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Gold Democrats and the Decline of Classical Liberalism, 1896–1900

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DAVID T. BEITO AND LINDA ROYSTER BEITO

In 1896 a new political party was born, the National Democratic Party (NDP). The founders of the NDP included some of the leading exponents of classical liberalism during the late nineteenth century. Few of those men, however, foresaw the ultimate fate of their new party and of the philosophy of limited government that it championed. By examining the NDP, we can gain insights into a broader ideological transformation that was under way at the turn of the century. More specifically, we can better understand the decline of classical liberalism and the subsequent rise of modern liberalism.

The choice of the new party's name was carefully considered. The NDP (more widely known as the Gold Democrats) had been founded by disenchanted Democrats as a means of preserving the ideals of Thomas Jefferson and Grover Cleveland. In its first official statement, the executive committee of the NDP accused the Democratic Party of forsaking that tradition by nominating William Jennings Bryan for president. For more than a century, it declared, the Democrats had believed "in the ability of every individual, unassisted, if unfettered by law, to achieve his own happiness" and had upheld his "right and opportunity peaceably to pursue whatever course of conduct he would, provided such conduct deprived no other individual of the equal enjoyment of the same right and opportunity." They had stood for "freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of trade, and freedom of contract, all of which are

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The Independent Review, v.IV, n.4, Spring 2000, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2000, pp. 555–575

implied by the century-old battle-cry of the Democratic Party, ‘Individual Liberty’” (National Democratic Party 1896, 1).

A who’s who of classical liberals gave the NDP their support. Among them were President Cleveland (Welch 1988, 211), E. L. Godkin, the editor and publisher of the *Nation* (Beisner 1968, 59), Edward Atkinson, a Boston fire insurance executive, textile manufacturer, and publicist for free-market causes (Williamson 1934, 211), Horace White, the editor of the *Chicago Tribune* and later the *New York Evening Post* (Logsdon 1971, 346), and Charles Francis Adams, Jr., a leading political reformer and the grandson of President John Quincy Adams (Blodgett 1966, 229).

Two other supporters of the NDP became better known in the decades after 1896: Moorfield Storey, the first president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and the journalist Oswald Garrison Villard (Hixson 1972, 27–28), an anti-imperialist and civil libertarian. But the two NDP backers who enjoyed the greatest fame in subsequent years were those bulwarks of progressivism Louis Brandeis and Woodrow Wilson (Blodgett 1966, 225–26; Bragdon 1967, 52).

The origins of the NDP can be traced to broader shifts in political alignments during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Between 1876 and 1896, the national Republican and Democratic Parties vied in almost complete equilibrium. Electoral margins were thin, turnout was often 80 percent of the eligible voters, and ticket-splitting was rare. Victory usually depended on getting the party faithful to the polls on election day (Wiebe 1995, 134; Jensen 1971, 2, 9–10; Kleppner 1979, 21–25, 44). The two most contentious national issues were the tariff and the gold standard. Especially after the rise of Cleveland in the 1880s, the Democrats supported free trade and hard money (Jensen 1971, 19–24). At the local and state levels, they generally fought liquor prohibition and Sunday blue laws. By contrast, the Republicans often espoused a more interventionist agenda of protective tariffs, legislation to regulate morals, and, to a lesser degree, monetary inflation (Jensen 1971, 133; Jones 1964, 93–95; Kleppner 1979, 195–96, 355).

During the first weeks of Cleveland’s second administration (1893–97), the country started to slip into a major economic depression. Cleveland blamed the crisis on the mildly inflationist Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890. Enacted under the previous (Republican) administration, this law required the Department of the Treasury to purchase 4.5 million ounces of silver per month. Fearing abandonment of the gold standard, foreigners (and Americans) scrambled to exchange dollars for gold. Cleveland fought to restore financial confidence by pressing for repeal of the Silver Purchase Act. His campaign, though ultimately successful, was painfully slow and did not immediately reverse the drain (Ritter 1997, 37–40; Higgs 1987, 87–88; Timberlake [1978] 1993, 167–79).

Now tarred as members of the party of depression, the Democrats lost their congressional majority in the 1894 elections. But Cleveland did not give up easily in his quest to save the gold standard. In January and November of 1894 he had authorized

the Secretary of the Treasury to float bonds to replenish the government's gold holdings, and he did so again in February 1895. The measures reversed the gold drain but did great damage to Cleveland's popularity. Critics charged that he had sold out to the Morgan banking syndicate that had arranged the ultimately successful 1895 bond sale (Ritter 1997, 45–46).

By the end of 1895, Democratic critics of Cleveland in the agricultural West and South, such as William Jennings Bryan of Nebraska and Benjamin ("Pitchfork") Tillman of South Carolina, had launched a party insurgency (Jones 1964, 54–60, 71–73). Seeking to raise commodity prices for hard-pressed farmers, the silverite insurgents demanded that the federal government implement an inflationary monetary policy of "free silver." Under that policy, the dollar value of sixteen ounces of silver would have been pegged by the Treasury as equivalent to the dollar value of one ounce of gold (Ritter 1997, 183). Because the free-market ratio between silver and gold was thirty-two to one, the result would have been a pell-mell rush of silver holders to exchange their metal for dollars, and hence rapid dollar inflation and a corresponding depreciation of the currency. By the early months of 1896, the silverites had captured control of most Democratic state organizations (Jones 1964, 192–94).

