularly, the agrarian interests."⁴⁷ Jefferson's idea of democracy, thus, is inseparable from the interests of the American farmer. "Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God," wrote the Founding Father from Virginia, "whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."⁴⁸ Furthermore, Jefferson foresaw the clash of economic interests brought forth by the bank's establishment - that which Beard described as "fluid capital versus agrarianism."⁴⁹

William Jennings Bryan, having grown up around farmland, developed a natural sympathy towards agrarian interests. His father, Silas, was such a respected figure in Salem, Illinois, that in 1866, as Kazin recorded, "he was able to buy a 520-acre farm a mile outside of town with a deer park alongside it."⁵⁰ When William was six years of age, he moved in to the farm with his family. Bryan also inherited his father's loyalty to the Democratic Party, as well as Silas' affinity for Andrew Jackson and Stephen A. Douglas.⁵¹ Founded by Jackson and Martin van Buren in 1828, the Democrats saw themselves as heirs to Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party and the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy. Although both Jackson and Douglas were stalwart defenders of slavery, their supporters "believed their task was to uphold the libertarian principles of the early republic [...] against well-born zealots who wanted to shut off immigration, prohibit drinking and other private amusements, and increase the powers of the federal government to enrich their friends," recounted Kazin.⁵²

It is far from surprising that Donald Trump sees himself as an heir to Jackson. In his presidency, Jackson presented himself as a "common man" and a defender of the common man's interests, against the high-born establishment of the Founders. But the seventh President was also a man of wealth, known for his "showy display of the opulent marble and mahogany furnishings in his home," as described by Mary Jordan in *The Washington Post*.⁵³ In a 2016 interview with

⁴⁷ Charles A. Beard. "Some Economic Origins of Jeffersonian Democracy," *The American Historical Review* 19, no. 2 (Jan., 1914): 283.

⁴⁸ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (J.W. Randolph, 1853), 176.

⁴⁹ Beard, "Some Economic Origins," 298.

⁵⁰ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 4.

⁵¹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 5.

⁵² Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 5.

⁵³ Mary Jordan, "Andrew Jackson was a rich populist who bragged and invited scorn. Trump draws new interest in the 7th president," *The Washington Post*, published January 31, 2017, accessed January 10, 2025,

The Hollywood Reporter, Trump's former Chief Strategist Steve Bannon emphasized Trump's Jacksonian spirit when he told Michael Wolff: "Like [Andrew] Jackson's populism, we're going to build an entirely new political movement [...] It's everything related to jobs. The conservatives are going to go crazy."⁵⁴

The spirit of Jackson was abundant in Bryan's "Cross of Gold" address. "[T]he 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," proclaimed the Congressman from Nebraska. "is as much a businessman as the man who goes upon the board of trade and bets upon the price of grain [...] We come to speak for this broader class of business men."⁵⁵ Agrarians, laborers, and Greenback supporters are part of this broader movement that inspired Bryan, and Bryan in turn inspired their political unity.

In 1894, while the country was still recovering from the previous year's economic crisis, a pro-silver pamphlet was published which captured the attention of this nascent populist movement. Authored by lawyer and political activist William Hope Harvey, *Coin's Financial School* was, per Hofstadter's assessment, "to the silver men of 1896 what *Common Sense* had been to the revolutionaries of 1776."⁵⁶ Although Harvey is the author of the treatise, he is not the narrator. Instead, the role is undertaken by a fictional ten-year-old boy named Coin, who holds lectures on finance throughout Chicago. For Hofstadter, Harvey's choice of making his narrator a youth "implied that the intricacies of economics, once the distracting features of selfishness and self-delusion were set aside, were not too great to be mastered by the acute, simple, and unspoiled mind of a boy, and hence that the intuitions of the common man about the money question were sounder than the complex sophistries of bankers and hireling professors of economics."⁵⁷ This anti-elitist sentiment, common amongst populist movements throughout American history, was given voice by Illinois Congressman Edward Lane on August 22nd, 1893 following the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/01/31/andrew-jackson-was-a-rich-populist-who-bragged-and-invited-scorn-trump-is-drawing-new-interest-in-the-7th-president/> .

⁵⁴ Michael Wolff, "Ringside With Steve Bannon at Trump Tower as the President-Elect's Strategist Plots 'An Entirely New Political Movement' (Exclusive)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, published November 18, 2016, accessed January 10, 2025,

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/steve-bannon-trump-tower-interview-trumps-strategist-plots-new-political-movement-948747/> .

⁵⁵ Bryan, *First Battle*, 200.

⁵⁶ Hofstadter, "Free Silver and the Mind of 'Coin' Harvey," 242.

⁵⁷ Hofstadter, "Free Silver and the Mind of 'Coin' Harvey," 264.

Mr. Speaker, my people do not have to consult Chevalier, John Stuart Mill, Ricardo, or any other writer on finance in order to understand their conditions. They know from personal knowledge that they occupy the garden spot of this whole rich country; that their crops for the last decade have been reasonably abundant, yet their pockets are empty. They have no bank accounts as do people who live in the sterile East; and at the end of the year they can scarcely make the tongue and buckle meet.⁵⁸

Much like Emery's *Seven Financial Conspiracies*, *Coin's Financial School* separates the financial elite from the common people, all the while arguing that the bankers and financiers are working in tandem to subvert the interests of the working man: "The men who produce the property of the world are the men whose happiness should be consulted. The men who handle this property after it is produced have little regard for the interests of the producers. Their selfishness and greed blind them. Their minds are running in a groove and they cannot see the rights of others."⁵⁹ The treatise is framed as a series of lectures taking place in six days, with the young Coin defending his "financial school" against a hostile, pro-gold press. This framing signifies the complex dynamic that populism has with mass media. On one hand, populist leaders often portray the mainstream press as being adversarial to them, and prefer a direct channel to their supporters. This is perhaps the reason why Bryan published *The First Battle* as an unfiltered access to his political platform, and (as we will see) why Donald Trump regularly uses social media sites to convey his thoughts. On the other hand, populist leaders like Bryan and Trump aim to maximize media attention and support. As suggested by Mudde and Kaltwasser, from the perspective of the populists, "the elite are defined on the basis of power, i.e., they include most people who hold leading positions within politics, the economy, the media, and the arts. However, this obviously excludes the populists themselves, as well as those within these sectors that are sympathetic to the populists."⁶⁰ An example of this can be found towards the end of *Coin's Financial School*, when a man named George Sengel, described as "a prominent citizen of

⁵⁸ Edward Lane, "Bimetallism or Monometallism -- Which? Speech of Hon. Edward Lane, of Illinois, in the House of Representatives, Tuesday, August 22, 1893' in 'Appendix to the Congressional Record.'" Northern Illinois University Digital Library, accessed December 26, 2024, <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-gildedage%3A23748>.

