



## Section 3

PRIMARY SOURCE *from* William Jennings Bryan's  
 "Cross of Gold" Speech

*During the 1896 Democratic convention, politicians fiercely debated whether to support the gold standard or bimetallism. William Jennings Bryan, the final speaker at the convention, delivered an eloquent appeal for unlimited coinage of silver. As you read this excerpt from his famous speech, consider his arguments.*

I would be presumptuous, indeed, to present myself against the distinguished gentlemen to whom you have listened if this were but a measuring of ability; but this is not a contest among persons. The humblest citizen in all the land when clad in armor of a righteous cause is stronger than all the whole hosts of error that they can bring. I come to speak to you in defense of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty—the cause of humanity. . . .

Here is the line of battle. We care not upon which issue they force the fight. We are prepared to meet them on either issue or on both. If they tell us that the gold standard is the standard of civilization, we reply to them that this, the most enlightened of all nations of the earth, has never declared for a gold standard, and both the parties this year are declaring against it. If the gold standard is the standard of civilization, why, my friends, should we not have it? So if they come to meet us on that, we can present the history of our nation. More than that, we can tell them this, that they will search the pages of history in vain to find a single instance in which the common people of any land ever declared themselves in favor of a gold standard. They can find where the holders of fixed investments have.

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

There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that if you just legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous that their prosperity will

leak through on those below. The Democratic idea has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous their prosperity will find its way up and through every class that rests upon it.

You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard. I tell you that the great cities rest upon these broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in this country. . . .

If they dare to come out and in the open defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the nation and the world. Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them, you shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

*from Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1895–1904: Populism, Imperialism, and Reform, vol. 12 of The Annals of America (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1968), 100–105.*

### Activity Options

1. Deliver Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech to your classmates. Then discuss why you think this speech moved the Democratic Party to nominate Bryan as its candidate for president.
2. During the 1896 presidential election, the debate over the gold standard raged. The Republican Party favored it, while the Democratic Party supported bimetallism. Create a campaign button that might have been used by either party.
3. Imagine that it is 1896. With your classmates, hold a mock debate in which you role-play a free silverite or a gold bug. If you argue against the gold standard, use Bryan's arguments to support your position. (Review pages 428–429 in your textbook.)

## Document 2 Wall St Owns America: Speech by Mary Elizabeth Lease (1890)

Mary Elizabeth Lease was a major leader in the Populist Party. At a time when women were becoming more politically involved, she gave many speeches around the nation on behalf of the Populist Party to gain supporters.

### Wall St Owns America

(note - words that are **bolded and in italics** are defined below the reading)

This is a nation of inconsistencies. The Puritans fleeing from oppression became oppressors. We fought England for our liberty and put chains on four million of blacks. We wiped out slavery and our tariff laws and national banks began a system of white wage slavery worse than the first. Wall Street owns the country. It is no longer a government of the people, by the people, and for the people, but a government of Wall Street, by Wall Street, and for Wall Street. The great common people of this country are slaves, and monopoly is the master. The West and South are bound and lay themselves before the manufacturing East. Money rules, and our Vice-President [Levi Parsons Morton] is a London banker. Our laws are the output of a system which clothes rascals in robes and honesty in rags.

The parties lie to us and the political speakers mislead us. We were told two years ago to go to work and raise a big crop, that was all we needed. We went to work and plowed and planted; the rains fell, the sun shone, nature smiled, and we raised the big crop that they told us to; and what came of it? Eight-cent corn, ten-cent oats, two-cent beef and no price at all for butter and eggs-that's what came of it. Then the politicians said we suffered from overproduction. Overproduction, when 10,000 little children, so statistics tell us, starve to death every year in the United States, and over 100,000 shop-girls in New York are forced to sell their virtue for the bread their **miserly** wages deny them ....

We want money, land and transportation. We want the abolition of the National Banks, and we want the power to make loans direct from the Government...we will not pay our debts to the loan-shark banks until the Government pays its debts to us. The people are at bay, [so] let the bloodhounds of money who dogged us thus far beware.

#### Vocabulary:

Miserly: penny-pinching, cheap

### Analysis Questions:

- 1) *Sourcing*: Is this a primary or secondary source on the Populist movement?
  - a) *Sourcing*: What is the title of this speech? Why might that be important to keep in mind?
  - b) *Contextualization*: Why was this speech given? Why might that be important to keep in mind?
  
- 2) *Close Reading*: How would you describe the tone and mood of this speech? Why would you describe it in this manner?