Meanwhile, at their June presidential convention the Republicans embraced the gold standard and nominated William McKinley. The GOP had not always supported sound money so staunchly. Earlier, McKinley, like many Republicans, had taken an evasive straddle on the financial issue (Jones 1964, 93–95, 159–61). The GOP also reaffirmed its longtime commitment to a high protective tariff. One month after McKinley's nomination, the silverites took control of the Democratic convention in Chicago. The platform repudiated the gold standard in favor of the sixteen-to-one plan and called for the prohibition of private bank notes. After delivering his rousing "Cross of Gold" speech, the youthful Bryan captured the nomination. The People's (or Populist) Party, which endorsed Bryan less than two weeks later, had more radical demands, such as a graduated income tax and the nationalization of railroads and telegraphs (Jones 1964, 212–63; Johnson [1956] 1978, 97–98, 105).

The pro-gold Democrats reacted to these events with a mixture of anger, desperation, and confusion. Although they looked upon Bryan as the exemplar of an illegitimate "Popocratic" party, they recoiled from the protectionist McKinley. A growing chorus urged a "bolt" and the formation of a third party (Barnes 1930, 435–37). In response, a hastily arranged assembly on July 24 organized the National Democratic Party (*New York Times*, July 25, 1896). A follow-up meeting in August scheduled a nominating convention for September in Indianapolis and issued an appeal to fellow Democrats. In this document, the NDP portrayed itself as the legitimate heir to Jefferson, Jackson, and Cleveland. Vowing to protect "the liberty of the individual, the security of private rights and property, and the supremacy of the law," it denied that the Chicago convention had the "right or power to surrender those principles" (Dunnell 1896, 441).

In the months before the September convention, the NDP scrambled to establish a nationwide presence. William B. Haldeman of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* labored to recruit delegates and national committee members. After a Herculean effort, he looked forward to a “great convention of first class men, the delegates representing every State and Territory in the American Union, excepting possibly three of the rotten boroughs of the West.” The strongest local organizations were in the relatively pro-gold Midwest and Northeast (Barnes 1931, 468–69).

Mugwumps and Regulars

Some of the most prestigious supporters of the NDP were among those widely known as the Mugwumps. The term first appeared in the 1880s and was derived from an Algonquian word for “great leader” or “chief.” It was used to refer to a group of self-described “independent voters” who had reputations for upholding principle over party (Tucker 1998, 73). Most of the Mugwumps lived in Northeastern states such as Massachusetts and New York. They were often college-educated and of distinguished Yankee ancestry, and many worked in professions such as journalism, law, and academe (McFarland 1975, 1).

Participation in the movement against slavery had been a defining life experience for the older Mugwumps. Atkinson and White, for example, had raised funds to help equip John Brown’s insurgent army in Kansas (Williamson 1934, 4; Logsdon 28–31). During the Civil War, the Mugwumps had identified themselves with Lincoln and embraced the Union cause. The younger Mugwumps often had family or personal ties to the antislavery movement. Thomas Mott Osborne, a member of the executive committee of New York’s NDP, was a grandnephew of Lucretia Mott, the abolitionist organizer of the first national women’s rights conference in 1848 (Chamberlain [1935] 1970, 33). Villard was a grandson of William Lloyd Garrison (Villard 1939, 4–5), and Moorfield Storey had been personal secretary to Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, a leading Radical Republican (Hixson 1972, 11–15).

Less than a decade after the surrender at Appomattox, the Mugwumps bolted from the Republican Party out of disgust with the corruption of the Grant administration. They grew increasingly close to the Democratic Party and particularly applauded Cleveland for advocating free trade, a gold standard, and civil service reform (Tucker 1998, 14, 38). For the Mugwumps, who often underscored the importance of personal integrity, inflationist schemes were not only economically destructive but dishonest (Ritter 1997, 172). Cleveland, though not a Mugwump himself, looked to their writings for guidance on policy and was an avid reader of the *Nation* (Villard 1939, 123).

The Mugwumps derived their free-market views from such sources as Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, Harriet Martineau, Herbert Spencer, and Francis Wayland (Fleming 1952, 88; Tucker 1998, 11–12). In 1939, for example, Villard character-

ized his former mentors White and Godkin as devotees of the free-trade and anti-imperialist ideals of Cobden and Bright. He described White “as a great economic conservative; had he lived to see the days of the New Deal financing, he would probably have cried out loud and promptly demised” (Villard 1939, 122, 126).

Long before and during their participation in the NDP, the Mugwumps had worked through numerous “sound money” and free-trade organizations such as the Illinois Sound Money League, the Honest Money League of Chicago (Dunnell 1896, 439), the American Free Trade League (Tucker 1998, 30), the New York Free Trade Club (Fleming 1952, 100), and the Reform Club of New York (Ritter 1997, 244; Jones 1964, 267, 275; Wheeler 1917, 256). Other NDP supporters in this pro-gold, free-trade orbit were Atkinson, who was a disciple of the philosophy and methods of Frédéric Bastiat (Tucker 1998, 13); Edwin Burritt Smith, a respected jurist from Chicago (Smith 1909, xv–xvi, xx–xxi), and R. R. Bowker, a publisher from New York (Fleming 1952, 88–96).

Although the Mugwumps contributed much intellectual capital to the NDP, the experienced party regulars controlled the national and state machinery (Fleming 1952, 263–67). In contrast to the Mugwumps, the regulars tended to be lifelong Democrats and to have substantial experience as party activists and officeholders. In their private careers, many were self-made men or, at the very least, lacked the Brahmin old-wealth ties of their Mugwump allies. It would be a mistake, however, to draw a rigid dichotomy between regular Democrats and Mugwumps. Many NDP members fit into both, or neither, of these camps, and nearly all shared a fierce loyalty to the policies of Cleveland.