⁵⁹ William Hope Harvey, *Coin's Financial School* (Coin Publishing Company, 1894), 26.

⁶⁰ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 12.

Fort Smith [Arkansas]”, attends Coin’s sixth lecture. Upon hearing what the financial prodigy has to say, Sengel changed his views regarding the gold standard: “I have been until to-day in favor of a single gold standard, but hard times, and this fact that all the gold in the world available for money can be put in a space of twenty-two feet each way, has knocked it out of me. Count on me and old Arkansas for bimetallism.”⁶¹

The Spirit of 1776 is alive and well in the pages of *Coin*. In his final lecture, having gained support even from much of the previously-hostile press, the narrator calls on a trade war with England as a gesture of protest against the monometallic gold standard:

If it is claimed we must adopt for our money the metal England selects, and can have no independent choice in the matter, let us make the test and find out if it is true. It is not American to give up without trying. If it is true, let us attach England to the United States and blot her name out from among the nations of the earth. [Applause.]

A war with England would be the most popular ever waged on the face of the earth. [Applause.] If it is true that she can dictate the money of the world, and thereby create world-wide misery, it would be the most just war ever waged by man. [Applause.]⁶²

This sentiment directly invokes Thomas Paine’s thoughts on the American Revolution, as articulated in *Common Sense*: “The Sun never shined on a cause of greater worth. ‘Tis not the affair of a City, a County, a Province, or a Kingdom; but of a Continent of at least one-eighth part of the habitable Globe.”⁶³ *Common Sense* started an American tradition of literary pamphlets and essays which provide intellectual support to a growing popular movement. While the Free Silver movement has *Coin’s Financial School* and *Seven Financial Conspiracies*, the Donald Trump Presidential race is anchored by arguments made in essays such as Michael Anton’s “The Flight 93 Election” and Samuel Francis’s “From Household to Nation”.

While Paine’s treatise became a philosophical classic, Harvey’s is relegated to being a product of its time. The cause of Free Silver, having reached its height of popularity in the 1890s, petered out by the dawn of the 20th century. With new developments in monetary management,

⁶¹ Harvey, *Coin’s Financial School*, 128.

⁶² Harvey, *Coin’s Financial School*, 131 - 132.

⁶³ Paine, *Common Sense*, 37.

the “battle of the standards” “has been rendered obsolete,” pronounced Hofstadter.⁶⁴ Due to William Jennings Bryan’s defeat in the election of 1896, the People’s Party lost its chance to establish itself in the American electorate for good. While Arthur Sewall fell into obscurity following his defeat, Tom Watson shifted his political stance from pro-agrarian to white supremacy. According to Woodward, as the 19th century transitions to the 20th, Watson “pledged his support, and the support of the Populists, to any anti-machine, Democratic candidate running upon a suitable platform that included a pledge to ‘a change in our Constitution which will perpetuate white supremacy in Georgia.’”⁶⁵ How Watson can reconcile his advocacy for the disadvantaged with his belief in the inferiority and disenfranchisement of an entire racial group is unclear. Bryan would seek the office of the Presidency two more times - one in 1900, and another in 1908. Both were unsuccessful. His last act as a public figure was to take a stand against the teaching of evolution in the infamous 1925 Scopes trial. Upon his passing that year, the journalist and provocateur H.L. Mencken, who had covered the trial, was unsparing in his assessment of the Nebraskan populist:

He was, in fact, a charlatan, a mountebank, a zany without sense or dignity. His career brought him into contact with the first men of his time; he preferred the company of rustic ignoramuses. It was hard to believe [...] that he had been a high officer of state. He seemed only a poor clod like those around him, deluded by a childish theology, full of an almost pathological hatred of all learning, all human dignity, all beauty, all fine and noble things [...] Imagine a gentleman, and you have imagined everything that he was not [...] He was born with a roaring voice, and it had the trick of inflaming half-wits. His whole career was devoted to raising those half-wits against their betters, that he himself might shine.⁶⁶

With his barbed literary style, Mencken established a decades-long historiographical consensus on how we remember Bryan. For example, Hofstadter wrote in *The American Political Tradition*: “[I]n an important psychological sense he was never a rebel at all... He never felt the excitement of intellectual discovery that comes with rejection of one’s intimate environment. The revolt of

⁶⁴ Hofstadter, “Free Silver and the Mind of ‘Coin’ Harvey,” 238.

⁶⁵ C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson: Agrarian Rebel* (Oxford University Press, 1963), 371.

⁶⁶ H.L. Mencken, “In Memoriam: W.J.B.,” in *The American Scene: A Reader*, ed. Huntington Cairns, 229 - 230 (Vintage Books, 1982).

the youth against paternal authority, of the village agnostic against the faith of his tribe, of the artist against the stereotypes of philistine life, of the socialist against the whole bourgeois community— such experiences were not within his ken. Near the end of his life his own party laughed him off the stage, but that came too late to be instructive.”⁶⁷ For a long time, historians considered him at best a failure, and at worst a reactionary.

