

“Gold, Trusts, and Imperialism:” The Populist’s Evolution of Thought on Intervention And Imperialism, 1896-1900

Between the party conventions of 1896 and 1900 a drastic change occurred in the People’s Party platform regarding Cuba and the Spanish American War. Reacting to how McKinley had changed the ostensibly humanitarian war to a war of conquest, the Populists adapted their positions as well. Before the war the Populists were largely in favor of intervention, the relatively safe option supporting the abstract concept of “democracy” and not adverse to pre-existing Populist views. Conversely, after the war, new questions concerning imperialism, militarism, and racism emerged, in order to conceptualize how to deal with the colonies, and perhaps more importantly what the implications for the war were back in America proper---for instance fears of the expanded role of the army, anxieties about the republic being replaced with autocracy, or bigoted fears about miscegenation. As such, the overall shift from 1896 to 1900 Populist party platform reflects the change between an idealistic foreign policy in the abstract and a more concrete, pessimistic policy in reality more colored by domestic fears than concrete foreign ideology.

Methodology & Quasi-Literature Review

One issue that consistently came up when writing this paper was a lack of secondary sources dealing specifically with the Populists and the war. In her own literature review, historian Catherine McNicol Stock describes this issue, giving a laundry list of the great Populist historians who solely focus on domestic issues: John D Hicks, Richard Hofstadter, Lawrence Goodwin, Elizabeth Sanders, Jeffrey Ostler, and Charles Postel for just a sample.¹ This was borne out by the books I read, which would generally either focus on the Republican attitude towards war or Populist domestic policy—however they often incidentally gave helpful information about the Populist attitudes on the

¹ Catherine McNicol Stock, “Making War Their Business: The Short History of Populist Anti-Militarism,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 13, no. 3 (July 2014): 387–99, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537781414000255>.p 388

war.² Moreover, there is occasionally reticence to describe the populists after 1896, with historians seeing them as fading into irrelevance after Bryan's electoral defeat.³ That being said, while they may have been a minority party, they still existed in Congress and the West. Populist Senator William V Allen of Nebraska, for instance, served until 1901; moreover the Populist votes in the senate were needed to pass the Treaty of Paris. Given that polling was not widespread until about three decades later, and even then only on the behalf of the major parties, I had to use alternate means to delve into Populist attitudes.⁴ As such, I have used the speeches and thoughts of William Jennings Bryan since he "provide[s] a strong exemplar" of his Populist supporters.⁵ In addition to solely Bryan, I also use speeches from other members of the People's party, for example Senator William V Allen. Finally, I will be using the People's party platform from the years of 1892, 1896, and 1900, given that this is the most direct statement of party orthodoxy. Sometimes lacking firm details on the Populists specifically, I will appeal to the dominant thought across the entirety of America. Especially on issues that the Populists cared less about, it is not out of the question that they would follow either party or American thought, in line with Berinsky's elite cue arguments. From these speeches, platforms, and information about the larger political climate, we can see the domestic-based reasoning by which the Populists first supported but later turned against the war in Cuba and the Philippines.

The Election of 1896 and the People's Party Support for Cuba

The People's party advocated for the Cuban people by an argument of humanitarian intervention, through the lens of Populist arguments. Spain's horrible treatment of the Cuban insurrectionists is well-documented, and was also well-known at the time. As just one instance,

² See, for example Brewer largely focusing on McKinley; this was generally par for the course

³ Daria Frezza, *The Leader and the Crowd: Democracy in American Public Discourse, 1880-1941*, trans. Martha King (Athens & London: University of Georgia Press, 2001) p.24 for example.

⁴ Adam Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 32..

⁵ Stock, 391.