The regulars controlled nearly every state NDP, whereas the Mugwumps had little influence outside the Northeast (Fleming 1952, 267). A few of the better-known regulars were William C. Whitney, a New York utility and railroad magnate and former Cleveland cabinet official (Hirsh 1948, 506–10), Henry Watterson, editor of the *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Wall 1956, 226–27), U.S. Senators William Vilas of Wisconsin (Merrill 1954, 237) and Donelson Caffery of Louisiana (Dunnell 1896, 437–40), former U.S. Representatives William D. Bynum of Illinois and William C. P. Breckinridge of Kentucky (Klotter 1986, 172–73), and former Mayor John P. Hopkins of Chicago (Holli and Jones 1981, 168–69).

The biographies of the NDP’s national and executive committee members can shed light on the characteristics of prominent regulars. Some information was available for thirty-two of the forty-six members of both committees. Of these, sixteen were current or past holders of public office. Among them were two U.S. senators, one former U.S. representative, one former governor, and former mayors of Boston and Chicago. Nine had either chaired or served on local, state, or national Democratic Party committees. Although the founding of the NDP came during the waning years of classical liberalism, the median age of the members was only forty-four.¹

The committee members represented a wide spectrum of business and professional pursuits. Not surprisingly, the legal profession, increasingly a bastion of *laissez-faire* jurisprudence, accounted for nineteen members (Paul 1960, 227–37). After law, the most common occupation was journalism. Seven committee members had either published or edited newspapers, mostly representing the dethroned Cleveland wing. Six were in banking, including the party's treasurer, George Foster Peabody, a wealthy investment banker and philanthropist (Ware 1951, 62–64). Three were manufacturers, two were in railroads, and one was a department-store owner.

Although not identified with the regulars, the most colorful member of the national committee was Charles Erskine Scott Wood of Oregon, a lawyer, essayist, poet, friend of Mark Twain, and graduate of West Point. Wood had witnessed the surrender of the Nez Perce at Bear Paw Mountain, Montana. It was he who recorded, and perhaps embellished, Chief Joseph's famous speech, "My heart is sick and sad. From where the sun now stands I will fight no more forever" (Bingham 1990, 10–18).²

Both the regulars and the Mugwumps liberally deployed the rhetoric of limited government when promoting the NDP, but on specific issues their stands were unpredictable (Hixson 1972, 21). In Massachusetts, for instance, Adams decried governmental paternalism even while he pressed for more state railroad regulation (Kirkland 1965, 168, 185–87). Much the same could be said for former Mayor Abram S. Hewitt of New York City, who favored municipally financed (and ultimately owned) subways, restrictive tenement legislation, and slum clearance through eminent domain and who even expressed a willingness to consider government-built housing for the poor (Nevins 1935, 498–500, 504–6; 1937, 373).

Other prominent figures associated with the NDP, however, more thoroughly adhered to the philosophy of limited government. Atkinson (Beisner 1968, 90), Vilas (Merrill 1954, 226–27, 246–47), Godkin (Dementyev 1979, 190–92), Villard (Wreszin 1965, 27), White (Logsdon 1971, 337–42), J. Sterling Morton, Cleveland's secretary of agriculture (Olson 1942, 410–11; *Conservative*, December 1, 1898, 1), and John Bigelow, a Democratic elder statesman (Clapp 1947, 328–29), opposed regulations on wages and working hours and called for a divorce of government and banking. None of these men would have disputed Atkinson's recommendation, "That country will prosper most which requires least from its Government, and in which the people having chosen officers, straightway proceed to govern themselves according to their common habit" (Williamson 1934, 267).

1. Sources of biographical information for committee members include various volumes of *Who Was Who in America*; the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*; the *New York Times*; the *History of Alabama and Dictionary of Alabama Biography*; Twitchell (1963, 525); *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi* ([1891] 1978, 860–61); and *Tennessee the Volunteer State* (1923, 570–73).

2. Many years later, Wood recalled that he had been dubious about running a third ticket (Hamburger 1998, 112–13). His contemporaneous correspondence, however, indicates considerable enthusiasm for the NDP's campaign (Wood to William D. Bynum, September 11, 1896, Correspondence 1896, Bynum Papers; Wood to National Democratic Committee, October 6, 1896, Correspondence, Usher Papers).

The Election Campaign

Delegates from forty-one states gathered at the NDP's national nominating convention in Indianapolis on September 2. The first speech by Roswell P. Flower, the former governor of New York, set the tone. He assailed the Chicago convention for abandoning the Democratic credo "that the government governs best which governs least." Referring to the platform of the Populist Party, Flower contended that a vote for Bryan "in the name of party regularity" was a vote for the nationalization of railroads and telegraphs (*New Orleans Picayune*, September 3, 1896). Like many other backers of the NDP, Caffery held up the specter of anarchy. Accusing Bryan of fomenting disorder and class warfare, he predicted that the Great Commoner's election "would mean the destruction of our whole party for a generation. For when our people recover from the debauch of Populism and anarchy, they will discard the men who have led their orgy" (*Literary Digest*, September 12, 1896, p. 615).

The NDP's platform was brief and focused on the currency issue and, to a lesser extent, the tariff. It condemned "paternalism and all class legislation," as exemplified by "protection and its ally, free coinage of silver, as schemes for the personal profit of a few at the expense of the masses . . . whose food and shelter, comfort and prosperity are attacked by higher taxes and depreciated money." The most radical plank called for the federal government to be "completely separated from the banking business." During the coming months, NDP campaigners generally said little about this de facto support of free banking and the abolition of the national banking system. Finally, the platform appealed to the traditional Democratic demand of a tariff for revenue only rather than for protective purposes (Johnson [1956] 1978, 101–2).