Kazin, however, proposed a different option in *A Godly Hero*: “Bryan was a great Christian liberal, and to neglect the content of his prophecies sells both his career and American political history short.”⁶⁸ As a born-again Christian, Bryan never wavered from his conviction that the teachings of Jesus Christ can be realized in a democratic environment. And as an enthusiastic heir to the Jeffersonian political tradition, Bryan championed the ideal of agrarian citizenship as the basis for popular sovereignty. In doing so, he had a hand in ushering American politics towards the Progressive Era, where his political platform became policies of both Republican and Democratic administrations during the early 20th century. As he proclaimed before Congress in 1893: “Free government cannot long survive when the thousands enjoy the wealth of the country and the million share its poverty in common.”⁶⁹ With these words, Bryan steered the course of the Democratic Party towards a more activist political organization. It is arguable that the New Deal, the most far-reaching economic and social reform in American politics, had its foundations in Bryan’s belief that popular sovereignty and responsible government goes hand in hand with one another. Furthermore, Bryan established a tradition of populist mobilization in American politics that continues to this day, whether from the left or the right. Donald Trump’s Presidential campaign in 2024, therefore, is the rightful heir to this tradition. Remarkably, Trump carried this tradition to successes beyond Bryan’s lifetime achievements - by becoming the President, not just once but twice.

II. The Populist President: Donald Trump’s Revolt Against the Elites

In September of 2016, one of the most influential essays on the political rise of Donald Trump was published. It is titled “The Flight 93 Election”, and published in the conservative

⁶⁷ Richard Hofstadter, “William Jennings Bryan: The Democrat as Revivalist,” in *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It* (Vintage Books, 1974), 250.

⁶⁸ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 305.

⁶⁹ Bryan, *First Battle*, 83.

quarterly *Claremont Review of Books*. The author took the pseudonym “Publius Decius Mus”, paying homage to the ancient Roman consul as well as the authors of the *Federalist Papers* (Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay - all of whom assumed the pseudonym “Publius”). The anonymous essayist was soon revealed, via *The Intercept*, to be Michael Anton, a former speechwriter who wrote addresses for Rudy Giuliani, Rupert Murdoch, and Condoleezza Rice.⁷⁰ In the following year, Anton would serve as Deputy Assistant to the President for Strategic Communications on the National Security Council under the first Trump administration. As of this writing, he has been appointed to the role of Director of Policy Planning under the second Trump term.

Taking its title from one of the tragic flights hijacked during the attacks of September 11th, 2001, the essay was a rousing call for conservatives to stand behind Trump in order to avert a disastrous future for America. Of the flights that were hijacked during that fateful day, United Airlines Flight 93 was the only one that did not reach the terrorists’ intended destination, which was Washington D.C. Instead, the doomed passengers fought back against the hijackers, regained control of the cockpit, and crashed the plane in Somerset County, Pennsylvania. In a startling manner, Anton believes that the American populace in 2016 are akin to the passengers of Flight 93, and that this election carries as much stake as the 11th of September:

2016 is the Flight 93 election: charge the cockpit or you die. You may die anyway.

You—or the leader of your party—may make it into the cockpit and not know how to fly or land the plane. There are no guarantees.⁷¹

This is undoubtedly incendiary language, in the tradition of revolutionary pamphlets such as *Common Sense* and the *Declaration of Independence*. It is also written in the enduring American literary tradition of the jeremiad, defined by Andrew R. Murphy as “a narrative that views society as having turned away from its moral foundations, risking divine punishment if it does not repent and reform its ways, and suffering calamities and misfortunes as evidence of God’s

⁷⁰ Peter Maass, “Dark Essays By White House Staffer Are the Intellectual Source Code of Trumpism.” *The Intercept*, published February 12, 2017, accessed December 27, 2024, <https://theintercept.com/2017/02/12/dark-essays-by-white-house-staffer-are-the-intellectual-source-code-of-trumpism/>.

⁷¹ Publius Decius Mus and Michael Anton, “The Flight 93 Election,” *Claremont Review of Books*, published September 5, 2016, accessed December 29, 2024, <https://claremontreviewofbooks.com/digital/the-flight-93-election/>.

wrath — to American political life.”⁷² The jeremiad, in essence, is a political document written in religious rhetoric. Its purpose is not to change minds, but to mobilize the converted. Just as British loyalists would not find the *Declaration* compelling, nor would gold standard advocates be moved by arguments made in *Coin's Financial School*, “The Flight 93 Election” was not intended for a left-leaning audience. Instead, its target audience are conservatives who did not support Donald Trump during his 2016 Presidential campaign, and its purpose is to convince them that Trump is the only viable option.

The essay made a big splash among American conservatives. As Damon Linker recalled in *The Week*, Rush Limbaugh - who was the nation’s most popular conservative radio host - was entirely converted by the arguments made in “The Flight 93 Election”, even devoting a bulk of one radio broadcast to read the essay aloud.⁷³ Matthew Continetti, in an interview with the author, remarked that “The Flight 93 Election” reflects a growing sense among certain conservatives - typically those who are associated with the think tank Claremont Institute such as Michael Anton - that the American Republic has been hijacked by elite interests, particularly concerning immigration, global trade and foreign intervention. Continetti believed that conservative intellectuals like Anton support Donald Trump not out of a sense of optimism, but pessimism - just like flight 93, America is going to crash, so extraordinary measures that may be unthinkable or nasty should be used to prevent catastrophe.⁷⁴ Therefore, it is no coincidence that attorney John C. Eastman, Anton’s colleague at Claremont, was part of a conspiracy to overturn the 2020 election in favor of the defeated President Trump.⁷⁵

Speaking in front of an audience in Phoenix, Arizona during his 2016 run for President, candidate Trump lamented that the American immigration system “is worse than anybody ever realized. But the facts aren’t known because the media won’t report on them. The politicians won’t talk about them and the special interests spend a lot of money trying to cover them up

⁷² Andrew R. Murphy, “Two American Jeremiads: Traditionalist and Progressive Stories of American Nationhood,” *Politics and Religion* 1 (2008): 86.