Spain's policy in putting down the rebellion through the use of concentration camps resulted in more than a hundred thousand casualties.⁶ The Governor-General of the Spanish, having learned under General Sherman, waged war destructively on the countryside, killing even more civilians and damaging civilian property.⁷ The press—both yellow and respectable—reported on the bloodshed knowing that it would sell well; as a result the American populace as a whole was aware of these atrocities.⁸ Senator Allen was able to use the violence on the ground as fodder in a speech agitating for intervention that he made in 1898, using visceral language to ask rhetorically “are we to stand here until the Spaniards cut the throats of the Cubans, and the bloody events pass into the permanent history of the country[?]”⁹ In speeches, Bryan would claim that “humanity demands that we must act,” placing it within the framework of bringing “justice” to Cuba.¹⁰ However, he goes on to give this sentiment a populist spin, framing the question in economic and trust terms, that “the sufferings of her people cannot be ignored unless we, as a nation, have become so engrossed in money-making as to be indifferent to distress.”¹¹ This theme of American greed and need for moral reform is Populist bread and butter, visible in Bryan's liberal use of warnings about the demon Mammon or labor reformer's warnings about capital throughout their respective speeches.¹² In a larger sense as well, some Populists conceived of themselves as a moral backbone of America, a solution to the degradation of cities, and so the idea to show their moral virtue through intercession might have been appealing. Defending Cuba, through this lens, was the anti-imperialist option by

⁶ David Lee Amstutz, “A Populist Approach to Foreign Policy: Governor William A. Poynter, the South African War, and the Indian Famine, 1899–1901,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (Winter 2014): 11–34, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24468072>, p. 14;

Susan Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n.d.), p. 18

⁷ Brewer, 18.

⁸ Brewer, 18-19.

⁹ William Vincent Allen, “Cuba Must Be Free” (Washington, Govt. print. office, 1898), <http://archive.org/details/cubamustbefree00alle> p. 4.

¹⁰ David D Anderson, *William Jennings Bryan*, ed. David J Nordloh (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), p. 98
Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero* (Knopf, 2007), p. 86.

¹¹ Anderson, 98.

¹² *National Conventions and Platforms of All Political Parties, 1789 to 1900; Convention, Popular, and Electoral Vote (3rd Ed., Rev. and Enl.)*, 1892 People's party platform, p. 282

which America could be the “guardian of liberty.”¹³ Moreover, the Populists were never too supportive of Spain, as they were fundamentally opposed to Europe for its corrupt morals and conniving economic policy towards America.¹⁴ Anything that would weaken a colonial power would be good for the Populists through this viewpoint. In this way, the humanitarian argument to advocate for Cuba was consistent with Populist philosophy.

The People’s party supported the liberation of Cuba into a state free to practice its republican form of government. The Populists largely supported the idea of self-determination, guided by the philosophy also espoused at home that government is by the consent of the governed.¹⁵ Senator Allen alludes to this idea in his speech “Cuba Must be Free,” saying that as far back as 1895 he was advocating that the Cubans’ “republican form of government” should be independent from the Spanish Government, describing Spain’s actions as a foreign attack.¹⁶ This blind defense of a democratic power against European autocracy was in line with Populist belief, seen for instance their language in their own platform bemoaning that “plutocracy has been enthroned upon the ruins of democracy.”¹⁷ In defending Cuba, Americans cited the Declaration of Independence, drawing explicit parallels between the current struggle and America’s mythical one for self determination.¹⁸ Allen, in his speech, refers to this idea, making the nationalistic argument that “if *our* form of government is best—and of that I have no doubt—then its recognition or establishment in other lands should be encouraged.”¹⁹ By linking republicanism to America, the Populists could frame the war abroad as a defense of the domestic way of life, supporting Cuba for moral and practical reasons.

¹³ Amstutz, 14.

¹⁴ Kendrick A Clements, *William Jennings Bryan: Missionary Isolationist* (Knoxville: Tennessee University Press, 1982), p. 23-4.

¹⁵ Amstutz, 12.

¹⁶ Allen, 3.

¹⁷ 1896 People’s Party Platform, 306. The “plutocracy” in question is a combination of American and European investors.

¹⁸ Kazin, 86.

¹⁹ Allen, 4. Emphasis in original.

As such, the People's party put a plank of support for Cuban independence into their platform of 1896. It is somewhat buried in the third paragraph of the "Direct Legislation and General Planks" section, and as such is not an issue that the Populists were dying to talk about as a standout issue.

We tender to the patriotic people of Cuba our deepest sympathy in their heroic struggle for political freedom and independence, and we believe the time has come when the United States, the great republic of the world, should recognize that Cuba is and of right ought to be a free and independent state.²⁰

This plank is somewhat more of sending "thoughts and prayers" than any meaningful policy. It is a relatively bloodless plank, not discussing any possibility of war; the only actionable is that America should recognize Cuba. Moreover, this is not a plank that stands out, as in fact every one of the major parties included a plank expressing sympathy towards the Cuban people.²¹ As such, this was not a controversial platform for the Populists to take, it would not hurt them at the ballot box—compare the issues over which the Populist party broke with the Democratic party. Under the facially uncomplicated question of Cuba's independence, with a multitude of factors paralleling Populist domestic policy, the People's party was more than happy to adopt this plank into their party platform of 1896.