The delegates then moved on to the selection of a presidential candidate. This was easier said than done. Although the NDP had no shortage of prestigious backers, few wanted to be its sacrificial lamb. Some delegates planned to nominate Cleveland, but they relented after a telegram arrived stating that he would not accept (McElroy 1923, 232). In a private letter to Vilas, the main drafter of the NDP's platform, Cleveland elaborated that "inasmuch as one element in the stock in trade of the reactionists is hatred and opposition to the Administration, I might aid them by entering the lists and thus giving force to the argument upon which this opposition is based" (Nevins 1933, 457). Vilas himself, who was a favorite of the delegates, also refused to run (Merrill 1954, 237–38).

The cabinet seemed to offer a bumper crop of potential candidates (Welch 1988, 211–12), including John C. Carlisle, the secretary of the Treasury and the champion of the gold standard (Barnes 1931, 470), William L. Wilson, the postmaster general (Summers 1957, 126), and J. Sterling Morton, the secretary of agriculture (Olson 1942, 394–95). All declined to run, in part because Cleveland had earlier urged them to keep a low profile in the campaign (Jones 1964, 270). For a time, Watterson expressed mild interest, but several complicating factors, including his absence from the country during the convention, led him to withdraw (Wall 1956, 227–29).

Ultimately, the delegates selected Senator John C. Palmer of Illinois as the presidential nominee. Palmer had an impressive record of accomplishments and a penchant for political independence. He had started his political career in the 1840s as a Jacksonian. Later, he became a Free Soil Democrat and then, in 1856, joined the Republicans (NDP 1896, 12–14). As a Union general in the Civil War, he was commander of the Kentucky department and had issued a controversial order to abolish slavery in the state. He bolted from the Republicans in 1872 because they had “adopted all the heresies of the old Whig party,” including a protective tariff. Thereafter, he was a Democrat again, winning office as governor of Illinois and in the U.S. Senate. Although not often portrayed as a Mugwump, Palmer had much justification for denying that his opinions had ever been derived from “the doctrines of a political party. I have thought for myself and have spoken my own words on all occasions” (Palmer 1941, 13, 24, 41, 178–86, 267–68, 276).

Palmer seemed the ideal candidate except for one critical flaw. At seventy-nine, he was far too old to persuade voters to take the campaign seriously. The same liability attached to his seventy-three-year-old running mate, Simon Bolivar Buckner, a former Confederate general and governor of Kentucky. In other respects, the pair complemented each other nicely: having fought in the Civil War on opposite sides, they formed a team that emphasized sectional unity. As state governor, each had achieved a solid reputation for independence and strenuous use of the veto pen (NDP 1896, 12–14; Stickles 1940, 374–75).

Party leaders left the convention in high spirits. Bynum, the NDP’s chairman, confidently ventured “a conservative estimate” of one million votes for Palmer (*New York Times*, September 5, 1896). A letter of encouragement from Cleveland gave the delegates an important psychological boost: “I am delighted with the outcome of the Indianapolis Convention and as a Democrat I feel very grateful to those who have relieved the bad political atmosphere with such a delicious infusion of fresh air” (Nevins 1933, 456). During the campaign, the NDP widely circulated printed copies of this statement.

Extensive, generally favorable press coverage also fueled the postconvention optimism. Several leading papers endorsed Palmer and Buckner, including the *Chicago Chronicle*, the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, the *Detroit Free Press*, the *Richmond Times*, and the *New Orleans Picayune*. Other Clevelandite papers, including the *New York Times*, *New York Evening Post*, the *New York Sun*, and the *Springfield Republican* officially backed McKinley but offered glowing praise for the NDP (*Literary Digest*, September 12, 1896, 610–11). An editorial in the *Sun* gave a backhanded compliment to Palmer and Buckner with the headline “A Splendid Ticket—Don’t Vote for It” (Stone 1938, 273). The *Nation* lauded the National Democrats for coming out “in favor of giving the individual citizen the widest freedom to earn his living unhampered by a paternal government. The distinctive difference between them and the Republican party is found here” (*Nation*, September 3, 1896).

Despite their advanced ages, Palmer and Buckner embarked on a busy speaking tour. This won them considerable respect from the party faithful, although some found it hard to take the geriatric campaigning seriously. “You would laugh yourself sick could you see old Palmer,” wrote Kenesaw M. Landis to Daniel S. Lamont, the secretary of war. “He has actually gotten it into his head he is running for office” (Barnes 1931, 478–79).

From beginning to end, the currency issue dominated the NDP’s campaign. At a postconvention rally in Madison Square Garden, Flower castigated the silverites as “fifty-cent Democrats.” Flanked by pictures of Jefferson, Jackson, Samuel Tilden, Cleveland, Palmer, and Buckner, he characterized Bryan’s plan to impose sixteen-to-one, when the market rate was thirty-two to one, as a chimera (*New York Times*, September 23, 1896). In a campaign speech in October, Vilas stated that free-silver legislation had as much chance of success as “a law that water should not freeze because its temperature falls below 32 degrees . . . no parliament or congress can make a piece of paper, or of metal, worth more than its redeemable or commercial value.” For Vilas the slow price deflation of the 1880s and 1890s was cause for “rejoicing, not lamentation,” because it meant that “a day’s labor will bring more bread, more clothes, more education to the toiling father’s family” (Merrill 1954, 240–41).

