

“On the Eve of A Very Dark Night”

The Transformation of the Democratic Party
by Luke Angelillo

Luke Angelillo is a first-year undergraduate student double concentrating in History and Political Science. He is particularly interested in American electoral history, especially the variety of parallels and connections that cut across different time periods. In the future, he hopes to attend law school.



On the morning of November 9, 1892, First Lady-elect Frances Folsom Cleveland Preston addressed the throng of reporters gathered around the Clevelands' New York residence: “[Grover’s] pleasure was not demonstrable . . . He seemed simply to be in the enjoyment of a perfect satisfaction.”¹ Grover Cleveland’s contentment was well deserved. He had just won the most decisive election in twenty years, defeating his Republican rival, Benjamin Harrison, by over 400,000 votes. This margin of victory prompted *The Brooklyn Eagle* to declare that “a cyclone struck the GOP.”² Within four years, however, Cleveland’s sense of triumph would fade, and by the 1896 election he found himself ostracized by his own party. The 1894 midterm elections, in addition to economic crisis and intra-party division, led to this dramatic transformation of the Democratic Party. The party’s record losses in the midterm elections of 1894 not only served as a challenge to the party’s viability at the national and state levels, but also constituted a repudiation of the antiquated, more conservative Bourbon Democrats. With the survival of the party at stake, control of the Democratic Party shifted

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to the progressive wing led by the Silver Democrats. As a result, both the candidature and platform in 1896 represented a fundamental shift towards progressivism.

The Civil War had left the Democratic party in a state of disrepair and consequently removed from national politics; while Republicans waved the bloody shirt, all Democrats could do was lick their wounds. The end of Reconstruction provided an opportunity for Democrats to reverse their fortunes, and by the early 1880s two factions had emerged eager to restore the party to relevancy: the Bourbons and the Silverists. The two wings of the party were divided by their views on bimetallism, and the debate over the coinage of gold and silver was quickly becoming the preeminent national issue. In 1873 Congress had passed the Coinage Act, revising the laws of the US Mint so that silver could no longer be struck into legal tender. This act effectively placed the country on the gold standard. Although the act was a major departure from previous US monetary policy, the bill passed with little fanfare: in fact, the general population and even some congressmen were seemingly unaware that it ended the practice of bimetallism.³ Only when silver prices dropped three years later and farmers went to have their bullion struck at the mint did the general population realize that the coinage of silver was no longer possible. Because previous coinage of silver had increased the money supply and caused inflation, farmers and debtors were the most negatively impacted by the new legislation. To combat the act these two groups banded together to form the Free Silver Movement, protesting against the “Crime of ‘73” and agitating for a return to the unlimited coinage of silver.⁴ These bimetallists secured a partial victory in 1878 with the passage of the Bland-Allison Act, which mandated that the federal government purchase between two and four million dollars worth of silver each month. This (albeit limited) coinage of silver was boosted by the 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act, which increased federal silver purchases enough to make the United States the second-largest buyer in the world. By the 1892 Convention, advocates of the gold standard already believed silver had encroached too far; conversely, Silverists would not be

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pleased until coinage of silver was unlimited.

The issue of bimetallism partitioned the nation across geographic lines and further divided the Democrats into two ideologically opposed factions; however, the Bourbons—the conservative arm of the party that advocated the gold standard—were ultimately successful in consolidating control of the party, mainly via the 1892 Convention and Platform. Although the first Bourbon Democrats were Southerners who protested Reconstruction, the election of New Yorker Grover Cleveland to the Oval Office in 1884 shifted their center of power to the Northeast, where it extended into the Midwest. The propertied elite and industrial workers in these regions supported the Bourbons' strong "sound money" stance.⁵ In contrast, support for the more progressive, populist-leaning Silver Democrats primarily derived from the South and the West, regions with thousands of farmers and debtors. Despite these divisions, the Democratic Party entered election season united around gaining control of the White House after four years of Republican dominance. Both factions believed that former President Cleveland represented the party's best opportunity. Although many of the liberal Silverists were unenthusiastic about what would be his third consecutive candidacy, Cleveland, thanks to his prestige and name recognition, emerged as the party's only logical candidate.⁶ Unsurprisingly, the convention nominated him on the first ballot.