However, even in 1896 the Populist party domestically was facing concerns that would grow to cause them to disavow the war by 1900. Bryan and other Populists resented militarism as a tool of the upper classes against freedom and as a "destructive influence" on America.²² In crises of labor and capital, the judiciary would sometimes order injunctions supported by the military.²³ Similarly,

²⁰ 1896 People's Party Platform, 309.

²¹ Clements, 26.

²² Kazin, 86-7; Stock, 392.

²³ Kazin 51

Coxey's army seeking relief for the West was dispersed by the American army.²⁴ The fear of "ruling by injunction" is even directly noted in the People's party platform, again in the list of general planks.²⁵ In addition, the Populists were closely tied to xenophobic groups such as the Knights of Labor, which advocated for the closure of immigration from Asia, the Philippines included.²⁶ Finally, since the Supreme Court had invalidated the more progressive federal income tax through their decision in *Pollock v. Farmers' Loan and Trust Company*, the People's party saw the tax burden to pay for the army as unfairly falling on the backs of farmers.²⁷ While none of these ideas are directly linked to the simple message of "is Spain's behavior towards the Cuban republic unjustified?" these questions of militarism and racism would complicate the issue of Populist support for the Spanish-American war as the reality on the ground became more involved.

War Breaks Out, Spreads to the Philippines

While the Populists may have approved of intervention in Cuba, nothing major came out of it until the USS *Maine* catalyzed support into action. Two years after losing the 1896 election, William Jennings Bryan still thought that the dominant issue in 1900 would be silver; even on the eve of the *Maine's* explosion he was stumping against the gold standard.²⁸ Once the explosion occurred, and yellow journalism whipped up sentiment against Spain, the Populists alongside the other major parties all were able to argue for war under the aegis of defending American honor.²⁹ The sinking of the *Maine* directly affected America itself, making a more domestic call for war on

²⁴ Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), p. 29.

²⁵ 1896 People's Party Platform, 309.

²⁶ Joseph Gerteis and Alyssa Goolsby, "Nationalism in America: The Case of the Populist Movement," *Theory and Society* 34, no. 2 (April 2005): 197–225, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-005-0342-y>. Jacobson 323.

²⁷ *Pollock v. Farmers Loan and Trust*, 157 US 429 (1895)

1896 People's Party Platform Platform 307

²⁸ Anderson, 97.

²⁹ Hoganson, 69.

Note that some scholars dispute this contingency, but that debate is outside of the scope of this paper (Thomas G Paterson, "United States Intervention in Cuba, 1898: Interpretations of the Spanish-American-Cuban-Filipino War," 2022, p. 351)

behalf of Americans possible. Potentially for political reasons, although certainly also driven by his sense of what was right, Bryan enlisted in the National Guard, aided in his pursuits by the Populist government of Nebraska. He was joined by a force of 2,114 Nebraskans, who had all enlisted for similar reasons as Bryan.³⁰ While he never actually saw combat—McKinley had no desire of making his political rival into a war hero—his patriotic decision to join the army is nevertheless notable. Bryan was a man driven by what he thought was right, and so would not join what he saw as an unjust cause for political gain; from this we can see he must have seen something of value in the war. As such, at least at the start of the war, Populists actively supported the simple conflict, even going as far as enlisting and fighting to support the cause.

The McKinley administration, not content with just taking Cuba, continued their war into the Pacific theater. This was billed to the people as military necessity, regardless of any underlying philosophy.³¹ However, back at home as the consequences of the war began to become clear, new questions began to be asked. Would Cuba and the Philippines be allowed to be independent, or would they continue to be under American governance as they were during the war? If they were under American governance, would they be allowed to govern themselves as states and even send representatives back to America? Independent of these questions of governance, moreover, were fears of how to even keep these territories when they were rebellious—would the US need to keep a standing army to accomplish this? As such, the end of the war raised these new thorny questions, complicating the situation from the simple liberty-spreading rationale needed to get into the war. Notably, moreover, that the Populists conceptualized many of these fears in how it would affect people back home; the humanitarian angle was relatively muted. By 1900, the Populists were firmly against the war, incorporating anti-imperialist sentiments into their speeches and platforms.

