The Forgotten Forerunner

William Jennings Bryan survives in popular memory chiefly as the much ridiculed figure of the Scopes trial. But he was much more than that. The first celebrity-politician and thrice the Democrats' presidential nominee, he turned his party into the standard-bearer of modern liberalism.

by Michael Kazin

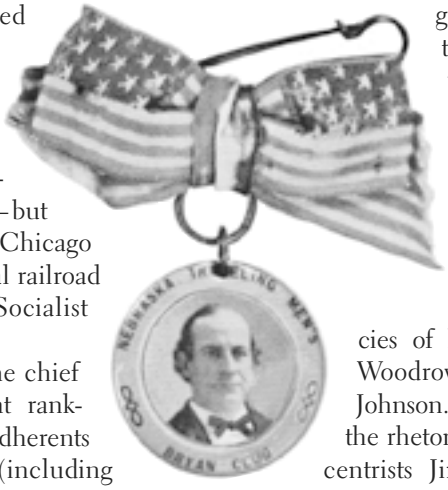
In the United States, few things are more durable than the historical images of our national leaders. Despite the arduous efforts of debunkers, both scholarly and polemical, George Washington remains, for most Americans, the selfless father of his country, Abraham Lincoln the self-made man who emancipated the slaves, and Franklin Roosevelt the empathetic leader who ended the Great Depression and won the antifascist war. Negative perceptions have similarly long lives, to the chagrin of those who've written revisionist biographies of the likes of Herbert Hoover and Richard Nixon.

On the hazy image of William Jennings Bryan hangs a sign that reads "old-fashioned." Thrice the unsuccessful Democratic nominee for president (in 1896, 1900, and 1908), Bryan is easy to portray as a tribune of lost causes. The man known as the Great Commoner defended the interests of small farmers, railed against the speculators of Wall Street, crusaded to ban the saloon, and denounced the teaching of evolution in public schools. His clumsy performance at the 1925 Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee (followed, just days later, by his death), earned him the derision of leading intellectuals and journalists. H. L. Mencken's scathing postmortem on Bryan as an agrarian charlatan, the would-be "Pope of the peasants," has echoed through the decades.

Yet for all his defeats, electoral and otherwise, Bryan was more a pioneer than an opponent of political change. Although he was not blessed with a powerful intellect, he and his career in politics gave early notice of two of the most significant features of American political life in the 20th century: the empowering of the federal government to regulate corporate power and, in limited ways, to redistribute income; and the building of a mass follow-

ing on the strength of celebrity. Moreover, with Congress today urging that the Ten Commandments be posted in schoolrooms, Bryan's fundamentalist stand no longer seems quite so out of step with our political culture.

The lifelong Democrat was the key figure in transforming his party from a bulwark of conservative thinking and policy into the standard-bearer of modern liberalism. In 1896, after a short legal career and two terms as a Nebraska member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Bryan won his first presidential nomination by eloquently defying Grover Cleveland, the incumbent president of his own party. Confronted by the worst depression the United States had ever endured, Cleveland rebuffed pleas by wheat and cotton farmers for debt relief and by unemployed workers for jobs—but rushed federal troops to Chicago to break an 1894 national railroad strike led by future Socialist leader Eugene V. Debs.



In 1896, Bryan became chief spokesman for insurgent rank-and-file Democrats and adherents of the Populist party (including Debs) who vowed to reverse Cleveland's disastrous course. Bryan demanded that the state intervene to help "the struggling masses" of workers, farmers, and small businessmen and rein in the power of their employers and corporate competitors. "There are two ideas of government," declared the Nebraskan at that year's Democratic national convention. "There are those who believe that, if you will only legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea, however, has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up through every class that rests upon them." Bryan won the nomination (as well as that of the Populist party) but lost that election to William McKinley, who had a war chest 10 times larger and posed as "the advance agent of prosperity." Although the turnout of eligible voters (more than 80 percent) was among the highest ever, the underfinanced Democrat lost thousands of votes to fraud and employer intimidation.

Despite the outcome, the conviction at the heart of Bryan's candidacy lived on in more than a half-century of public rhetoric and action. The big issue of the 1896 election—whether to adhere to the gold standard or to inflate the currency by basing it on both gold and silver—soon faded. But the idea that the federal government should routinely take the side of wage earners and other citizens of modest means (known in Bryan's day as "the producing classes") grew in popularity and was the basis for the domestic policies of liberal presidents from Woodrow Wilson to Lyndon Johnson. (It also was evident in the rhetoric, if not the actions, of centrists Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton.)