Democrats created a general, moderate platform that they hoped would net the party as much support as possible.⁷ Cleveland, who understood the obvious ideological, sectional, and coalitional differences within his party, went to great length to avoid alienating either faction. Operating on this strategy, Cleveland structured his platform almost solely around valence issues, including the party's support of civil service reform, small government, and the proposed Nicaragua Canal. He similarly emphasized the Democrats' successful blockage of the 1890 Lodge Bill. Most importantly, the platform strongly denounced the McKinley Tariff, an unpopular protectionist measure that likely influenced Republicans' poor performance in the elections of 1890. Cleveland intended to continue reaping the rewards

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of the Republicans’ failure: “our policy,” he declared, “should be to let them flounder.”⁸ Outwardly, the Democrats appeared united, and *The San Francisco Examiner* reported that the party was “united on the tariff.” “Let the issue on which it is divided wait,” *The Examiner* continued, pushing the party’s underlying divisions into the distant future.⁹ However, such substantial differences could not be kept secret for long; in the meantime, division percolated quietly.

Of particular concern was the Platform’s internally disputed endorsement of bimetallism and antitrust legislation. Cleveland privately opposed “the dangerous and reckless experiment of free, unlimited coinage of silver at our mints.”¹⁰ In a letter to New York Reform Club President Ellery Anderson, Cleveland bemoaned what he thought of as a rejection of the Northeast in favor of agrarian interests.¹¹ In public, however, he remained ambiguous enough on his position that he succeeded in siphoning support from both progressives and conservatives. Similarly, although Cleveland maintained only tepid support for antitrust legislation—many of his chief donors and supporters in the Northeast would be negatively affected by a stricter application of the Sherman Antitrust Act—he and his fellow Bourbon Democrats added this plank to the Democratic platform to draw support from moderate progressives. Of course, the platform’s outward support of bimetallism and antitrust legislation did not go too far; in fact, Cleveland avoided discussing these issues on the campaign trail, instead committing his campaign to lowering the tariff. This strategy proved successful: the Democratic Party gained control of the Senate, the House, and the Oval Office for the first time since the Buchanan Presidency.

However, as previously mentioned, the illusion of unity that the Democrats’ sweeping victory suggests is misleading and masks tensions between the Democratic Party’s competing factions. The Bourbons and Silverists failed to make meaningful compromise: the platform largely served as lip service to attract a wider net of voters. In addition, Cleveland always intended to campaign and subsequently govern on his own terms. Thus, despite his promise to “infuse new blood” into the executive branch, all but one of

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Cleveland's cabinet appointments were Bourbon Democrats.¹² Some Silver Democrats even refused to support the new president. For instance, Governor Pennoyer of Oregon declined to attend Cleveland's inauguration, insisting that Cleveland was nothing more than a "Wall-Street Plutocrat."¹³ Moreover, Republicans had found themselves in an extremely weak position in 1892—thus making them easier to defeat. Indeed, Speaker of the House Thomas Reed's unpopular new rules, coupled with recession and high tariffs, made the party incredibly vulnerable. Thus, the Democrats had hardly needed a high level of cohesion to defeat their rivals. The hidden divisions within the Democratic Party would soon begin to show, especially following the emergence of economic depression.

The Panic of 1893 resulted in the continued fracturing of the Democratic Party. By the time Cleveland assumed the presidency on March 4, 1893, the nation found itself in the throes of an economic downturn, with unemployment reaching 18 percent by the end of July. Republicans immediately argued that Democratic threats to lower the tariff had eroded business confidence. This effort to pin the crisis on the majority party was successful: the soup kitchens that opened across the nation quickly became known as Cleveland Cafes.¹⁴ Cleveland responded by recalling Congress for a special session in August to request the repeal of the 1890 Sherman Silver Purchase Act. Eager to both disprove the Republicans and weaken the position of Silver Democrats, Cleveland argued that the act was singularly responsible for the economic turbulence.¹⁵ The ensuing debate over the proposal proved particularly embarrassing to the Democrats: while the Republicans rallied together to defeat the law, the Democrats remained completely split.¹⁶ Debate lasted for months, and Cleveland could hardly contain his displeasure. When Congress finally succeeded in repealing the bill on November 1, only half of the Democrats voted for the measure.