- 3) *Close Reading:* The preamble to the Populist Party platform describes America as on the verge of moral, political, and material ruin...The people are demoralized...The fruits of the toil of millions are boldly stolen to build up **colossal** fortunes for a few, unprecedented in the history of mankind; and the possessors of those, in turn, despise the republic and endanger liberty. From the same **prolific** womb of governmental injustice we breed the two great classes — beggars and millionaires.”

*Compare and contrast this description with the one provided in this speech by Mary Elizabeth Lease. What does she say that is similar or different?*

- 4) The following is an excerpt from a speech President Obama made in 2011, when describing the economic collapse of 2008:

“But for most Americans, the basic bargain that made this country great has eroded. Long before the recession hit, hard work stopped paying off for too many people. Fewer and fewer of the folks who contributed to the success of our economy actually benefited from that success. Those at the very top grew wealthier from their incomes and their investments -- wealthier than ever before. But everybody else struggled with costs that were growing and paychecks that weren't -- and too many families found themselves racking up more and more debt just to keep up....”

*How does President Obama's description of the economy in 2008 **compare** to the description of America in 1890 presented in both the Populist Party platform and the speech by Mary Elizabeth Lease above? Is it similar or different? Cite textual evidence to support your claims.*

## Excerpt #2 Populist Party Platform

(note - words that are **bolded and in italics** are defined below the reading)

We declare, therefore: *First.* — That the union of the labor forces of the United States this day ... shall be permanent and **perpetual**

*Second.* — Wealth belongs to him who creates it, and every dollar taken from industry without an equivalent is robbery. "If any will not work, neither shall he eat." The interests of rural and civic labor are the same; their enemies are identical.

*Third.* — We believe that the time has come when the railroad corporations will either own the people or the people must own the railroads, and should the government enter upon the work of owning and managing all railroads, we should favor an amendment to the Constitution by which all persons engaged in the government service shall be placed under a civil-service regulation of the most rigid character, so as to prevent the increase of the power of the national administration by the use of such additional government employees.

FINANCE. — We demand a national **currency**, safe, sound, and flexible, issued by the general government only, a **full legal tender** for all debts, public and private, and that without the use of banking corporations, a just, equitable, and efficient means of distribution direct to the people...

- We demand a **graduated** income tax.
- We believe that the money of the country should be kept as much as possible in the hands of the people, and hence we demand that all State and national **revenues** shall be limited to the necessary expenses of the government, economically and honestly administered.
- We demand that postal savings banks be established by the government for the safe deposit of the earnings of the people and to facilitate exchange.

TRANSPORTATION — Transportation being a means of exchange and a public necessity, the government should own and operate the railroads in the interest of the people. The telegraph, telephone, like the post-office system, being a necessity for the transmission of news, should be owned and operated by the government in the interest of the people, not in the interests of capitalists.

LAND. — The land, including all the natural sources of wealth, is the heritage of the people, and should not be monopolized for **speculative** purposes, and alien [immigrant] ownership of land should be prohibited. All land now held by railroads and other corporations in excess of their actual needs, and all lands now owned by aliens [immigrants] should be reclaimed by the government and held for actual settlers only.

### Vocabulary:

Perpetual: everlasting

Currency: system of money

Full legal tender: coins or banknotes considered money

Graduated: changes by a scale (in this case, a graduated income tax would mean you paid more as you earned more, paid less if you earned less)

Revenues: profits

Speculative: involving high risk of loss

## Analysis Questions:

- 1) *Analysis:* Do you think the Populists are supporters of capitalists (also known as captains of industry and/or robber barons) or do they think the government should have a strong hand in the economy and share the wealth? Cite at least two examples from the platform to support your claim.
  
- 2) *Close Reading:* Does the Populist Party support the idea of unions among labor forces? How do you know?
  
- 3) *Close Reading:* Why do the Populists feel that transportation, the telegraph, and the telephone should be owned and operated by the people/government?
  
- 4) *Analysis:* The Populist Party platform called for a graduated income tax - meaning that the more you earned, the more you paid, and the less you earned, the less you paid. The robber barons and industrialists were against this policy proposal.
  - a) Why do you think the Populists supported this idea?
  
  - b) Why do you think the robber barons opposed this idea?
  
- 5) *Contextualization:* Imagine reading this platform in 1890. What is the platform trying to convince the reader of regarding the moral and economic state of America?
  - a) *Corroboration:* If you wanted to confirm these claims before joining the political party in 1892, how might you do that?