⁷³ Damon Linker, “The chilling tributes to Rush Limbaugh,” *The Week*, last updated February 19, 2021, accessed December 30, 2024, <https://theweek.com/articles/967577/chilling-tributes-rush-limbaugh>.

⁷⁴ Matthew Continetti, interviewed by the author, *Unlicensed Philosophy with Chuong Nguyen*, published August 28, 2023, accessed January 3, 2025, https://open.substack.com/pub/musicallyspeaking/p/episode-191-second-interview-with?r=bu2im&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=web&showWelcomeOnShare=false.

⁷⁵ “Backgrounder: John Eastman's Trial Before the State Bar Court of California,” *States United Democracy Center*, published February 15, 2023, accessed January 3, 2025, <https://statesunited.org/resources/backgrounder-john-eastmans-trial/>.

because they are making an absolute fortune. That's the way it is [...] The fundamental problem with the immigration system in our country is that it serves the needs of wealthy donors, political activists and powerful, powerful politicians.”⁷⁶ In his book *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism*, Continetti remarked that Trump's heavy emphasis on a controversial topic such as immigration during his campaign “made him all the more polarizing, visceral, contentious, and spiteful. Immigration restriction had replaced Social Security as the ‘third rail’ of American politics. Trump decided not only to touch the third rail but to hug it. It made him electric.”⁷⁷

In 2016, while most of the conservative establishment was still opposing Trump's political candidacy, Rush Limbaugh stood as one of Trump's highest-profile supporters. In a radio broadcast on January 20th that year, Limbaugh articulated the appeal of Trump by reading from a 1996 essay by writer Samuel Francis, whom the host introduced as “an advisor to [Republican Presidential candidate] Pat Buchanan” and who “later in life suffered the — acquired the — reputation of being a white supremacist.”⁷⁸ The radio host is referring to Francis's involvement in white nationalist politics in his final years, as documented by the Southern Poverty Law Center.⁷⁹ The essay is titled “From Household to Nation”, and it was published in the paleoconservative magazine *Chronicles*. Francis, much like Anton twenty years after him, framed the challenges of conservatism as based in class differences, not ideological:

The post-World War II middle class was in reality an affluent proletariat, economically dependent on the federal government through labor codes, housing loans, educational programs, defense contracts, and health and unemployment benefits. All variations of conservative doctrine rejected these as illegitimate extensions of the state and boasted of plans to abolish most of them, and Middle American allegiance to political parties and candidates espousing such doctrine could never become firm. Yet, at the same time, the

⁷⁶ Donald J. Trump, “Transcript of Donald Trump's Immigration Speech,” *The New York Times*, published September 1, 2016, accessed December 31, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/02/us/politics/transcript-trump-immigration-speech.html>.

⁷⁷ Matthew Continetti, *The Right: The Hundred-Year War for American Conservatism* (Basic Books, 2022), 391.

⁷⁸ Rush Limbaugh, “Understanding Trump's Appeal,” *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, published January 20, 2016, accessed December 31, 2024, https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2016/01/20/understanding_trump_s_appeal-2/.

⁷⁹ “Sam Francis,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/sam-francis>.

Ruling Class proved unable to uproot the social, cultural, and national identities and loyalties of the Middle American proletariat, and Middle Americans found themselves increasingly alienated from the political left and its embrace of antinational policies and countercultural manners and morals.⁸⁰

Francis was writing in support of Patrick Buchanan, the GOP veteran whom he saw as the right challenger to the political and cultural establishment formed by both Republicans and Democrats. Although Buchanan did not win the Presidency, Francis's words have proven their staying power - first by being featured on the most widely-listened conservative radio host in America, second by laying the foundation for the Trump revolt. In his tribute to the provocative intellectual, Pedro Gonzalez viewed the initial Trump campaign as the "fulfillment of Francis's prophecy" and a sign that "the populist reaction had found its lightning rod."⁸¹

Sam Francis the writer, Rush Limbaugh the radio host, and Donald Trump the candidate - all claim to represent what sociologist Donald I. Warren termed "Middle American Radicals" (MARs). The term was coined in his landmark 1976 study *The Radical Center: Middle Americans and the Politics of Alienation*, which describes a politically-active population that is not separated by political ideologies, but united through the shared view that "government - local to national - allied simultaneously with minority and idealistic doctrines" is working against their interests and social status.⁸² Furthermore, they resisted efforts to categorize the population along race, gender, religious and ethnic lines, as they often result in the privileging of one group over another and the growing individual alienation towards an increasingly fragmented society. Seeing the two major parties as equally unelectable, MARs yearn for a third-party alternative who can give voice to their discontents. This is why, Warren stated, MARs saw the segregationist Alabama Governor George Wallace as "[operating] within a tradition of individualistic revolt" against institutions of power which they saw as subversive to their pursuit of happiness.⁸³ In his Presidential candidacies in 1968 and 1972, Wallace moderated his stance on racial segregation,

⁸⁰ Samuel Francis, "From Household to Nation," *Chronicles*, published March 1, 1996, accessed December 31, 2024, <https://chroniclesmagazine.org/web/from-household-to-nation/>.

⁸¹ Pedro Gonzalez, "Sam Francis: A Foundational Thinker of the Right," in *A Paleoconservative Anthology: New Voices for An Old Tradition*, ed. Paul Gottfried, 48 (Lexington Books, 2023).

⁸² Donald I. Warren, *The Radical Center: Middle Americans and the Politics of Alienation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 3.

