Two female strikers picket during the Uprising of the 20,000 in New York City in 1910. Library of Congress.

final two decades of the nineteenth century saw over twenty thousand strikes and lockouts in the United States. Industrial laborers struggled to carve for themselves a piece of the prosperity lifting investors and a rapidly expanding middle class into unprecedented standards of living. But workers were not the only ones struggling to stay afloat in industrial America. American farmers also lashed out against the inequalities of the Gilded Age and denounced political corruption for enabling economic theft.

V. The Populist Movement

"Wall Street owns the country," the Populist leader Mary Elizabeth Lease told dispossessed farmers around 1890. "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." Farmers, who remained a majority of the American population through the first decade of the twentieth century, were hit especially hard by industrialization. The expanding markets and technological improvements that increased efficiency also decreased commodity prices. Commercialization of agriculture put farmers

in the hands of bankers, railroads, and various economic intermediaries. As the decades passed, more and more farmers fell ever further into debt, lost their land, and were forced to enter the industrial workforce or, especially in the South, became landless farmworkers.

The rise of industrial giants reshaped the American countryside and the Americans who called it home. Railroad spur lines, telegraph lines, and credit crept into farming communities and linked rural Americans, who still made up a majority of the country's population, with towns, regional cities, American financial centers in Chicago and New York, and, eventually, London and the world's financial markets. Meanwhile, improved farm machinery, easy credit, and the latest consumer goods flooded the countryside. But new connections and new conveniences came at a price.

Farmers had always been dependent on the whims of the weather and local markets. But now they staked their financial security on a national economic system subject to rapid price swings, rampant speculation, and limited regulation. Frustrated American farmers attempted to reshape the fundamental structures of the nation's political and economic systems, systems they believed enriched parasitic bankers and industrial monopolists at the expense of the many laboring farmers who fed the nation by producing its many crops and farm goods. Their dissatisfaction with an erratic and impersonal system put many of them at the forefront of what would become perhaps the most serious challenge to the established political economy of Gilded Age America. Farmers organized and launched their challenge first through the cooperatives of the Farmers' Alliance and later through the politics of the People's (or Populist) Party.

Mass production and business consolidations spawned giant corporations that monopolized nearly every sector of the U.S. economy in the decades after the Civil War. In contrast, the economic power of the individual farmer sank into oblivion. Threatened by ever-plummeting commodity prices and ever-rising indebtedness, Texas agrarians met in Lampasas, Texas, in 1877 and organized the first Farmers' Alliance to restore some economic power to farmers as they dealt with railroads, merchants, and bankers. If big business relied on its numerical strength to exert its economic will, why shouldn't farmers unite to counter that power? They could share machinery, bargain from wholesalers, and negotiate higher prices for their crops. Over the following years, organizers spread from town to town across the former Confederacy, the Midwest, and the Great Plains, holding evangelical-style camp meetings, distribut-

The banner of the first Texas Farmers' Alliance. Source: N. A. Dunning (ed.), *Farmers' Alliance History and Agricultural Digest* (Washington, DC: Alliance Publishing Co., 1891), iv.

ing pamphlets, and establishing over one thousand alliance newspapers. As the alliance spread, so too did its near-religious vision of the nation's future as a "cooperative commonwealth" that would protect the interests of the many from the predatory greed of the few. At its peak, the Farmers' Alliance claimed 1,500,000 members meeting in 40,000 local sub-alliances.[18]

The alliance's most innovative programs were a series of farmers' cooperatives that enabled farmers to negotiate higher prices for their crops and lower prices for the goods they purchased. These cooperatives spread across the South between 1886 and 1892 and claimed more than a million members at their high point. While most failed financially, these "philanthropic monopolies," as one alliance speaker termed them, inspired farmers to look to large-scale organization to cope with their economic difficulties.[19] But cooperation was only part of the alliance message.

In the South, alliance-backed Democratic candidates won four governorships and forty-eight congressional seats in 1890.[20] But at a time when falling prices and rising debts conspired against the survival of family farmers, the two political parties seemed incapable of representing the needs of poor farmers. And so alliance members organized a political party—the People's Party, or the Populists, as they came to be known.