Though Bryan was unable to win the White House, by remaking the Democrats into a vigorous party of reform he set the stage for the men who did. Under his leadership, Democrats first pushed for energetic antitrust prosecutions, laws to limit working hours and set minimum wages, measures to subsidize farmers and protect union organizers, and a federal income tax (for many years, imposed mainly on the rich). Conservatives in his party, backed by wealthy men such as financier August Belmont and including the redoubtable machine of Tammany Hall, refused to accept many of the changes. In 1904—

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four years after Bryan's second loss to McKinley—they wrested control of the Democratic convention away from the Great Commoner and his allies and nominated for president one of their own, Alton Parker, a respected New York judge. That fall, Parker suffered a crushing defeat, winning fewer states and more than a million fewer popular votes than Bryan had in either 1896 or 1900. Laissez-faire Democrats would never be able to dominate the party again.

Though alone on a burning deck in this 1896 cartoon, Bryan won 47 percent of the popular vote to McKinley's 51 percent.

In 1908, Bryan faced only minor opposition on his way to a third presidential nomination. That year, he again proved a political pioneer, winning the active support of the American Federation of Labor, headed by Samuel Gompers—and thus forging the bond between unions and liberal Democrats that has lasted into the postindustrial age. Herbert Hoover once snapped that the New Deal was "Bryanism under new words and methods," proving that bitterness need not impair one's historical vision.

Bryan's progressive populism also led him to champion causes that did not gain majority support in his time and remain controversial in ours. He argued, for example, that private businesses should be banned from giving any money at all to political campaigns. "Big contributions from those who are seeking Government favors," Bryan warned in 1924, "are a menace to honest government." His solution was public financing—10 cents for each vote an established party received in the last federal election and the same amount for each certified member of a new party. "This would," Bryan predicted, "prevent the obligating of parties or candidates to the predatory interests." Americans today might not endorse his particular plan, but they would certainly applaud his determination to get big money out of politics.

A century after Bryan's heyday, many assume that candidates or officeholders espousing such liberal views will be secular minded, or at least careful to wall off their religious beliefs from their politics. The Great Commoner would have considered any such separation both illogical and immoral. He was raised in a family of devout Protestants who prayed three times daily and regarded the Bible as the foremost guide to correct behavior, both public and private. Though, like all good Democrats, he idolized Thomas Jefferson, perhaps the least pious man ever to occu-

Critics decried Bryan's use of Christian symbols and rhetoric.

py the White House, Bryan routinely drew on Scripture to underline the righteous sincerity of his own political views. "If my party has given me the basis of my political beliefs," he concluded in 1924, speaking at his last Democratic convention, "my Bible has given me the foundations of a faith that has enabled me to stand for the right as I saw it."

Bryan brought his version of democracy by the Good Book to bear on every major issue he cared about. In 1899, to press the case that employers should pay higher wages, he declared, "God made all men, and he did not make some to crawl on hands and knees and others to ride upon their backs." A year later, while opposing, on anticolonialist grounds, the U.S. war against Filipinos fighting for their independence, he asked: "If true Christianity consists in carrying out in our daily lives the teachings of Christ, who will say that we are commanded to civilize with dynamite and proselyte with the sword?" In 1908, to underline the urgency of breaking up trusts, he told a Carnegie Hall audience, "I insist that the commandment, 'Thou shalt not steal,' applies as much to the monopolist as to the highwayman."

Bryan routinely applied his fundamentalist faith to social maladies. While rejecting the liberal interpretation of the Bible espoused by some Social Gospelers, he warmly agreed with the practical remedies proposed by such figures as Baptist theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, who called for churches to side with the urban poor. Bryan, a man from the Great Plains, did not move in the world of municipal reformers and settlement house workers that was the crucible of the Social Gospel. But he backed their causes and worked with the Federal Council of Churches, founded in 1908 to coordinate their activities.

Where Bryan did part company with Protestant liberals was in his insistence that the religious creed of the majority always ought to prevail in the public sphere. This led him to take positions that provoked the scorn of Mencken and other, less iconoclastic critics. Bryan was firmly convinced that any nation that allowed destructive, un-Christian practices to flourish was on the road to ruin. Few Social Gospelers objected when he directed this indictment against the liquor "trust." After all, the demand for prohibition enjoyed support from nearly every Protestant denomination in the