Postwar Considerations and the Platform of 1900

³⁰ Coletta, 222-3.

³¹ Jacobson, 235.

Over the course of the war, Americans began to see Cuba as less white, aggravated more so by the Philippine's inclusion in the war; this racial fear caused concerns of the status of these new territories having a republic while staying in the United States. Before Spain was defeated, the press did not comment on the racial makeup of Cuba, preferring to go after the common enemy of Spain, but after it was clear that America and the Cubans would win the press began to write more and more about the race of the Cuban insurrectionists.³² This change is also reflected in the newspaper cartoons from the time, changing the race of the personified Cuba from a white damsel in distress into a "guileless plantation 'darky.'"³³ Letters from soldiers who had volunteered to go to Cuba in order to defend self-determination also became full of racial hatred and slurs following the defeat of Spain.³⁴ The Filipinos were subject to the same if not even more racial hatred, constantly being referred to as the n-word and other slurs as well as subject to Asian stereotypes by the soldiers in correspondence sent back home.³⁵ Notably, compare these attitudes to the start of the war, when McKinley hid the focus on race; as the war went on and letters kept on coming back the awareness of the race of citizens in the countries soon to be owned by America rose back home.³⁶ Populists such as Bryan would claim that "their people [are] too different from ours" and so sharing the same democratic government could potentially hurt America's republic.³⁷ Notably, the Populists did not simply believe that the Filipinos were unable to govern themselves—to the contrary the Platform of 1900 argues for "a stable [democratic] government of their own creation"—but rather feared sharing the same government with them.³⁸ Moreover, Americans and Populists began to garner fears about racial mixing back home.³⁹ America, captive to racial thinking "had grown appalled by the high

³² Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth* (New York: Metropolitan Books: Henry Holt and Co., 2019), p. 319.

³³ Jacobson, 237.

³⁴ Grandin, 139.

³⁵ Jacobson, 232.

³⁶ Eric T.L. Love, *Race Over Empire: Racism & US Imperialism 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), ch 5.

³⁷ Anderson, 101.

³⁸ 1900 People's Party Platform, 351.

³⁹ Kazin, 92.

degree of miscegenation in the [Western] hemisphere” and as such did not want to incorporate these countries into the United States.⁴⁰ Notably, miscegenation changes the issue from the existence of different races abroad to specifically how it will affect Americans back home, moving the question from foreign to domestic. The concreteness of this domestic fear was one pillar that moved Populists away from supporting the imperialist war.

In addition to racial fears, Populists including William Jennings Bryan nursed fears about the corrosive effect that empire would have on institutions at home. As a bright line, Populists believed that Cuba and the Philippines could not healthily remain as colonies; America could not be split between an empire and a republic without losing the republic.⁴¹ Unlike former expansions of the US such as the Louisiana Purchase, Bryan argued, the McKinley administration was not expanding America’s freedoms to the new colony.⁴² In a speech titled “Imperialism” that Bryan gave right after returning from Cuba, Bryan layed out that a republic could also not be an empire; moreover it would be hypocritical to join a war preaching self-determination just to turn around and hold the new empire.⁴³ The largest issues facing America, in his view, were the classic Populist issues of “gold [and] trusts,” but also “imperialism” for its equally negative effect on the American people.⁴⁴ Such hypocrisy would be detrimental to the national character, hurting democratic and moral norms back home. As such, the war was not merely against the Philippines, but in “the action of the administration ... is in conflict with all the precedents of our national life; at war with the Declaration of Independence [and] the Constitution.”⁴⁵ Where just two years ago Populists had used the Declaration of Independence to agitate for intervention, when the question of what to do with the new colonies arose this same document was now used to castigate the administration. Finally, the

⁴⁰ Paterson, 353.

⁴¹ Anderson, 198-199

⁴² Anderson, 113

⁴³ Coletta, 225.

⁴⁴ Anderson, 102.

⁴⁵ 1900 People’s Party platform, 351.

