

TRIUMPHANT PLUTOCRACY

The Story of
American Public Life
from 1870 to 1920

By
R. F. PETTIGREW
Formerly United States Senator
from South Dakota



Printed by THE ACADEMY PRESS
112 Fourth Avenue, New York City

THE NEW YORK
PUBLIC LIBRARY

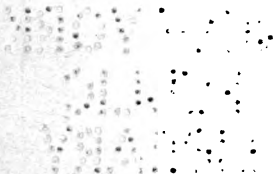
50077A

ASTOR. LENOX AND
TILDEN FOUNDATIONS
R 1922 L

Copyright 1921 by R. F. Pettigrew.

All rights, including the right of translation into foreign languages, reserved.

Published January 1, 1922.



XVIII. BRYANISM

It is not easy to characterize a complex political situation in a brief and comprehensive manner. If such a thing can be done at all, I believe that it can be done most successfully through the personality of two men who typify the two extremes of American political life. One of these men that I shall select for the purpose is William Jennings Bryan. The other is Joe Cannon of Illinois. The first is a Democrat—the second a Republican.

I have known both of these men for many years. Neither is a statesman in any sense of the word. Both are lawyers and suffer from the disqualifications that go with the study and practice of the law. Bryan has integrity, of a sort; Cannon has a keen mind. Both understand the political game, and both play it according to their lights. Bryan plays prohibition politics; Cannon plays plutocratic politics. Neither has any real grasp of the meaning of the phrase 'the public welfare.'

In the previous chapter, I have referred to the support which I gave Mr. Bryan in his fight against the eastern bankers and trust magnates. The fight ended in failure because Mr. Bryan was very weak while the trusts were very strong. Since that fight, Bryan has showed himself for what he is—an American politician, vacillating, uncertain, overlooking the fundamental things, ignorant of the forces that are shaping American public life, incapable of thinking in terms of reality, but making phrases as a substitute for thought.

Mr. Bryan is weak, not corrupt. That is why I wish to describe some of his public activities during the past few years. He is a type of the "good man" that so often fools the American people. By way of illustration, let me refer to two incidents which show Mr. Bryan's attitude toward public questions and his method of judging matters of personal conduct.

When the Spanish Treaty was pending in the Senate

of the United States and we believed that we had it defeated beyond a question, Bryan came to Washington from his home in Nebraska and urged a ratification of the treaty. He saw several Senators, before he came to me, and urged them to vote for ratification. Bryan knew the grounds upon which I was opposing the ratification of the treaty and yet he had the temerity to come and ask me to vote for ratification of the treaty. He argued that the treaty would entirely end our troubles with Spain and that, once it was ratified, the nation would have an opportunity to perform a great moral duty—the granting of freedom, under a wise and generous protectorate, to the people of the Philippines. His chief argument was that should the Republicans not give the people of the Philippines their independence, but, instead, should undertake to conquer the islands and annex them to the United States, such a course would and ought to drive the Republican party from power. The Filipinos had been our allies in the war with Spain, and he held that our repudiation of an alliance by such an act of bad faith as that implied in the conquest of the islands would wreck any administration that attempted it.

Bryan thus made the ratification of the Spanish Treaty an act of political expediency, and did not seem to realize that every person who voted to ratify the treaty at the same time endorsed the doctrine of purchasing a country and its people without their consent—the very doctrine on which he proposed to pillory the Republican administration before the country. Neither did he understand that a Senator holding my views and voting for ratification would be guilty of the most outrageous moral turpitude and depravity.

I called Mr. Bryan's attention to the fact that, if we voted for the treaty, it would be fair for the administration to assume that the Senate sympathized with the spirit of the document which, as I pointed out, besides violating every principle of free government, contravened the Constitution which I had sworn to sup-

port. I told him that I would sooner cut off my right arm than cast my vote for the treaty. I was so incensed by his effort to induce me, on the score of expediency, to change front on a matter of principle and stultify myself, that I finally told him emphatically that he had no business in Washington on such an errand; that his stand reflected on his character and reputation as a man, and indicated a lack of knowledge of human affairs which must make his friends feel that he was not a suitable person to be President of the United States.