NDP campaign pronouncements repeatedly linked free silver with repudiation and instability. For Edward S. Bragg, a party leader in Wisconsin, sixteen-to-one aimed “a blow at the financial credit of the government and the business prosperity of the citizens” (*Chicago Times-Herald*, ca. August 27, 1896, Clippings, Usher Papers). He charged that an inflated currency would disrupt business plans and decimate the creditor class. NDP campaigners repeatedly disputed common stereotypes about this class. Perry Belmont of New York, for example, noted that it encompassed not only wealthy financiers but also wage-earners, widows, orphans, bank depositors, and all others who depended on fixed incomes (Belmont [1941] 1967, 429).

Although the gold issue occupied the center stage of the campaign, the NDP did not forget the tariff. It was Cleveland’s defense of lower duties during the 1880s, after all, that had first endeared him to many members. It was also the chief issue that divided them from the Republicans (Krock 1923, 62–63; Chamberlain [1935] 1970, 118–19; Ware 1951, 67). NDP members could readily agree when Breckinridge depicted the protective tariff as a species of special privilege. He accused the Democrats of waffling on their traditional commitment to a “tariff for revenue only” by leaving the word “only” out of the Chicago platform (*New Orleans Picayune*, September 4, 1896).

Few pro-NDP pronouncements were complete unless they praised Cleveland’s use of federal troops during the railroad strikes in Chicago in 1894. The failure of the Democratic Party to defend the president on that score was a source of great anger. An enraged Charles S. Hamlin, the assistant secretary of the Treasury, wrote in his diary that the criticism of Cleveland’s actions “would have made me bolt the convention if

there had been a gold plank in the platform” (Hamlin, Diaries, July 5, 1896, Hamlin Papers). While conceding that Americans could have “honest differences of opinion” about the strikes, the *Campaign Text-Book* warned that “there can be no dispute about the necessity of upholding the supremacy of the law” (NDP 1896, 9, 1.91, 1.98). Although the governor of Illinois had protested the deployment of federal troops, NDP backers emphasized that it had passed muster with the Supreme Court as necessary to protect interstate commerce and the delivery of the U.S. mail. Few, if any, expressed concern that the precedent established by the ruling could ever be used to undermine property rights or to limit the free flow of interstate commerce.

Members could rally around a common platform and candidates for 1896, but they could not agree on either a short- or long-term strategic vision. On one extreme were those who regarded the Palmer ticket as little more than a vehicle to elect McKinley. Chief representatives of this view were Whitney (Hirsh 1948, 508–9) and Hewitt, the national treasurer of the NDP. To Hewitt, the election of McKinley, and thus protection of the gold standard, overrode all other issues. He had initially opposed a third ticket but had come to the conclusion that it would help defeat Bryan. Hewitt reasoned that most Cleveland Democrats would vote for Bryan out of habits of regularity unless they had a third alternative (Nevins 1937, 362–63, 370). Osborne did not go quite so far but stated that he would vote for McKinley if he “lived in a doubtful state” (Chamberlain [1935] 1970, 125). Palmer himself said at a preelection stop that if “this vast crowd casts its vote for William McKinley next Tuesday, I shall charge them with no sin” (Jones 1964, 273).

There was some cooperation with the GOP, especially in finances. The Republicans hoped that Palmer could draw enough Democratic votes from Bryan to tip marginal midwestern and border states into the McKinley column (Barnes 1931, 479; Nevins 1937, 362–63). In a private letter, Hewitt underscored the “entire harmony of action” between both parties in standing against Bryan (Nevins 1937, 363). To this end, the Republicans contributed one-half to an NDP fund of \$100,000 in the battleground states of Michigan, Indiana, and Kentucky (Nevins 1935, 564–65). The two parties joined forces in the distribution of “sound money” literature, and in some areas the Republicans gave direct aid to the NDP (W. E. Hawkins to C. Vey Holman, October 7, 1896 and J. Stevens to Usher, October 31, 1896, Correspondence, Usher Papers).

Although it brought obvious financial benefits, the alliance with the GOP did tremendous damage to the NDP’s credibility. Potential supporters repeatedly expressed concern that their votes would be “wasted” or, worse, would help to throw the election to Bryan. The complaint of an NDP activist several weeks before the election was typical. He reported that many pro-gold Democrats were “almost persuaded to vote for Palmer and Buckner, but hesitate at the fear that the National Democracy is but a Republican side-show” (John D. Goss to William F. Vilas, October 16, 1896, Vilas Papers). Mainstream Democrats had a field day in their efforts to discredit the

campaign. Palmer and Buckner regularly faced hecklers who dogged them with the jeer “Look at the McKinley Aid Society!” (Barnes 1930, 443).

Even so, the NDP was not, as one historian put it, merely “an adjunct to the Republican campaign” (Jones 1964, 275). Although party leaders preferred that McKinley rather than Bryan be elected, a more important goal was to nurture a loyal remnant for future victory. Repeatedly they depicted Bryan’s prospective defeat, and a credible showing for Palmer, as paving the way for ultimate recapture of the Democratic Party. For Bragg, it was critical to “keep the vestal fires burning” of old Democratic traditions (*Milwaukee Journal*, August 24, 1896, Clippings, Usher Papers). Storey conceded defeat in November but underscored the need to offer a “trustworthy organization to which the voters can turn when the reaction which is sure to follow McKinley’s election sets in” (Logsdon 1971, 346). Similarly, Palmer hoped to create a “nucleus around which the true Democrats . . . can rally once more, and to preserve a place for our erring brothers, if the time comes when they repent . . . we will be ready to receive them with open arms! Come back to the party of your fathers” (Barnes 1930, 437).