The Populists attracted supporters across the nation by appealing to those convinced that there were deep flaws in the political economy of Gilded Age America, flaws that both political parties refused to address. Veterans of earlier fights for currency reform, disaffected industrial laborers, proponents of the benevolent socialism of Edward Bellamy's popular *Looking Backward*, and the champions of Henry George's farmer-friendly "single-tax" proposal joined alliance members in the new party. The Populists nominated former Civil War general James B. Weaver as their presidential candidate at the party's first national convention in Omaha, Nebraska, on July 4, 1892.[21]

At that meeting the party adopted a platform that crystallized the alliance's cooperate program into a coherent political vision. The platform's preamble, written by longtime political iconoclast and Minnesota populist Ignatius Donnelly, warned that "the fruits of the toil of millions [had been] boldly stolen to build up colossal fortunes for a few."[22] Taken as a whole, the Omaha Platform and the larger Populist movement sought to counter the scale and power of monopolistic capitalism with a strong, engaged, and modern federal government. The platform proposed an unprecedented expansion of federal power. It advocated nationalizing the country's railroad and telegraph systems to ensure that essential services would be run in the best interests of the people. In an attempt to deal with the lack of currency available to farmers, it advocated postal savings banks to protect depositors and extend credit. It called for the establishment of a network of federally managed warehouses—called subtreasuries—which would extend government loans to farmers who stored crops in the warehouses as they awaited higher market prices. To save debtors it promoted an inflationary monetary policy by monetizing silver. Direct election of senators and the secret ballot would ensure that this federal government would serve the interest of the people rather than entrenched partisan interests, and a graduated income tax would protect Americans from the establishment of an American aristocracy. Combined, these efforts would, Populists believed, help shift economic and political power back toward the nation's producing classes.

In the Populists' first national election campaign in 1892, Weaver received over one million votes (and twenty-two electoral votes), a truly startling performance that signaled a bright future for the Populists. And when the Panic of 1893 sparked the worst economic depression the nation had ever yet seen, the Populist movement won further credibility and gained even more ground. Kansas Populist Mary Lease, one of the

movement's most fervent speakers, famously, and perhaps apocryphally, called on farmers to "raise less corn and more Hell." Populist stump speakers crossed the country, speaking with righteous indignation, blaming the greed of business elites and corrupt party politicians for causing the crisis fueling America's widening inequality. Southern orators like Texas's James "Cyclone" Davis and Georgian firebrand Tom Watson stumped across the South decrying the abuses of northern capitalists and the Democratic Party. Pamphlets such as W. H. Harvey's *Coin's Financial School* and Henry D. Lloyd's *Wealth Against Commonwealth* provided Populist answers to the age's many perceived problems. The faltering economy combined with the Populist's extensive organizing. In the 1894 elections, Populists elected six senators and seven representatives to Congress. The third party seemed destined to conquer American politics.[23]

The movement, however, still faced substantial obstacles, especially in the South. The failure of alliance-backed Democrats to live up to their campaign promises drove some southerners to break with the party of their forefathers and join the Populists. Many, however, were unwilling to take what was, for southerners, a radical step. Southern Democrats, for their part, responded to the Populist challenge with electoral fraud and racial demagoguery. Both severely limited Populist gains. The alliance struggled to balance the pervasive white supremacy of the American South with their call for a grand union of the producing class. American racial attitudes—and their virulent southern strain—simply proved too formidable. Democrats race-baited Populists, and Populists capitulated. The Colored Farmers' Alliance, which had formed as a segregated sister organization to the southern alliance and had as many as 250,000 members at its peak, fell prey to racial and class-based hostility. The group went into rapid decline in 1891 when faced with the violent white repression of a number of Colored Farmers' Alliance–sponsored cotton picker strikes. Racial mistrust and division remained the rule, even among Populists, and even in North Carolina, where a political marriage of convenience between Populists and Republicans resulted in the election of Populist Marion Butler to the Senate. Populists opposed Democratic corruption, but this did not necessarily make them champions of interracial democracy. As Butler explained to an audience in Edgecombe County, "We are in favor of white supremacy, but we are not in favor of cheating and fraud to get it."[24] In fact, across much of the South, Populists and Farmers' Alliance members were often at the forefront of the movement for disfranchisement and segregation.