Despite the vigor of my statement, I doubt if Bryan understood what I was driving at. He was seeking political capital and he was willing to take it where he found it, without paying too much attention to nice questions of principle.

The treaty was ratified by one more vote than was necessary. I do not believe Mr. Bryan's visit changed the result, although several Democrats, who made speeches against it, voted for the treaty. The only effect of his visit was to give an excuse for Democrats, for a cash consideration, to sell out to Aldrich and vote for the treaty.

Andrew Carnegie, in his autobiography, on page 364, refers to this subject as follows:

"Mr. Bryan had it in his power at one time to defeat in the Senate this feature of the Treaty of Peace with Spain. I went to Washington to try to effect this, and remained there until the vote was taken. I was told that when Mr. Bryan was in Washington he had advised his friends that it would be good party policy to allow the treaty to pass. This would discredit the Republican party before the people; that 'paying twenty millions for a revolution' would defeat any party. There were seven staunch Bryan men anxious to vote against Philippines annexation.

"Mr. Bryan had called to see men in New

York upon the subject, because my opposition to the purchase had been so pronounced, and I now wired him at Omaha, explaining the situation and begging him to write me that his friends could use their own judgment. His reply was what I have stated—better have the Republicans pass it and let it then go before the people. I thought it unworthy of him to subordinate such an issue, fraught with deplorable consequences, to mere party politics. It required the casting vote of the Speaker to carry the measure. One word from Mr. Bryan would have saved the country from the disaster. I could not be cordial to him for years afterwards. He had seemed to me a man who was willing to sacrifice his country and his personal convictions for party advantage."

This is a significant verification of my conclusions, but it is rather amusing to read Carnegie's comments on the perfidy of Bryan. The facts in his own case do not permit him a great deal of latitude in criticizing others. Carnegie was a very active opponent of the treaty and of the doctrine of imperialism. He was a member of the conference which met at the Plaza Hotel (New York) on the 6th of January, 1900, and he took a prominent part in its discussions (see Chapter XXIII). The conference was called by the New England Anti-Imperialist League, to organize an Anti-Imperialist political party for the purpose of compelling the old parties to agree to the independence of the Philippines, and for the purpose of opposing the acquisition of tropical countries.

The conference was called ostensibly to discuss the annexation of the Philippines and the Spanish West Indies and Hawaii. Its real purpose was to meet the broader question as to whether we should start on the course of empire. In a vigorous speech Mr. Carnegie

urged upon the conference the necessity of a new political party for the purpose of opposing the imperial policy of both the old parties, and said that he would give as much money, dollar for dollar, as all the rest of us could raise toward promoting the campaign. As a pledge of good faith, he subscribed twenty-five thousand dollars on the spot. Afterward, he withdrew completely from the movement because the organizers of the steel trust served notice on him that he must choose between a comfortable berth with them and an Anti-Imperialist party, which threatened the whole success of the steel trust movement; and the organizers of the steel trust told Carnegie that, unless McKinley was elected, they would not attempt to form the trust, as they needed a McKinley tariff in order to justify its great overcapitalization. It was a case of imperialism and a tariff or no trust and Carnegie lined up with the imperialists.

Despite Mr. Carnegie's comments, he and Bryan measure up very much alike. Bryan was willing to sell his convictions for a supposed political advantage; Carnegie sold his for gold. Bryan's act was one of intellectual stupidity. Carnegie's act was prompted by what big business calls enlightened self-interest.

Bryan has the point of view of an ordinary American business man. His ruling passion is "safety first"—not the financial safety of a manufacturer, but the political safety of a visionless manipulation of party machinery. This trait appeared very clearly in his activities during the Baltimore Convention of 1912, where Woodrow Wilson was nominated for President of the United States, with Champ Clark, Speaker of the House, as his chief opponent. The custom in Democratic conventions had always been to disregard the two-thirds rule and give a candidate the nomination when he had secured a majority and held it for several ballots.