Few individual voters, or even party activists, probably thought in such grandiose terms. To most, the NDP filled a simple and immediate need. It allowed them to vote for a candidate other than McKinley or Bryan. In his study of the NDP in Michigan, Philip VanderMeer found that the party arose not so much “to recapture the Democratic party or to elect McKinley. Rather, it was formed primarily to help its members, to allow them to participate in politics that year without having to compromise” (VanderMeer 1989, 78).

Such motivation was a shaky foundation on which to build a third party, and the stage was set for a poorly managed campaign. Bynum’s tenure as national chairman was lethargic and marked by conflict with state and national party officials. Even with the aid from the GOP, the party always seemed to be starved for cash. Each state organization had to grope its way through to November (Jones 1964, 271, 274). Although the NDP established a minimal presence in all but four states (Nevada, Utah, Idaho, and Wyoming), its affiliates were often little more than shell organizations. When asked by a journalist for a list of state party committees, Bynum refused because “there would appear so many blanks upon the list as to make a bad showing” (Bynum to Henry F. Rhoades, December 21, 1896, Letterbook Bynum Papers). Looking back several years later, Ellis B. Usher, the chair of the Wisconsin NDP, remembered that “Few . . . know how near our National Committee’s campaign came to being an utter and transparent farce. . . . A few of us put up a big ‘bluff’ and did enough to save being caught at it, but the escape was a close call” (Jones 1964, 275).

The confusion about goals led to repeated clashes in the state parties over whether to build a more permanent organization. Usher, for example, proposed that Wisconsin field local and state candidates as a means of enhancing the party’s credibility (Usher to Vilas, August 19, 1896, Correspondence, Vilas Papers). Vilas vetoed the plan, fearing

that it would unduly antagonize local Democrats. Vilas wondered whether “the fight should be hot? We are after votes now, and the unification of the Party by and by” (Vilas to Usher, August 20, 1896, Correspondence, Usher Papers). In the end, several state NDPs, including those of Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Missouri, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Alabama, Ohio, Oregon, New York, Tennessee, and Virginia, fielded candidates for governor or Congress (Congressional Quarterly 1975, 677–80; Kallenbach and Kallenbach 1977). They tended to avoid contesting races with either pro-gold Democrats or low tariff, pro-gold Republicans. But restrictive state ballot laws, combined with a late start, had the effect of discouraging many from running.

There were fusion candidates with the GOP in Kentucky, New York, and New Jersey, but most NDP leaders tried to keep some distance from the Republicans. Despite a shared aversion to Bryan, feelings of distrust ran deep. Many backers of the NDP regarded free silver as the inevitable by-product of the Republican “paternal theory of Government” (Krock 1923, 84). In Bowker’s view, “our money botherations and our labor difficulties spring from the Protectionist group and . . . we have to make all along the line the strongest kind of fight against Socialism, protectionism, Bimetallism, and other nostrums” (Fleming 1952, 257). In a campaign speech for the NDP in Massachusetts, Siquourney Butler blamed the Republican protectionists for setting the fire of sixteen-to-one and noted the irony that they “now ask us to help put it out with their appliances. We will help, but we’ll run with our machine” (*Boston Herald*, October 1896, Scrapbooks, Hamlin Papers).

The Election and the Final Years

On election day, McKinley edged out Bryan by a vote of 51 percent to 46 percent. Palmer came in a dismal third at only 0.96 percent. Ironically, Palmer’s strongest vote tended to be in the Northeast and the South rather than in the high-priority midwestern and border states. He did best in New Hampshire, at 4.2 percent, followed by Florida, Alabama, Massachusetts, Delaware, and Connecticut. The NDP’s scorecard in other races was better but still disappointing. All of its nonfusion candidates for the U.S. House lost, although seven polled more than 20 percent (Congressional Quarterly 1975, 280, 677–80). By contrast, no NDP candidate for governor garnered even 10 percent (Kallenbach and Kallenbach 1975).

Faced with these desultory results, the NDP leaders still put on a brave show. They made much of the fact that Palmer’s small vote in Kentucky was higher than McKinley’s thin margin in that state (Congressional Quarterly 1975, 280). From this, they concluded that Palmer had drained off needed Democratic votes and thrown the state to McKinley (Barnes 1930, 445–46). Other evidence calls this claim into question. The bulk of the correspondence in the Cleveland, Usher, Bynum, Breckinridge, Hamlin, and Vilas papers shows that few wavering Democrats who expressed any preference even considered voting for Bryan. For most, the choice boiled down to

one of Palmer, McKinley, or staying at home. Although Palmer might have helped McKinley carry Kentucky, a border state where Democrats were often averse to voting Republican, the situation was not nearly so cut-and-dried as NDP spokesmen claimed. In any case, the claim was really beside the point. McKinley would have won the election even if he had lost in Kentucky.

Some NDP partisans even tried to portray the election as a stunning victory for their party. They confidently predicted that the defeat of the despised Bryan would open the door for the recapture of the Democratic Party. To Euclid Martin, Nebraska's NDP chair, McKinley's election represented the "victory of defeat." His state voted for Bryan, but he found reason to "congratulate ourselves. . . . People find less fault with the blunders in the state in view of the splendid victory achieved in the nation" (Olson 1942, 398). Few of the optimists could match the zeal of Watterson, who beamed in a postelection editorial that "Palmer and Buckner have saved the country from shame and have saved the party from destruction" (Wall 1956, 232).