⁸³ Warren, *The Radical Center*, 67.

taking aim not against the integrating black population but the government policy of desegregation busing.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, as part of the racial integration process following the landmark 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, federal courts were allowed to transport school-children via buses into racially-homogenous school districts in an attempt to end *de facto* segregation. However, it was met with profound backlash from white and black communities, who viewed this as the federal government overstepping its enumerated powers and contributing to the breakdown of local communities. This controversial policy was brought back to light in 2019 by future Vice President Kamala Harris, in a debate against future President Joe Biden: “There was a little girl in California who was part of the second class to integrate her public schools and she was bused to school every day. That little girl was me.”⁸⁴

Harris’s remarks were a pivotal point during the 2020 Presidential election, and may have contributed to her becoming Biden’s running mate and Vice President. However, the effectiveness of busing as a means of desegregating public schools remains an intensely debated topic. What cannot be denied is that the backlash towards this policy was formative in the development of MAR politics. In a poll published by *Newsweek* in 1969, Dan T. Carter recounted that three-fourths of respondents were opposed to further racial integration in public schools, 90% were against integration of their neighborhoods, and an overwhelming 98% were hostile to busing.⁸⁵ While other Democratic candidates in 1968 and 1972 refrain from addressing this overwhelming backlash for fear of alienating the black vote, George Wallace attacked busing front and center. In doing so, the Alabama governor paid homage to the Democratic Party of the 19th century, most notably of William Jennings Bryan. As Carter recounted, in his public addresses Wallace “reached back to the language of his nineteenth-century populist forebears as he celebrated the ‘producers’ of American society: the ‘beauticians, the truck drivers, the office workers, the policeman and the small businessmen,’ who had formed the heart of the Democratic Party, ‘the bulk of its strength and vitality.’”⁸⁶ Governor Wallace’s populist appeal derived from his focus on one issue of controversy and rendering it politically salient to the MAR population.

⁸⁴ Edith Honan, “‘That little girl was me’: Kamala Harris, Joe Biden spar over desegregation at Democratic debate,” *ABC News*, published June 27, 2019, accessed January 1, 2025, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/girl-senator-harris-vice-president-biden-spar-desegregation/story?id=64007842>.

⁸⁵ Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (Simon & Schuster, 1995), 375.

⁸⁶ Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 425.

This is unmistakably an inheritance from Bryan, which he would pass down to later populists including Trump. In other words, by way of Wallace, the populism of Bryan reappeared in the present day as the populism of Trump.

It is worth mentioning that Wallace inherited Bryan's views on race also. According to Willard H. Smith, not unlike his former running mate Thomas E. Watson, the Congressman from Nebraska was unable to reconcile his racial politics with his advocacy for the common man.⁸⁷ Kazin, when interviewed, described an episode during Bryan's 1908 Presidential campaign, where he intended to advocate for the nationalization of the railroad industry. Some of the white Democrats, however, were concerned that by giving the federal government control over the railroads would mean Congress can pass laws against segregated train cars. Thus, to secure their support in his third attempt at the Presidency, Bryan "acquiesced to their worries and did not [...] support nationalization of railroads."⁸⁸ In *A Godly Hero*, Kazin recounted Bryan's vocal opposition towards President Theodore Roosevelt when he invited the black civil rights leader Booker T. Washington to dine at the White House in 1901, characterizing it as a political stunt to "secure black votes and promote the pipe dream of 'social equality' between the races."⁸⁹

Although Bryan was silent on the politics of race and ethnicity, George Wallace and Donald Trump made it the basis for their entire political programs. Just as the Governor of Alabama's opposition to desegregation busing masked overt racial prejudice, Donald Trump's opposition to immigration was drawn from already-existing popular bigotry towards the foreign-born. Much like William Jennings Bryan in the 19th century elevated bimetallism to a populist issue, and George Wallace elevated busing to a nationwide debate, Donald Trump succeeded in making immigration a wedge issue between "the corrupt elite" and "the pure people." In the late 19th century, the Congressman from Nebraska was fighting against his own party as much as he was running a Presidential campaign against his Republican opponent, William McKinley. In a similar fashion, Wallace's Presidential campaign in 1968 and 1972 was not against incumbent President Richard Nixon, whose views on busing he aligned with, but against his own Democratic Party and its support for civil rights legislation. Starting in 2016,

⁸⁷ Willard H. Smith, "William Jennings Bryan and Racism," *The Journal of Negro History* 54, no. 2 (Apr., 1969): 127.

⁸⁸ Kazin, interviewed by the author.

⁸⁹ Kazin, *A Godly Hero*, 114.

Donald Trump's focus on restricting immigration has been the focal point of his attack on the GOP establishment.

It was Ronald Reagan who signed into law the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, which granted legal residence to illegal aliens who arrived in the United States prior to January 1st, 1982.⁹⁰ President George W. Bush, in his 2007 State of the Union address, called for continued immigration reform that “uphold[s] the great tradition of the melting pot that welcomes and assimilates new arrivals.”⁹¹ Following the end of his presidency, Bush remains an advocate for immigration reform and upholding the melting pot tradition.⁹² However, within the Republican Party, opposition and hostility towards immigration and immigrants existed in parallel with the pro-immigrant stance shared by Reagan and Bush. For conservative politicians like Patrick Buchanan and intellectuals like Samuel Francis, immigrants are not only a cultural challenge to the native-born, but also harmful to America's status as a world power. In a 1993 speech, Buchanan voiced his concerns in stark terms:

America needs to take what some have called a ‘time out’ on immigration: a closing of our southern frontier to invading illegals, by troops if necessary, a toughening of our asylum laws, a cutback on legal immigration to spouses and minor children of those already here.

Looking back down the 20th century, we see that all the great multinational empires have fallen apart. Now, the multinational states – Canada, Czechoslovakia, India, Russia, Yugoslavia, South Africa, Ethiopia—are breaking apart. Are we immune to all this?⁹³

Buchanan's support for curtailing immigration, legal and illegal, via a five-year moratorium, reflects “the economic interests and identity of the nation, just as a defense and foreign policy

⁹⁰ U.S. Congress, “S.1200 - 99th Congress (1985-1986): Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986,” *Congress.gov*, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/99th-congress/senate-bill/1200>.

⁹¹ George W. Bush, “President Bush Delivers State of the Union Address,” *The White House*, published January 23, 2007, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070123-2.html>.

⁹² In 2021, Bush published a book of oil paintings titled *Out of Many, One: Portraits of America's Immigrants* (Crown). The paintings' subjects are men and women who immigrated to America from multiple countries, as well as accompanying stories of how they embody the American dream.