At Baltimore, after Clark had for several ballots received the votes of a majority of the delegates, Bryan,

who had been instructed at the primaries to vote for Clark and use all honorable means to secure his nomination, arose in the convention and said that he would abandon him and violate the instructions of the Democrats of Nebraska as long as the Democratic delegates in the convention from the state of New York continued to vote for Clark. This occurred after the delegations from New York, Virginia and Illinois had voted in the convention with Bryan to seat the Wilson delegates and oust the Clark delegates from South Dakota, although Clark had carried South Dakota in the primaries by twenty-five hundred majority.

Bryan could vote with Roger Sullivan of Chicago, and Ryan of Virginia, and the Tammany Democrats of New York, to throw Clark delegates out of the convention and seat Wilson delegates, but his pure soul would not permit him to vote for Clark while New York delegates were voting for him. This whole performance branded Bryan as not only a hypocrite, but also as a man lacking in character and in intellect

Immediately upon Bryan making the announcement, I gave out the following interview which was published in all the leading newspapers of the United States:

“Mr. Bryan’s statement that he will support no candidate for President who has the support of New York is the rankest hypocrisy. It is the excuse of the demagogue who believes that such a statement will be popular among the western voters, and has been seized upon by Mr. Bryan as an excuse for doing what he has intended to do ever since he was elected as a delegate to this convention by the Democrats of Nebraska.

“He was not only instructed by the Democrats of Nebraska to vote for Mr. Clark, but instructed by the State Convention to use all honorable means to secure his nomination. After that, he stumped Ohio, Maryland and Florida in Wilson’s interest. While claiming that he maintained strict neutrality between Clark and Wilson, during the last week in May, Wilson’s managers sent a letter to every Democratic voter in South

Dakota saying that Mr. Bryan had endorsed Wilson and made speeches in Ohio and Maryland in support of him.

"This letter was circulated with Mr. Bryan's knowledge and consent. Mr. Bryan was thoroughly familiar with the campaign made in South Dakota. He was familiar with the primary law of that state and knows that there were two Clark tickets in the field and that one of these was put up by Wilson's managers to divide the Clark vote, hoping to give Wilson a plurality.

"He knows that this bogus ticket was not supported by the men who put it into the field, and he is fully aware that Clark carried the state by over twenty-five hundred majority over Wilson. Yet he voted to seat the Wilson delegates in this convention, joining with the ninety votes from New York and the fifty-eight from Illinois and the Virginia delegation, of which Mr. Ryan is a member, to oust the Clark delegates from South Dakota. Yet Mr. Bryan would now have us believe that no honest Democrat can co-operate with New York, Illinois and Virginia in this convention."

The publication of this interview regarding Bryan's hypocrisy and the other facts connected with the Baltimore Convention ended his political career, and yet he still hopes that he will be nominated four years from now, for he honestly believes that he was predestined from his birth to be President of the United States.

This is the William Jennings Bryan, who "led" the Democratic party until he was succeeded by Woodrow Wilson—the Bryan of political expediency and political chicanery. He has traveled around the world, yet he knows little of international affairs. He has been from one end of the United States to another, yet he is ignorant of America.

Furthermore, this is Bryanism—a fluent tongue, a resonant voice, the plausible statement of half truths, an appeal to the passions and prejudices of the moment, a mediocre mind, and a verbal fealty to "right,"

“justice,” “liberty” and “brotherhood.” An ignorant electorate has always followed after such superficial qualities.

Bryan has never told any of the real truths of modern life, because he does not know them. He has never made a fight on an issue of principle because he has no abiding principle. He listens. He watches his audience. He gauges its intelligence and then he makes his point. Mr. Bryan is reputed to be one of the best speakers in the United States. His reputation in this regard has been won not by what he says but by the way in which he says it. Nothing in his public career, with the possible exception of his resignation as Secretary of State, has been based on a hard-fought or hard-won principle. Rather he has yielded to the necessity of the moment, trusting that in the end all would be well, but without foreseeing the end or understanding its import.

Bryanism carries with it no taint of corruption—no suggestion of wilful wrongdoing. It is the politics of an ignorant, unimaginable and of a rather vain mind that is quick in trifles and impotent before major issues. Reform politics in the United States has never existed on any other basis, and therefore reform politics has always proved an easy mark for the machinations of big business.