Beneath these upbeat proclamations, however, ran a strong undercurrent of disappointment. The wide gulf between Bynum's "conservative" prediction of a million votes and the final total of 134,000 was hard to gloss over. At the very least, the poor performance dashed any immediate offensive against the Bryanites, who were already planning to try again in 1900. Unable to bargain from a position of strength, NDP activists concentrated instead on either influencing McKinley's policies or petitioning for patronage. In a letter to Vilas, one expressed the hope "that McKinley will recognize some of the hard workers in the 'DEMOCRATIC' party. They can well afford to do so as the election of McKinley is certainly due to them" (W. A. Wyse to Vilas, November 11, 1996, Correspondence, Vilas Papers).

These attempts to shape the policies of the Republicans or curry their favor made little headway. A case in point came in early 1897, when Atkinson wrote to Republican Senator George F. Hoar of Massachusetts, urging him to oppose the protective Dingley tariff. McKinley, he claimed, had been "put in power by the Sound Money Democrats . . . yet the purpose of the Republican Party seems to be to ignore the Sound Money Democrats on the tariff." Atkinson should not have been surprised by Hoar's curt response: "The Republicans were never put in power by Sound Money Democrats. . . . We should have carried the country triumphantly . . . if there had not been a Sound Money Democrat in the world" (Williamson 1934, 220–21). Only a few gold Democrats secured federal appointments, most notably Lyman Gage as secretary of the Treasury (Barnes 1930, 446).

Despite these disappointments, the NDP struggled on, perhaps buoyed by its strong showing in some congressional races. But weak performances in the 1897 and 1898 elections dashed most of its lingering hopes. In 1898, for example, the NDP candidate for governor in Maine garnered a paltry 315 votes (Fleming 1952, 270–71; Barnes 1931, 502–03). For some, the rise of the American Anti-Imperialist League after the Spanish-American War offered prospects for renewal

of the party. The league had been formed in November 1898 to oppose annexation of the Philippines and other captured territory. Within a year, several anti-imperialists began to discuss plans to combine forces with the NDP to launch a third presidential ticket in 1900.

At first, the prospects for forging such an alliance looked promising. Former Palmer supporters exercised much influence in the leadership of the Anti-Imperialist League. Storey was a vice president of the league and later its president (Hixson 1972, 50–51); Edwin Burritt Smith was the chair of its executive committee. Cleveland, Carlisle, Adams, White, Peabody, Wood, Caffery, Morton, and Atkinson were vice presidents (Smith to Carl Schurz, January 13, 1900, Schurz Papers; Lanzar 1930, 18–20; Williamson 1934, 227). Despite the efforts of Storey, Osborne, Morton, Villard, Atkinson, and others, however, the plan for a third ticket failed to bear fruit (Olson 1942, 419; Villard to Schurz, July 20, 1900 and White to Schurz, July 25, 1900, Schurz Papers; Tompkins 1967, 155–58). As the election grew closer, it became increasingly clear that Bryan had effectively captured the anti-imperialism issue, and few relished another quixotic third-party bid. Moreover, the gold standard seemed secure under McKinley. In 1900, as its last official act, the NDP's national committee resolved that nomination of a third ticket "for the offices of President and Vice President is unwise and inexpedient" ("Resolutions," July 25, 1900, Clippings, Usher Papers).

Aftermath

The nomination of Alton Parker in 1904 gave a victory of sorts to pro-gold Democrats, but it was a fleeting one. The old classical liberal ideals had lost their distinctiveness and appeal. By World War I, the key elder statesman in the movement, Palmer, as well as Buckner, Vilas, and Atkinson, had died. During the twentieth century, classical liberal ideas never influenced a major political party as much as they influenced the Democrats in the early 1890s.

Although many of the younger key NDP activists and voters had long careers ahead of them, few remained on the path of classical liberalism in the twentieth century. The biographies of thirty-two national and executive committee members illustrate this trend after the demise of the party. One member died in 1898, but the others survived into the next century. Fifteen did not indicate any subsequent party affiliation or hold significant office after 1900. Thirteen of the thirty-two reentered the Democratic Party, and four joined the Republicans. The usual progression of those who returned was to gravitate first to Parker and then to Wilson, who himself had voted for Palmer and Buckner. VanderMeer found that NDP members in Michigan had a similar tendency to rejoin the Democrats (VanderMeer 1989, 83).³

3. For our sources of biographical information, see footnote 1.

For many, the classical liberalism of the National Democratic Party served as a stepping-stone to the big-government liberalism of the twentieth-century Democratic Party. Some former NDP backers even helped to create Wilsonian progressivism. Peabody sponsored the publication of *The New Freedom*, a 1913 collection of Wilson's essays, and he later defended the New Deal and the nationalization of railroads (Ware 1951, 67, 164, 232–34). Osborne was instrumental in engineering Wilson's nomination in 1912 (Chamberlain [1935] 1970, 177–78).⁴

Several national and executive committee members held office under Wilson. Among them were the special counsel to the Railroad Administration in World War I, two members of the Democratic National Committee, the assistant secretary of the navy, the director of the War Finance Corporation, and the deputy chairman of the Federal Reserve Board of New York.