⁹³ Patrick Buchanan, “West's Doors Closing (1993),” *National Constitution Center*, accessed January 2, 2025, <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/historic-document-library/detail/wests-doors-closing-1993>.

follows from his political nationalism, reflecting the political interests and identity of the nation,” asserted Francis.⁹⁴

This viewpoint on immigration would be adopted by the Tea Party movement, a coalition of conservatives and libertarians within the GOP that gained prominence following the 2007 - 2008 Great Recession and the election of Barack Obama. Named after the Boston Tea Party protest in 1773 - a significant episode in the American Revolution and Founding - the movement presented itself as the voice of “Sam’s Club” conservatism over the “country club” conservatism of Bush and Wall Street. While Tea Party supporters are vocal in their opposition to various social issues - abortion, gay marriage, immigration - their populist outrage are rooted in a pervasive sense of economic insecurity. In their book *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream*, Republican commentators Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam identified “Sam’s Club” conservatives with the working class, whose views on social issues are directly tied to their economic status:

Safe streets, successful marriages, cultural solidarity, and vibrant religious and civic institutions make working-class Americans more likely to be wealthy, healthy, and upwardly mobile. Public disorder, family disintegration, cultural fragmentation, and civic and religious disaffection, on the other hand, breed downward mobility and financial strain—which in turn breeds further social dislocation, in a vicious cycle that threatens to transform a working class into an underclass.⁹⁵

The “working class” of Douthat and Salam’s book are successors to the “Middle American Radicals” of Warren’s. From Richard Nixon to Donald Trump, this population has been referred to by populists as the “silent majority.” According to Mudde and Kaltwasser, while Nixon himself was not a populist, he popularized the term as a populist appeal “to the majority of the (real) American people figuratively and literally silenced by the (liberal) elite.”⁹⁶ When it comes to an issue of intense debate, populist leaders such as Bryan and Trump assume that the views of their supporters are not given a fair hearing in mainstream media outlets, and that the political establishment have a hand in making sure that would never happen. Because of this, they would

⁹⁴ Francis, “From Household to Nation.”

⁹⁵ Ross Douthat and Reihan Salam, *Grand New Party: How Republicans Can Win the Working Class and Save the American Dream* (Doubleday, 2008), 7 - 8.

⁹⁶ Mudde and Kaltwasser, *Populism*, 24.

prefer direct addresses to the populace, instead of lending their voices to conventional media channels (newspapers, cable news, etc.) Just as Bryan publishes his speeches in a bound volume (*The First Battle*), Trump addresses his supporters via social media sites such as Twitter (now X) and Truth Social. That Trump's most prominent ally in the 2024 election is the CEO of X, Elon Musk, appears as no coincidence.

Douthat and Salam published their book in 2008, when the world was reeling from the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. For the working class and Tea Party supporters, the Great Recession and the subsequent government bailout of banks signify the inherent economic instability brought about by the globalized age, as well as the alignment between the government and Big Finance that brings back the worst of the Gilded Age. By ordering federal troops to break the rail workers' strike and soliciting industry tycoons for gold, Grover Cleveland is portrayed by Bryan and his supporters as a traitor to the people and a lackey of the financial interests. In a similar fashion, by spending large amounts of taxpayers' money to rescue Wall Street, George W. Bush is perceived to have betrayed the people by catering to the wealthy elites.

Anxieties and misgivings about globalization are not a new phenomenon. In the late 19th century, Bryan's attacks on the gold standard doubled as an attack on international finance, for Britain and much of Europe were on a gold standard. In the early 21st century, anti-globalization rhetoric either focuses on the income and wealth inequality between the "haves" and the "have-nots", or the economic and social instability brought about by an enlarged global labor market. It is the latter that drives the American working class to be sympathetic with the Tea Party movement and Donald Trump. Douthat and Salam coined this phenomenon the "Great Doubling" - wherein the worldwide labor population is expanded thanks to the inclusion of China, India, and former Soviet bloc countries into the global economy - the result of which is "the developed world sheds less-skilled, low-wage jobs to the developing world but gains skilled high-wage jobs in return."⁹⁷ This means that not only would the American worker have to compete with domestic skilled professionals - he would also have to compete with his counterparts from across the world, as well as the labor force of those who immigrated into his country. If mass immigration is not controlled, Douthat and Salam warned, "[it] will exert downward pressure on wages for low-skilled workers, strain the government's ability to deliver

⁹⁷ Douthat and Salam, *Grand New Party*, 163.

needed social services, and exacerbate the cultural divide that's opened between the Sam's Club demographic and the mass upper class."⁹⁸

In their 2023 book *Where Have All the Democrats Gone? The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes*, Democratic political analysts John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira concurred with Douthat and Salam that "Democrats' enthusiasm for immigration of unskilled workers and the party's opposition to measures that might reduce illegal immigration" was an important factor in driving away the American working class towards Trump.⁹⁹ Middle Americans, Judis and Teixeira suggested, may not greet immigrants as a source of inexpensive labor but as a "tax burden" and a "threat to what had been a common culture."¹⁰⁰ However, following Trump's first term in office, it was his divisiveness and bigoted rhetoric towards immigrants that resulted in his loss in 2020. In an election cycle that featured the Coronavirus pandemic, racial protests following the death of George Floyd, and a severe economic downturn, Joe Biden's promise of a "return to normalcy" proved effective with the American working class who yearned for a measure of economic and social stability. But in his four years as a President, he did not address the populist concerns that drew the working class towards his opponent, particularly immigration.

Unlike in Bryan's time, when Free Silver lost its political appeal thanks to an economic recovery following 1896, the issue of immigration became even more intensified in 2024 than in 2016. In the days leading up to Election Day 2024, Donald Trump gave an address in front of his supporters at his home estate - the Mar-a-Lago - where he featured newscasts of a 12-year-old girl who was murdered by illegal migrants from Venezuela, while accompanying the girl's mother. Commenting on the tragic story, Trump remarked: "I think what's happening on the border is the single biggest issue, and I'm seeing it more and more when I speak."¹⁰¹ Per a recent poll by the Pew Research Center, the majority of Trump's supporters share this view, with 88% favoring a mass national deportation effort for those living in the country illegally, while 92% agree with the statement that "*immigrants living in the country illegally* make crime worse."¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Douthat and Salam, *Grand New Party*, 9.