The Democrats certainly could have politically recovered had the repeal led to noticeable economic change—but, contrary to Cleveland's prediction, the economy remained stagnant. As the repeal ultimately failed to alleviate the worst effects of the depression, it

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led to serious repercussions for the administration: as a result of the Democrats’ inability to foster compromise, the party’s disunity fully revealed itself to the voting public. Cleveland’s decision to play intra-party politics had been proven unwise—and Silver Democrats were fervent in voicing their discontent. Perhaps the loudest voice came from William Jennings Bryan, a second-term representative from Nebraska, who responded to the continued depression by calling for a “parting of the ways” within the party.¹⁷ More importantly, Cleveland’s blunder finally secured silver’s place as the leading national issue. Since the last election, Cleveland had carefully sidestepped the issue that bitterly divided his party; ironically, he had now accidentally succeeded in catapulting silver to the national forefront. As an effect, the tariff reform that he had married himself to during the 1892 campaign became inconsequential.

1894 presented more problems for Cleveland and the Bourbon Democrats. A tariff bill finally arrived on the House floor in the waning days of 1893, but, by the time it passed in mid-1894, the Wilson-Gorman Tariff had been stripped of almost all of its Democratic provisions. Cleveland, self-described as “a man depressed and disappointed,” let it become law without signing it.¹⁸ The economic depression worsened, and Coxey’s Army, a group of discontented workers, began its march to Washington to protest widespread unemployment. Additionally, a crop shortage resulting from an unusually warm summer compounded the suffering. However, none of these political misfortunes compared to Cleveland’s botching of the Pullman Strike, a massive railroad protest that encompassed nearly 250,000 workers at its peak. Cleveland, the same man who had campaigned so fervently for limited government, sent federal troops into Illinois to break the strike, much to the frustration of Governor John Peter Altgeld. Well-respected among the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, Altgeld resented Cleveland’s intervention in a situation that, he thought, the state government had under control. Altgeld thus began organizing liberal Democrats to defeat Cleveland in 1896. The factionalized nature of the Democratic Party prevented Cleveland from suffering in solitude: by association, the

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problems that plagued the administration now affected the Bourbon Democrats as a whole. Furthermore, Cleveland's failure to properly execute damage control further exposed the glaringly obvious intra-party divisions to the public. In a private letter to Cleveland, one of his close friends predicted that "[Bourbons] are on the eve of a very dark night."¹⁹ With the fall midterms looming, this nightfall quickly approached.

The 1894 midterm elections were not only an electoral failure for the Democratic Party, but also a challenge to the party's political viability and relevance at a national level. The Cleveland Administration marked the first point in the postbellum period that Democrats had enjoyed unified government. The results of the 1894 midterm thus served as a wringing denunciation of Democratic governance and, more specifically, Cleveland's wing of the Democratic Party. Democrats relinquished 127 seats to Republicans—the largest loss in history. Shockingly, the Democrats ceded thirty-three of these seats in the traditionally solid South. The Democrats' electoral strategy presupposed wins in this conventionally Democratic region, and Republican gains endangered that plan. Beneath a public facade of confidence and optimism, Cleveland privately pondered the unpleasant realities of the election: what could be the Democrats' electoral path if the party could not even reliably win the South, its longtime political stronghold?²⁰

However, the Democrats' most severe losses occurred in the Midwest: the party saw its representation dwindle from eighty-nine seats to three.²¹ With the North and South essentially clinched in advance by the Republicans and Democrats, respectively, the Midwest was the only perennially competitive region. Thus, the Democrats' resounding defeat was dismaying because the road to control of the federal government ran through the states of the Old Northwest. Although the losses in the Midwest were troubling to the whole party, Bourbon Democrats were particularly disturbed. A few days before the election, Governor Altgeld begged voters to spare progressive, anti-establishment Democrats: "Judas betrayed his master . . . but the world did not therefore condemn all twelve of the

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apostles.”²² Whether acting in direct response or not, voters answered his plea to spare progressive Silverists. Indeed, while defeat spanned the country, it disproportionately affected the Bourbon Democrats’ strongholds: the Midwest and Northeast witnessed enormous losses. Before the 1894 election, the conservative wing made up over half the party and almost the entire establishment. Afterward, only a few Bourbon representatives remained, and the faction’s most prominent members found themselves unemployed: Cleveland’s Democratic Party had withered away. Comparatively mild turnover in the South and West, coupled with the repudiation of the Bourbons, opened the way for the progressive Silver Democrats to take control of the national party.