Most strikingly, all three of Wilson's appointments to the Supreme Court—Brandeis, James C. McReynolds, and John H. Clarke—had campaigned for the NDP in 1896. The tenure of each on the Court, however, shows little evidence of a common thread. Brandeis, a backer of the NDP in Massachusetts, generally voted to sustain expanded governmental intervention (Friedman and Israel 1969, 2047–59). Clarke, the chairman of the NDP convention in Ohio in 1896, ended his career as a vocal public defender of the New Deal and of FDR's court-packing plan (Warner 1959, 24–25, 194–96). McReynolds, an NDP candidate for the U.S. House in Tennessee, moved in the opposite direction. As a leader of the conservative “four horsemen,” he repeatedly voted to strike down New Deal legislation (Friedman and Israel 1969, 2025–33).

Although the NDP had steered clear of such issues, several former members were in the vanguard of movements for civil liberties and civil rights. Although some, including Morton and Caffery, expressed racist opinions (*Conservative* 1, February 23, 1899, 2; Gatewood 1975, 301–2), they were not typical (Tucker 1998, 113). Compared to other Americans during that extremely racist period, major NDP figures generally had advanced views. Though Breckinridge and Watterson were both Kentucky Democrats, for example, they favored suffrage and the right to testify in court for blacks (Wall 1956, 92–94; Klotter 1986, 147–48, 179–81). Villard, White, Osborne, and Storey helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1910. Storey became the president, Villard was disbursing treasurer and chairman of the board, and Osborne was on the general committee (St. James 1980, 23–24, 240–41, 247–50). Villard had abandoned economic laissez-faire by the 1920s (Wreszin 1965, 220, 228), but Storey held on to many of his earlier beliefs, including opposition to federal prohibition of child labor. According to Storey's biographer, he subscribed to a

4. For other examples of a tendency of NDP supporters to shift from classical liberalism to progressivism or modern liberalism, see Fleming (1952, 275); Smith (1909, 109–11, 358–59); and Wall (1956, 247–49).

philosophy “which for him included pacifism, anti-imperialism, and racial egalitarianism fully as much as it did laissez-faire and moral tone in government” (Hixson 1972, 39, 123–26, 154–58).

Storey and Villard aggressively defended civil liberties during World War I and the subsequent red scare. The historian Mark A. Graber persuasively argues that they, along with Godkin and Atkinson, advocated a “conservative libertarian” perspective that upheld both civil liberties and property rights (Graber 1991, 22–23, 238–40). But few dared to go as far as C. E. S. Wood. As a lawyer, he not only represented dissidents such as Emma Goldman but crossed the line into anarchism. After the turn of the century, he wrote articles for anarchist and other radical journals, such as *Liberty*, *The Masses*, and *Mother Earth*. Until his death in 1944, Wood advocated such unfashionable causes as free love, birth control, and anti-imperialism (Hamburger 1998, 118–21, 128–31, 140–46). Writing in 1927, during high tide of the Coolidge Era, he lamented that the

city of George Washington is blossoming into quite a nice little seat of empire and centralized bureaucracy. The people have a passion to “let Uncle Sam do it.” The federal courts are police courts. An entire system with an army of officials has risen on the income tax; another on prohibition. The freedom of the common man, more vital to progress than income or alcohol, has vanished. (Wood 1927, vii–viii)

Conclusion

Historians have rightly classified the 1896 presidential election as a watershed in American politics. During that campaign the ideological fault lines between the two major parties were wider than they had been for decades. Although Bryan was unable to displace the established financial system, American politics underwent a significant realignment. An often forgotten facet of that realignment was the disappearance of the old Democratic Party, which had upheld free trade, hard money, and minimalist government.

The NDP’s efforts to defend these values ended in near-complete failure. The party was hindered by a vague and contradictory political strategy. The goal of a getting a high vote total, so as to impress the silverites, was undercut by the equal fear of risking a Bryan victory, even if the alternative was election of the “paternalistic” McKinley. The NDP represented an almost wholly reactive response to free silver and, to a lesser extent, protectionism. The silverite “usurpation” of the Democratic Chicago convention was a theme in virtually every campaign document. These constant allusions, combined with heavy doses of hyperbole about anarchist mobs, could hardly generate anything but a negative impression. The NDP devoted little attention to finding creative responses to the currency crisis that might appeal to the public.

The banking issue was an example. Although the platform endorsed the separation of government and banking, the NDP never followed up by proposing specific policies to legalize free banking and interstate branching. The nearly all-consuming hatred of Bryan pushed aside almost everything else.⁵

A related problem was the inability of NDP leaders to decide whether theirs was a third party or a “wronged” faction of “true” Democracy. In many ways, they had chosen the worst of both worlds. The preoccupation with gaining control of the party machinery in the hope of recapturing the Democratic organization served to cancel out any chance of building an effective third party. Yet, at the same time, the decision to bolt and to run candidates had the effect of alienating Democrats who remained in the party and thereby preventing the very reconciliation that was desired.

Nonetheless, the NDP deserves closer attention from historians. It stands out as the last classical liberal political movement of the nineteenth century, and it did not have a successor for many decades to come. Within a few years of its disappearance, the limited-government ideas defended by the NDP were all but forgotten. In 1912, for example, all three major candidates, William Howard Taft, Woodrow Wilson, and Theodore Roosevelt, put forward interventionist agendas. Not until the 1970s would classical liberal ideas finally reoccupy a significant position in political and policy debates.

5. For more on the role played by government restrictions on branch banking and the issuance of bank notes during this period, see Timberlake ([1978] 1993, 202–9); Hummel (1996, 324–25); Horwitz (1992, 150–60); and Doti and Schweikart (1991, 53–72).

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Acknowledgments: Bradley Birzer, Mark Brady, Robert Higgs, Todd J. Olson, and Alan Petigny offered many valuable suggestions and other support for this article.

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