⁹⁹ John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone? The Soul of the Party in the Age of Extremes* (Henry Holt and Company, 2023), 5.

¹⁰⁰ Judis and Teixeira, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?*, 125.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Maggie Haberman and Jonathan Swann, "Trump's Mar-a-Lago Speech Puts Focus on Immigration Following Controversial MSG Rally," *The New York Times*, accessed January 3, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/29/us/politics/trump-mar-a-lago-immigration.html>.

¹⁰² Sahana Mukherjee and Jens Manuel Krogstad, "Where Trump and Harris Supporters Differ and Align on Immigration," *Pew Research Center*, published September 27, 2024, accessed January 4, 2025,

What is more concerning is that this fear over illegal migrants has transferred over proposed policies to reduce *legal* immigration into the United States. Following Buchanan's suggestions, a bill titled "Mass Immigration Reduction Act of 2024" was introduced to Congress in January of the same year. Sponsored by Matthew Rosendale Sr., a Republican Congressman from Montana, the bill proposes a five-year "immigration moratorium" which would prohibit granting visa status to family-sponsored immigrants and diversity immigrants, even forbidding birthright citizenship status if neither of the parents are living in the United States legally. Along with Rosendale, seven other U.S. Representatives - all Republicans - have put their names on this proposed legislation. As of this writing, it has been referred to the House Committee on the Judiciary.¹⁰³

In 1954, witnessing a similar phenomenon in certain Republicans' opposition to desegregation and the New Deal, Hofstadter coined the term "pseudo-conservatism", defined as an old-style combination of the ultraconservative and isolationist tendencies of the early 20th century.¹⁰⁴ Seventy years later, it appears that Donald Trump's pseudo-conservative revolt against the GOP establishment has worked out in his favor. In the late 19th century, William Jennings Bryan became a national figure and a presidential hopeful by applying a similar strategy - repudiating the classical liberalism of Grover Cleveland in favor of progressivism. While Bryan and Trump are from different political parties, they both waged a successful internal revolt against their own party. Following Bryan, similar acts of dissension took place: from George Wallace's campaign against a pro-civil rights Democratic Party to Patrick Buchanan's attacks against the internationalist Republican Party in the 1990s. In an ironic manner, Michael Anton's dark predictions are correct - a hijacking did take place. But what was hijacked is not the American Republic, but American conservatism. In a 2021 interview with *Politico* magazine, George F. Will, a long-time conservative columnist for the *Washington Post*, shared the same view: "What do conservatives want to conserve? The answer is the American founding... And

<https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/09/27/trump-and-harris-supporters-differ-on-mass-deportations-but-favor-border-security-high-skilled-immigration/>. (emphasis in original)

¹⁰³ U.S. Congress, "H.R.6940 - Mass Immigration Reduction Act of 2024 - 118th Congress (2023-2024)," Congress.gov, accessed January 4, 2025,

<https://www.congress.gov/bills/118/congressional-legislation/6940/text>.

¹⁰⁴ Hofstadter, "The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt - 1954", in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, 48.

along comes Mr. Trump, who says, ‘No, conservatism is beating up on the Mexicans’ or whatever he says.”¹⁰⁵

As Continetti suggested, from 2020 to 2024, a political realignment took place during the turbulent years of Joe Biden’s presidency - the Democratic Party “stood for the accepted way of doing things. And the Republicans, in the person of Trump, resembled the outsider populists led by William Jennings Bryan.”¹⁰⁶ Because the GOP has all but abandoned the traditional conservatism represented by Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, the party has managed to attract notable outsiders such as Elon Musk, who has voted for and supported Democratic presidential candidates prior to 2024.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, as of this writing, Trump has appointed former Democrats into key positions in his administration - such as Robert F. Kennedy Jr., heir to a traditionally Democratic political family, and Tulsi Gabbard, former Democratic Congresswoman from Hawaii and Vice Chair of the Democratic National Committee from 2013 to 2016. Likewise, prior to 2016, Trump himself was an outsider to the Republican Party, and was not taken seriously by the GOP establishment. Michael Gerson, chief speechwriter of George W. Bush between 2001 and 2006, wrote in the pages of the *Washington Post* in 2016: “There is no question of ethics, political philosophy or theology to which Trump is the answer. It is simply childish to trust this contemptible parody of a father figure.”¹⁰⁸ But the warnings of GOP establishment figures such as Gerson were powerless against the foreboding rhetoric of “The Flight 93 Election.” This is because they failed to see that the groundworks for Trump’s victory have been laid for decades. From George Wallace’s revolt against the Democratic Party on the busing question to Patrick Buchanan and Samuel Francis’s fervent opposition to immigration and globalization, a succession of outsider figures have paved the way for the new direction of American populism in general, and American right-wing politics in particular. Contradictory as it may be, William Jennings Bryan’s 1896 Presidential campaign influenced

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Zack Stanton, “Does ‘Conservatism’ Actually Mean Anything Anymore?” Politico, accessed January 4, 2025,

<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/09/17/future-politics-conservatism-george-will-512308>.

¹⁰⁶ Continetti, *The Right*, 427.

¹⁰⁷ Jake Lahut et al., “Elon Musk’s Political Views and Donations Over the Years,” *Business Insider*, updated November 28, 2024, accessed January 4, 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/elon-musk-political-beliefs-public-stances-timeline-republican-desantis-2022-6>.