Populism exploded in popularity. The first major political force to tap into the vast discomfort of many Americans with the disruptions wrought by industrial capitalism, the Populist Party seemed poise to capture political victory. And yet, even as Populism gained national traction, the movement was stumbling. The party's often divided leadership found it difficult to shepherd what remained a diverse and loosely organized coalition of reformers toward unified political action. The Omaha platform was a radical document, and some state party leaders selectively embraced its reforms. More importantly, the institutionalized parties were still too strong, and the Democrats loomed, ready to swallow Populist frustrations and inaugurate a new era of American politics.

VI. William Jennings Bryan and the Politics of Gold

William Jennings Bryan (March 19, 1860–July 26, 1925) accomplished many different things in his life: he was a skilled orator, a Nebraska congressman, a three-time presidential candidate, U.S. secretary of state under Woodrow Wilson, and a lawyer who supported prohibition and opposed Darwinism (most notably in the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial). In terms of his political career, he won national renown for his attack on the gold standard and his tireless promotion of free silver and policies for the benefit of the average American. Although Bryan was unsuccessful in winning the presidency, he forever altered the course of American political history.[25]

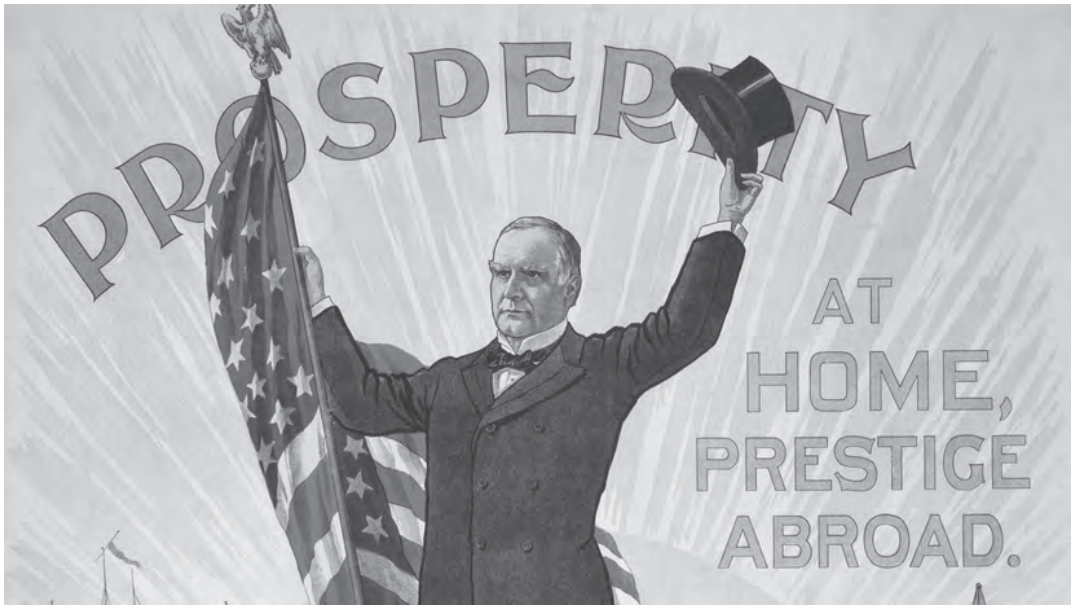
William Jennings Bryan, 1896. Library of Congress.

Bryan was born in Salem, Illinois, in 1860 to a devout family with a strong passion for law, politics, and public speaking. At twenty, he attended Union Law College in Chicago and passed the bar shortly thereafter. After his marriage to Mary Baird in Illinois, Bryan and his young family relocated to Nebraska, where he won a reputation among the state's Democratic Party leaders as an extraordinary orator. Bryan later won recognition as one of the greatest speakers in American history.

When economic depressions struck the Midwest in the late 1880s, despairing farmers faced low crop prices and found few politicians on their side. While many rallied to the Populist cause, Bryan worked from within the Democratic Party, using the strength of his oratory. After delivering one speech, he told his wife, "Last night I found that I had a power over the audience. I could move them as I chose. I have more than usual power as a speaker. . . . God grant that I may use it wisely."[26] He soon won election to the Nebraska House of Representatives, where he served for two terms. Although he lost a bid to join the Nebraska Senate, Bryan refocused on a much higher political position: the presidency of the United States. There, he believed he could change the country by defending farmers and urban laborers against the corruptions of big business.