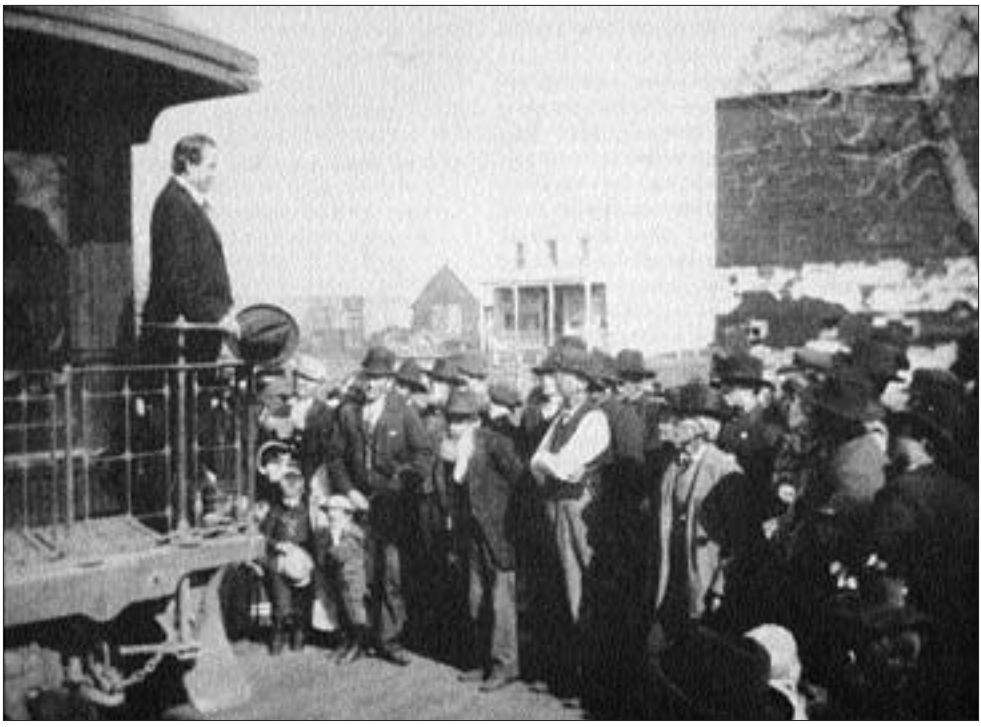
country. More controversial was Bryan's proposal that states mandate Bible reading in public schools. And his decision, in the early 1920s, to throw his declining energies into the crusade against Darwinism tarred him ever after as an apostle of ignorance.

One need not defend Bryan's role as chief prosecutor in the case against John Scopes for violating a Tennessee law against the teaching of evolution in the public schools. But one should recognize that it sprang from the same spirit of Christian empathy that motivated his support for wage earners and farmers and his denunciation of corporate power and imperial conquest.

Bryan objected to evolutionary theory on the grounds of what might be called sentimental democracy. He feared that agnostic intellectuals were seeking to substitute a cruel belief in the "survival of the fittest" for faith in a loving God—the only basis for moral and altruistic conduct that most ordinary people had. Bryan, like many other Americans at the time, thought that Darwinism implied social Darwinism, particularly a belief in eugenics, promoted by influential scientists as the surest way to improve the human race. The consequence, the evangelical populist predicted (in a speech he did not live to deliver), would be "a system under which a few supposedly superior intellects, self-appointed, would direct the mating and the movements of the mass of mankind—an impossible system!" Hitler's excursion into eugenics only a decade later suggests that Bryan's fear was not entirely unfounded.

A few figures on the contemporary religious right have embraced the Great Commoner as a pioneer in their own struggle to remoralize politics. In 1994 Ralph Reed, then chief strategist of the Christian Coalition, placed Bryan alongside Martin Luther King, Jr., as one of the great American champions of "religious dissent." Certainly, the Nebraskan's campaign against Darwinism didn't expire with him. Kansas opted this summer to delete virtually any mention of evolution from the state's science curriculum. Numerous school boards have bowed to grassroots pressure and now grant equal time to Genesis and natural selection.

Cartoonists were often unkind to Bryan, but their endless attention helped to turn him into a national celebrity.



Bryan's whistlestop campaign in 1896 was a first for major-party presidential nominees.

Last spring, Representative Tom DeLay (R.-Texas), one of the most powerful conservatives in Congress, laid some of the blame for the massacre in Littleton, Colorado, on school systems that "teach the children that they are nothing but glorified apes."

Bryan, of course, would blanch at DeLay's hosannas to the free market and his contempt for labor unions. The America in which one could be both a prominent conservative in religion and a left-liberal in politics no longer exists. Even in Bryan's heyday, fundamentalist Protestants split their votes between the major parties, neither of which had a monopoly on pietistic causes. But starting with the Scopes trial, the national press subjected fundamentalists to such ridicule that many gave up politics altogether and others withdrew to their Bible schools and denominational institutes to build strength for future challenges. In the 1930s, the Democrats under Franklin Roosevelt muted talk of evangelical moralism and welcomed, on an equal basis, Americans of all religious faiths and none. Had Bryan lived another decade, he would have had to make a torturous choice between his party and the political demands of his faith.