¹⁰⁸ Michael Gerson, “The self-refuting idea that America needs Donald Trump as a savior,” *The Washington Post*, published September 12, 2016, accessed January 4, 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-self-refuting-idea-that-america-needs-donald-trump-as-a-savior/2016/09/12/d89a26ae-790b-11e6-beac-57a4a412e93a_story.html.

both the Progressive politics in the first half of the 20th century and the populist backlash against it in the second half. The cause of Free Silver may be a historical antiquity, but the cause of those who feel disenfranchised and dispossessed by the economic, political, and cultural establishment has existed since the Founding of America, and will continue to exist long after Trump is out of office. Where Bryan focused on silver to rally a coalition of aggrieved farmers and laborers against the political establishment of his time, Trump focused on immigration to mobilize and galvanize Middle Americans who harbor similar grievances against the current political status quo. It is too early to tell what the next four years in American politics will have in store, but it is safe to conclude that Trump achieved something Bryan did not: he carried the force of popular discontent all the way to the White House, and he did it twice.

Conclusion

Reflecting on Donald Trump's first Presidential victory in 2016 in the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, Kazin distinguishes between the "civic nationalist" populism - which William Jennings Bryan represented - and the "racial nationalist" populism - which Trump represented. While both types of populism pit the "common people" against business and government elites, the second type, Kazin argued, has a much narrower definition of the "common people":

For most of U.S. history, it meant only citizens of European heritage- 'real Americans,' whose ethnicity alone afforded them a claim to share in the country's bounty. Typically, this breed of populist alleges that there is a nefarious alliance between evil forces on high and the unworthy, dark-skinned poor below- a cabal that imperils the interests and values of the patriotic (white) majority in the middle.¹⁰⁹

As demonstrated by this paper, it is difficult to separate the "racial nationalist" element of a populist leader from the "civic nationalist" element. Bryan's indefatigable advocacy for the common man did not extend towards equality between white and black people. Thomas E. Watson, Bryan's Populist running mate, became committed to the cause of white supremacy after

¹⁰⁹ Michael Kazin, "Trump and American Populism: Old Whine, New Bottles," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no.6 (November/December 2016): 18.

the 1896 defeat. And even when George Wallace toned down his segregationist rhetoric in favor of a more “civic nationalist” stance during his Presidential campaigns in 1968 and 1972, his relentless opposition to desegregation busing only thinly masks his racial bigotry. Patrick Buchanan’s hostility towards the foreign-born is tied to his concerns regarding American national interests in the age of globalization. Likewise, Trump’s incendiary rhetoric on the subject of immigration reflects an increasing American concern towards the security of the U.S.-Mexico border. In the aforementioned Pew Research poll, 96% of Trump supporters and 80% of Kamala Harris supporters agree that improving border security should be the main priority.¹¹⁰ This is due to the fact that during his Presidential administration, Joe Biden failed to reduce illegal migration and temper the population’s anxiety over border safety. Furthermore, as Judis and Teixeira stated, the Biden administration even encouraged migration from the Southern border, which resulted in 1.7 million illegal crossings in 2021, and 2.8 million between September 2021 and September 2022.¹¹¹ In both the Presidential elections of 1896 and 2024, we see a Democratic candidate defeated and a Republican candidate victorious. But Bryan’s defeat is not similar to Biden’s - while the former failed to usher in a new consensus regarding monetary standards, Biden was defeated because he was unsuccessful in restoring a pre-Trump status quo. Bryan’s loss in 1896 was also the end of a radical change in national monetary policy, while Biden’s loss in 2024 signifies the end of a pro-immigration consensus that was agreed upon since the Presidency of Ronald Reagan.

In the same *Foreign Affairs* article, Kazin wrote: “At its best, populism provides a language that can strengthen democracy, not imperil it... Even some populist orators who railed against immigrants generated support for laws, such as the eight-hour workday, that, in the end, helped all wage earners in the country, regardless of their place of birth.” From Bryan to Trump, populist movements and their leaders have encouraged American civic engagement and discourse on some of the most important issues throughout the country’s history. Even when the leaders themselves have unsavory personal characteristics, they give voice to an aggrieved population against a stagnant status quo, thus invigorating democratic politics. Woodward said it best when considering populism throughout American history: “One must expect and even hope that there will be future upheavals to shock the seats of power and privilege and furnish the

¹¹⁰ Mukherjee and Krogstad, “Where Trump and Harris Supporters Differ and Align on Immigration.”

¹¹¹ Judis and Teixeira, *Where Have All the Democrats Gone?*, 168.

periodic therapy that seems necessary to the health of our democracy. But one cannot expect them to be any more decorous or seemly or rational than their predecessors.”¹¹²

Indeed, populist movements are often driven by elements and people outside of the status quo, in order to champion people whom the status quo has failed to prioritize. Whether they are called “Middle American Radicals”, “the silent majority”, or “the working class”, they provide a wellspring of electoral engagement that constantly awaits a leader to voice their concerns. Some of the most successful populist leaders in American history - Trump included - have been able to mobilize this engagement by focusing on one central issue that is thought to be outside of the current consensus, then connect it to the dissatisfaction and alienation suffered by the forgotten men and women throughout the country. In 2024, Trump was able to succeed by mobilizing enough of these voters to secure a popular majority in the Presidential election - something he was not able to do in 2016 and 2020. But he would not have been able to earn this historic victory had it not been for the defeats of the populist leaders that preceded him - namely Patrick Buchanan, George Wallace, and most importantly William Jennings Bryan. In 1896, Bryan and his allies in the People’s Party defined what it meant to be a populist in the context of American democracy. From then on, whether they are from the political left or right, Bryan’s populist successors have framed the definition of democracy in novel and challenging ways. Donald Trump, with all his vices and unsavory personal traits, is a continuation of this tradition. In addition to that, he showed that under the right circumstances, populism can win in an electoral setting. Furthermore, with his victory, Trump has managed to upend traditional definitions of “conservative” and “liberal” in American politics. Just as the 1896 Presidential election brought out a new era of American politics as well as a broader understanding of American democracy, we suspect that the election of 2024 will achieve the same effects in the years to come.

¹¹² C. Vann Woodward, “The Populist Heritage and the Intellectual,” *The American Scholar* 29, no. 1 (Winter, 1959-60): 72.

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