Populists did not just see this conflict between imperialism and domestic freedom as a hypothetical, but drew a direct connection between the war abroad and events taking place in Idaho at the time. The Populist Platform describes the army putting down a labor strike in Coeur d'Alene as "a further manifestation of imperialism," with the ultimate goal to "den[y] laborers their inherent liberty and compel[] them to forswear their manhood."⁴⁶ Thus, the People's party drew explicit parallels between imperialism abroad and how it was harmful domestically. After all, if America has accepted its ability to deprive its citizens rights, it could and did use this same force against miners in Idaho. Thus, the populists came out against imperialism, both for grand philosophical reasons in supporting the American Republic but also pragmatic reasons reflecting the physical presence of troops on the ground in America proper. As they framed America's holding of the islands (correctly) as imperialism, it followed to argue against the war from this angle.

Moreover, Populists were concerned about the negative effects that the standing army needed to maintain the American Empire would have on Americans. Bryan, as he was wont to do, even framed this as a moral issue, denouncing a standing army as the "*unchristian* tool of the upper class."⁴⁷ In his characteristic combination of religion and class, Bryan summarizes both the threat to America as a moral institution and to Populist individuals from an economic standpoint. A standing army is described in the People's party platform as a "burden ... which is crushing the people of the Old World," playing on Populist scorn towards Europe.⁴⁸ Especially after the Supreme Court forcing the regressive tax model back, war made it "necessary to place tax burdens upon those least able to bear them."⁴⁹ As such, the aforementioned "burden" would not just be crushing the country, but specifically the poor farmer and laborer. The fear of injunctions as a tool of capital in its (sometimes literal) war against labor still was present in 1900 as it was in 1896, visible in the People's party

⁴⁶ People's Party platform, 351-2.

⁴⁷ Kazin, 87, my emphasis

⁴⁸ 1900 People's Party platform, 351.

⁴⁹ Coletta, 222.

platform of 1900 “denounc[ing] the practice of issuing injunctions.”⁵⁰ By holding a standing army, the Populists claim that America “put[s] its liberties in jeopardy.”⁵¹ Finally, the Populist party platform makes it clear that “out of ... imperialism ... springs the un-American cry for a large standing army,” linking the holding of the Philippines and Cuba to the continued need for an army; one cannot have one but not the other.⁵² In a speech, Bryan noted that an army is the “natural and necessary complement” of an “imperial policy.”⁵³ Bryan believed, and advocated to the party, that continuing to hold colonies would merely benefit the large corporations, with both a physical and moral cost to the everyday American.⁵⁴ As such, the continued wars and holding of rebellious land was dangerous to America herself, an issue intrinsic to the mechanism of holding it.

Conclusion

Considering the patriotic fervor that led to the Spanish American war, why did the Populists turn against the war, framing “imperialism” alongside “gold” and “trusts” as the largest issue facing the country?⁵⁵ For this, it is important to consider the war within the context of American politics, wherein most people, and the Populists especially, did not care about foreign events. According to at least one source, only 10-20% of America followed foreign events or cared about those issues.⁵⁶ Even before the war, some Populists especially in the West resented it, thinking that it would divert from their important domestic policy issues.⁵⁷ It is notable, then, that many of their issues with the war are couched in domestic policy, wherein they believed the best way to convince a voter was to link the policy with how it might affect him personally at home. Once they framed imperialism in this domestic light, it was easier to argue against, as a symptom of the administration’s faults. This is

⁵⁰ 1900 People’s Party Platform, 352.

⁵¹ 1900 People’s Party Platform, 351

⁵² 1900 People’s Party Platform, 351.

⁵³ Anderson, 114.

⁵⁴ Clements, 35-6.

⁵⁵ Anderson, 102.

⁵⁶ Patterson, 350.

⁵⁷ R Hal Williams, *Realigning America:McKinley, Bryan, and the Remarkable Election of 1896*(University of Kansas Press, 2011), 164-165.

not to say that the Populists were fully isolationist, given that the 1900 platform also has a plank supporting the “brave Boers of South Africa,” but merely that their foreign policy platform was heavily informed by their domestic one.⁵⁸ Going forward, this may prove to be an interesting framework to apply to other wars. How often in American history are wars fought for purely altruistic reasons, and more importantly are they marketed to the American people as such? Conversely, how is dissent to other wars conceptualized, i.e. is this Populist tactic of focusing on the domestic side of things common in other wars as well? Given that the Spanish American war is generally credited to be one of America’s first imperialist wars, a longer analysis would do well to trace this theme through the next century to see if other parties operate in the same ways as the Populists.

⁵⁸ People’s People’s Platform, 352.

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