Control at the state level, which was crucial to acquiring Senate seats prior to the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment, also slipped away from the Democrats. The increasingly popular People’s Party banded together with Republicans in North Carolina, Alabama, and Texas to take control of these states’ respective legislatures. Despite several fundamental differences between these two parties, they coalesced around a desire to liberalize the vote and prevent discriminatory voting practices by the Democratic Party. Democrats surely wished that members of their own party could cooperate so well: in the fifty-third Congress, party-line votes represented only 6 percent of the total.²³ Of course, it is important to not overemphasize Democratic disunity in the party’s 1894 electoral meltdown. As the incumbent party, the Democrats were naturally susceptible to loss. Furthermore, the Republicans ran a strong, motivated campaign after being embarrassed by the Democrats in 1892. Even a united Democratic Party would have struggled to succeed, and, factoring in economic depression, the party faced an exceedingly difficult election; longterm division within the party only accentuated its electoral weaknesses. However, the midterm elections certainly made intra-party differences much more visible, as Silver Democrats immediately began blaming the Bourbon establishment for the party’s defeat.

The 1894 midterm elections destroyed the reputation of

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President Cleveland and the Democratic Party establishment. Talks of electing a Silverist presidential candidate had been circulating since 1893, and these discussions gained momentum as President Cleveland quickly became a convenient scapegoat following the disastrous midterm elections.²⁴ Republicans and Democrats alike blamed the recession on President Cleveland's monetary policy, especially his strong push to repeal the 1890 Sherman Purchase Act. Thus, the 1894 publication of William H. Harvey's *Coin's Financial School*, a bestselling collection of fictional lectures in favor of bimetallism, resonated strongly with both disaffected Democrats and other citizens. One Minnesota magazine editor observed that "high school boys are about equally divided between silver and baseball, with a decided leaning toward the former."²⁵ Governor Altgeld's constant criticism of President Cleveland also accelerated after the midterm defeat, further injuring not only Cleveland's reputation, but also that of the Bourbon Democrats as a whole. Once-sympathetic colleagues and newspapers endlessly ridiculed President Cleveland: choice insults included Benedict Arnold, the Wicked Witch of the East, and "an old bag of beef [that ought to be] prod[ded] with a pitchfork."²⁶ With few Bourbons remaining in Congress, they could do little to defend themselves or their president. Cleveland, never an adept party leader or compromiser—he tended to "rub out sore spots with bricks"—failed to recover, spending the remainder of his presidency eagerly awaiting a return to private citizenship.²⁷ While the Bourbons spiraled out of control, Bryan and the Silver Democrats took control of the party.

Bryan and the Silver Democrats, taking advantage of the power vacuum created by the public denunciation of Cleveland and the Bourbons, steered the Democratic Party in a more progressive direction. Following the earth-shattering election results, demand for free coinage of silver—already heavily supported in the West and South prior to the midterms—skyrocketed; in the surviving Congress, the only unifying factor greater than silver was a distaste for Cleveland. Voters had decided that Cleveland mishandled the silver issue, and Silver Democrats immediately began moving to