In 1895–1896, Bryan launched a national speaking tour in which he promoted the free coinage of silver. He believed that bimetallism, by inflating American currency, could alleviate farmers' debts. In contrast, Republicans championed the gold standard and a flat money supply. American monetary standards became a leading campaign issue. Then, in July 1896, the Democratic Party's national convention met to choose their presidential nominee in the upcoming election. The party platform asserted that the gold standard was "not only un-American but anti-American." Bryan spoke last at the convention. He astounded his listeners. At the conclusion of his stirring speech, he declared, "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."[27] After a few seconds of stunned silence, the convention went wild. Some wept, many shouted, and the band began to play "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." Bryan received the 1896 Democratic presidential nomination.

The Republicans ran William McKinley, an economic conservative who championed business interests and the gold standard. Bryan crisscrossed the country spreading the silver gospel. The election drew



Conservative William McKinley promised prosperity for ordinary Americans through his "sound money" initiative during his election campaigns in 1896 and again in 1900. This election poster touts McKinley's gold standard policy as bringing "Prosperity at Home, Prestige Abroad." Library of Congress.

enormous attention and much emotion. According to Bryan's wife, he received two thousand letters of support every day that year, an enormous amount for any politician, let alone one not currently in office. Yet Bryan could not defeat McKinley. The pro-business Republicans outspent Bryan's campaign fivefold. A notably high 79.3 percent of eligible American voters cast ballots, and turnout averaged 90 percent in areas supportive of Bryan, but Republicans swayed the population-dense Northeast and Great Lakes region and stymied the Democrats.[28]

In early 1900, Congress passed the Gold Standard Act, which put the country on the gold standard, effectively ending the debate over the nation's monetary policy. Bryan sought the presidency again in 1900 but was again defeated, as he would be yet again in 1908.

Bryan was among the most influential losers in American political history. When the agrarian wing of the Democratic Party nominated the Nebraska congressman in 1896, Bryan's fiery condemnation of northeastern financial interests and his impassioned calls for "free and unlimited coinage of silver" co-opted popular Populist issues. The Democrats stood ready to siphon off a large proportion of the Populists' political support. When the People's Party held its own convention two weeks later, the party's moderate wing, in a fiercely contested move, overrode the objections

William Jennings Bryan espoused many Populist positions while working within the two-party system as a Democrat. Republicans argued that the Democratic Party was now a radical faction of Populists. The pro-Republican magazine *Judge* showed Bryan (Populism) as a huge serpent swallowing a bucking mule (the Democratic party). 1896. Wikimedia.

of more ideologically pure Populists and nominated Bryan as the Populist candidate as well. This strategy of temporary "fusion" movement fatally fractured the movement and the party. Populist energy moved from the radical-yet-still-weak People's Party to the more moderate-yet-powerful Democratic Party. And although at first glance the Populist movement appears to have been a failure—its minor electoral gains were short-lived, it did little to dislodge the entrenched two-party system, and the Populist dream of a cooperative commonwealth never took shape—in terms of lasting impact, the Populist Party proved the most significant third-party movement in American history. The agrarian revolt established the roots of later reform, and the majority of policies outlined within the Omaha Platform would eventually be put into law over the following decades under the management of middle-class reformers. In large measure, the Populist vision laid the intellectual groundwork for the coming progressive movement.[29]

VII. The Socialists

American socialists carried on the Populists' radical tradition by uniting farmers and workers in a sustained, decades-long political struggle to reorder American economic life. Socialists argued that wealth and power were consolidated in the hands of too few individuals, that monopolies and trusts controlled too much of the economy, and that owners and investors grew rich while the workers who produced their wealth, despite massive productivity gains and rising national wealth, still suffered from low pay, long hours, and unsafe working conditions. Karl Marx had described the new industrial economy as a worldwide class struggle between the wealthy bourgeoisie, who owned the means of production, such as factories and farms, and the proletariat, factory workers and tenant farmers who worked only for the wealth of others. According to Eugene Debs, socialists sought "the overthrow of the capitalist system and the emancipation of the working class from wage slavery."[30] Under an imagined socialist cooperative commonwealth, the means of production would be owned collectively, ensuring that all men and women received a fair wage for their labor. According to socialist organizer and newspaper editor Oscar Ameringer, socialists wanted "ownership of the trust by the government, and the ownership of the government by the people."[31]

The socialist movement drew from a diverse constituency. Party membership was open to all regardless of race, gender, class, ethnicity, or

American socialist leader Eugene Victor Debs, 1912. Library of Congress.