Bryan did, however, presage the future in a way that goes beyond matters of legislation and ideology. He was the first celebrity politician in the modern sense—renowned for his personality and his communication skills as much as for the substance of his beliefs. Before Bryan's 1896 campaign, no major-party nominee for president had toured the country, speaking to millions and shaking hands and sharing small talk with the crowds. Tradition required presidential candidates to maintain at least the appearance of a dignified distance from the hurly-burly of politics. But the Democrat needed to overcome the huge financial advantage enjoyed by his opponent, McKinley, who stayed on his front porch in Canton, Ohio, greeting a continual stream of citizen delegations traveling to see him gratis on the GOP's money train.

The remarkable canvass during which Bryan traveled more than 18,000 miles and delivered as many as 36 speeches a day (resting, of course, on the Sabbath) proved to be a superb form of self-promotion. One newspaper dubbed him "the best advertised man the country has produced since the days of P. T. Barnum." The 1896 campaign made Bryan a controversial but universally recognized figure who, for the rest of his life, was in constant demand as a public speaker, the subject of countless newspaper profiles, editorial cartoons, and silent newsreels. Even if they didn't share his views, Americans enjoyed reading about the Commoner's exploits and listening to his stem-winding oratory.

Bryan reveled in all the attention and knew how to stoke it. From the late 1890s to the early 1920s, his lengthy talks on political and religious subjects were always the top attraction on the Chautauqua circuits that wound through small towns in the Midwest and West; he also consistently drew big crowds in urban venues. Even in traditionally Republican towns, "Bryan Day" was a big occasion. At each stop on his schedule during a 1912 swing through Michigan, storekeepers and factory owners gave employees the day off, flag-draped autos paraded him through the streets, and a National Guard band serenaded the uncommon Commoner as he approached the big tent for his address. Bryan endeared himself to local planning committees by charging a flat fee of $250 per speech, no matter how big the crowd.

The permanent campaign to boost his fortunes and his favorite issues was also waged in print. Starting in 1901, the once and future candidate published—from Lincoln, Nebraska—his own weekly newspaper (inevitably titled *The Commoner*), which boasted a circulation in excess of 100,000. Throughout his career, he also penned a steady stream of pieces for national magazines and big-city newspapers, as well as a dozen books rich in anecdote and aphorism—two based on foreign trips undertaken, in part, to burnish his statesmanlike image. This man who had enjoyed his only electoral success as a congressional candidate from Nebraska in the early 1890s was seldom out of the public eye until his death more than three decades later. Bryan's presidential nominations in 1900 and 1908, his status as the most stalwart reformer in his party, and his 1913 appointment as Woodrow Wilson's secretary of state (a post he resigned in 1915 to protest the U.S. tilt away from neutralism before the country entered World War I) all depended on his ability to cultivate his status as an affable political star whose eloquence always made for good copy.

But the Commoner was one celebrity who did not take his nickname for granted. Bryan had risen to fame as a champion of "the struggling masses," and that identity enabled him to build and retain a loyal following with which every other national politician had to contend. The most abundant evidence of how "Bryan's people" viewed the world can be found in the huge volume of mail they sent to him, a sample of which is kept in the Library of Congress. Bryan received thousands of letters from ordinary Americans—craftsmen, self-employed professionals, farmers, traveling salesmen, homemakers, and a surprising number of children. The size and passion of this correspondence were unprecedented for a political figure never elected to the White House. Contrary to his agrarian image, Bryan's correspondents were found as frequently in cities as in small towns and were spread across the nation, most numerous in the Middle West and thinnest in New England and the Deep South. The overwhelming majority were, like their hero, white Protestants from evangelical denominations. But until the eve of the Scopes trial his correspondents rarely expressed anger at those of other religious persuasions.

Often, in fact, Bryan's followers portrayed their defeated champion as a man

ahead of his time, "an inspired prophet in the affairs of our nation," as a Baptist minister put it in 1915. The Commoner seemed to them a paragon of honesty and principle in a public arena that had grown venal and mendacious. Frequently, correspondents mingled spiritual and secular images in ways that must have gratified their hero. Just after the 1896 election, W. R. Alexander, an unemployed printer from Des Moines, Iowa, wrote to Bryan, "Yesterday I took off the badge . . . which I had worn during the campaign and left it on the dresser." His wife found the badge, "burst into tears," and quickly pressed it within the pages of the family Bible. Later that day, the couple opened the book to find that the badge "rested" next to the 37th Psalm—which opens, "Fret not thyself because of evildoers. . . ." The message seemed self-evident to the couple, who had depleted their savings and were about to default on an $800 mortgage. "We both read it and cried. . . . We feel that we have lost a near and dear friend in this campaign, but thank God he is not dead, but more determined than ever to lead us out."