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rectify his mistake: bimetallism gave the party a new identity.²⁸ According to Governor Altgeld, the midterm had not caused the remaining Democrats to wallow, but rather “stirred up our people . . . [and] put new life into the Democratic Party.”²⁹ In response to economic depression and the midterm results, twenty Democratic state platforms came out in favor of free silver by the end of 1894. Around the same time, Bryan began perfecting his famous “Cross of Gold” speech. After a failed Senate bid in 1894, Bryan traveled west and honed his oratory skills by giving speeches about the advantages of free silver. Following the midterms, Populists and Silver Republicans dominated the West—and Bryan and Altgeld saw the region as political capital that could be flipped to the Democrats. As Populists had previously worked with Silver Republicans in state legislatures, Bryan and Altgeld wondered if these parties might similarly be able to work with Democrats on a national scale. Bryan, an ardent admirer of the 1892 People’s Party presidential candidate, James Weaver, saw the Populists as having more similarities than differences with the Silver Democrats. With hopes of an alliance in mind, Bryan showed a willingness to take the Democratic Party in a decidedly populist direction. In addition to building a bridge between the People’s Party and the Democrats, Bryan spent the rest of his seventeen months out west networking and building name recognition. Thousands of people traveled to hear the Boy Orator of the Platte speak, and progressive Democrats lavished him with praise. The best bellwether of Bryan’s growing popularity may have been Cleveland’s growing contempt. As articulated by historian Hal Williams, Bryan had become “the embodiment of the forces reshaping the Democratic Party”—a rearrangement decidedly unfavorable to the Bourbon Democrats.³⁰ By the time the Democratic Convention came around in July 1896, Bryan appeared poised to complete the party’s Silverist transition.

The 1896 Party Platform and the eventual nomination of Bryan displayed the formal embrace of a progressive agenda by the Democratic Party. From the start, the 1896 Convention strongly favored the Silverist ideology: only one candidate in the whole field

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favored the gold standard, and not a single one affiliated himself with President Cleveland or the Bourbon Democrats. In fact, Cleveland's hold on the party had become so weak that he opted to sit the convention out; instead, he went on a fishing trip.³¹ Although the Convention's progressive ideology was clear, the party still had to determine who their standard bearer would be. Despite his extensive, cross-country speaking tour, Bryan entered the 1896 Convention with less recognition than other prominent Democrats; to counter this, his Nebraskan delegation handed out a photograph and one of his speeches to each other state delegation.³² Luckily for Bryan, no other candidate came in as a favorite either. Altgeld would have been a popular choice, but he was born in Germany, making him ineligible. This left two veterans of the free-silver cause as Bryan's main competition: Richard Bland and Joseph Blackburn. Bryan easily defeated this competition with his electrifying "Cross of Gold" speech, which propelled him to the nomination after only five ballots. Bryan's appeal became so wide-reaching that it transcended party lines: both the People's Party and the Silver Republicans formally nominated him for president. Bryan's dreams of a political coalition among these groups and the Silverists thus appeared to be falling into place—revealing yet another victory for the progressives.

The platform created at the Convention was unapologetically progressive. It called most prominently for the free coinage of silver and gold at the ratio of 16 to 1. Additionally, it contained a severe denunciation of the high tariffs established by Republicans. Many of its other planks drew direct inspiration from the Populists' 1892 Omaha Platform, including the imposition of term limits and the dissolution of national banks. The wave of change that swept over the Democratic Party prompted Henry Cabot Lodge to remark that "the Democratic Party . . . has passed completely into the hands of the Populists."³³ Ultimately, the platform served as the culminating reaction to the transpirations of the past four years. Cleveland's failures, economic depression, and electoral turmoil had motivated the Democratic Party to take a radical departure from the policy it

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had advocated in 1892. Now, in 1896, Bryan declared that he was ready “to enter up the judgement already rendered by the . . . people of this country.”³⁴

The 1894 Midterm Elections proved to be more than an electoral earthquake; they marked a turning point within the Democratic Party. For most of the post-Civil War era, Bourbon Democrats dominated the party while progressive dissent and intra-party divisions quietly fomented. The political climate that resulted as an effect of the midterms thus did not cause the party to completely default on its prior policy, but rather facilitated the continuation of an already existing trend towards progressivism. Massive turnover left the door open for William Jennings Bryan and other Silverists to take control of the party. As a result, Democratic presidents like Woodrow Wilson, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Lyndon B. Johnson would eventually enact some of the most progressive reform of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the voting bloc that the Democratic Party assembled in 1896 served as a model for the New Deal Coalition that would emerge 40 years later. Today, the 1894 midterm elections are of particular interest to the Democratic Party because the party stands at a similar juncture. Rattled by the shocking results of the 2016 presidential election, the party stands at a crossroads between moderate and liberal factions. Hillary Clinton’s defeat appears analogous with Cleveland’s downfall, and Senators such as Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, who are generally said to offer more radical alternatives to Clinton’s Democratic traditionalism, bear similarities to Bryan. In fact, Sanders’ claim that “Democrats need new direction” is reminiscent of Bryan’s call for a “parting of the ways”.³⁵ Whether we are about to witness a new transformation of the Democratic Party, however, remains to be seen.

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ENDNOTES

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² “A Grand Triumph,” *The Brooklyn Eagle*, November 9, 1892, 1.

³ Allen Weinstein, “Was There a ‘Crime of 1873’?: The Case of the Demonetized Dollar,” *The Journal of American History* 54, no. 2 (September 1967): 308.

⁴ *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. “Free Silver Movement,” accessed April 17, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Free-Silver-Movement>.

⁵ Andrew Busch, *Horses in Midstream: U.S. Midterm Elections and Their Consequences* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999), 69-70.

⁶ Williams, *Years of Decision*, 55-56.

⁷ During the Gilded Age, the platform was generally believed to be the best articulation of a particular party’s views, and citizens often decided who to vote for based on these views. However, candidates were in no way bound to follow each plank exactly; Cleveland himself would disregard the bimetallist plank in the 1892 platform.

⁸ Williams, *Years of Decision: American Politics in the 1890’s*, 44.

⁹ *San Francisco Examiner*, March 18, 1892. Quoted in Williams, *Years of Decision*, 45.

¹⁰ Arthur Meier Schlesinger Jr., *History of American Presidential Elections*, vol. 2 (Langhorn, PA: Chelsea House, 1971), 1711.

¹¹ Schlesinger, *History*, 2, 1711.

¹² Williams, *Years of Decision*, 65-72.

¹³ Williams, *Years of Decision*, 72.

¹⁴ Christina Romer, “Spurious Volatility in Historical Unemployment Data,” *Journal of Political Economy* 94, no. 1 (February 1986): 31.

¹⁵ *Congressional Record*, 54th Congress. Vol. 28.

¹⁶ “Repeal of the Silver Act,” History Central, accessed April 12, 2018, <http://www.historycentral.com/Industrialage/SilverAct.html>.

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- ¹⁸ W. J. Rorabaugh, *America's Promise: A Concise History of the United States*, vol. 2 (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 432.
- ¹⁹ Williams, *Years of Decision*, 90.
- ²⁰ Williams, *Years of Decision*, 96.
- ²¹ Tim Reuter, “Before Donald Trump, There Was William Jennings Bryan,” *Forbes*, June 20, 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/tim-reuter/2016/06/20/before-donald-trump-there-was-william-jennings-bryan/2/#1594714e1fa9.
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- ²⁴ “Grover Cleveland Home,” *National Parks Service*, https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/presidents/grover_cleveland_home.html.
- ²⁵ Stanley L. Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), 33.
- ²⁶ Mark Summers, “A Good Man is Hard to Take: Grover Cleveland, Man of Destiny,” *Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Library and Museums*, www.rbhayes.org/hayes/a-good-man-is-hard-to-take-grover-cleveland-man-of-destiny/.
- ²⁷ Orlando Stealey, *Twenty Years in the Press Gallery* (New York, 1906), 28.
- ²⁸ Williams, *Years of Decision*, 104.
- ²⁹ Altgeld, *Live Questions*, 96.
- ³⁰ Williams, *Years of Decision*, 108.
- ³¹ Richard Franklin Bense, *Passion and Preferences: William Jennings Bryan and the 1896 Democratic National Convention* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 18.
- ³² Jones, *The Presidential Election of 1896*, 163-165.
- ³³ Henry Cabot Lodge to Moreton Frewen, July 14, 1896, Moreton Frewen Papers 1823-1934, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

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³⁴ Williams, *Years of Decision*, 111.

³⁵ Michael Knigge, "Why the race to lead the Democratic Party has become a thing," *DW*, February 24, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/why-the-race-to-lead-the-democratic-party-has-become-a-thing/a-37693324>.

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