Adoration of Bryan could also spring from less desperate motivations. In the late 1890s, his handsome, virile likeness was familiar to anyone with access to a Democratic broadside or a partisan newspaper. The many letters he received in those years from Americans too young to vote often exhibited the kind of whimsical infatuation we now associate with fans of movie stars and rock musicians. In 1899, Texas teenager Ruby Gardner tried to kiss the Commoner when he passed through her hometown on a speaking tour. Bryan jokingly declined the offer, and the episode became an amusing item in the nation's press. Soon after, Gardner wrote to her hero that "very proper old ladies" were upbraiding her, but, to her delight, "I am the recipient daily of letters from all over the country sympathising [sic] with me in my failure to kiss the great W. J. Bryan." Youth rebellion could take rather innocent form in late Victorian America.

The object of all this affection had a large, if seldom appreciated, influence on American political culture. Before the 1896 campaign, major-party presidential candidates considered it undignified to stump for themselves; partisan foot soldiers took the battle to the enemy, while aspirants for George Washington's chair remained above the fray. After Bryan broke that tradition and almost scored an upset victory, future nominees increasingly found it necessary, even enjoyable, to let the voters judge them in the flesh.

Inevitably, the personal campaign tended to equate the man with his message. In 1900 Theodore Roosevelt, Republican candidate for vice president, made a point of traveling more miles and claiming to give more speeches than Bryan had four years before. The hero of the Spanish-American War regarded the populist Democrat as naive and dangerous, but he was quick to imitate Bryan's oratorical marathons and relentless self-promotion. Later, as president, Roosevelt continued in the same fashion, becoming the first chief executive who routinely traveled around the country to speak to the public. TR's great popularity as a "rhetorical president" was built on the same friendly but vigorously anticorporate image Bryan had pioneered.

Notwithstanding Roosevelt's best efforts, the affable, go-to-the-people national campaign was, for decades, closely associated with progressive Democrats who followed Bryan's lead, embracing the idea that theirs was the only party of and for the common people. Woodrow Wilson, with his restrained, professorial manner, was something of an exception. But from the late 1920s to the late 1960s (and again, in the 1990s, with Bill Clinton), every Democratic nominee for president played the happy warrior—cracking jokes, beaming for the cameras, flailing the rich and the comfortable before audiences of the insecure. During the 20th century, the GOP could produce only two candidates—a war hero, Dwight Eisenhower, and a movie star, Ronald Reagan—able to project a relaxed yet uplifting image on the stump and in the media.

Bryan's clumsy performance at the 1925 Scopes trial, along with ridicule from defense lawyer Clarence Darrow and journalist H. L. Mencken, gave him the lasting image of an agrarian charlatan.

The rise of the accessible, rhetorical chief executive has a structural element as well as a partisan one. As the governmental apparatus grew more bureaucratic and legislation more complex, Americans hankered for leaders who could make the enterprise of governing seem more personal and comprehensible. The electorate has struck an implicit bargain with the political class: if we can no longer understand or control much of what our government is doing, at least give us men and women to head it who can comfort us and, on occasion, provide a thrill.

Leadership by celebrities has its drawbacks, of course. The tendency—first exemplified by Bryan—to build a following that often confuses loyalty to the candidate with knowledge about the candidate's issues has only been magnified in the age of televised campaigning. Since the epochal campaign of 1896, American voters have expected or, at least, hoped to be moved by a presidential candidate more than by the stated principles or program of the party to which he or she belongs. Such anticipation may have weakened the everyday practice of democracy, which requires citizens to draw inspiration from the routines of governance. These are seldom as entertaining as a speech by a master orator or a witty, 30-second spot.

So some blame or credit must be given to the great political evangelist for blazing the path that has led to our uncertain present. He was as liberal on social and economic policy as FDR, as consistent a political evangelist as Pat Robertson, and nearly as beloved a political celebrity as Ronald Reagan (though the latter was better at converting renown into votes). What is more, Bryan was the first in a line of ideologically stalwart candidates for president—Robert LaFollette, Barry Goldwater, George Wallace—whose crusades foreshadowed shifts in national policy. "He was one of the creative losers," columnist George Will has remarked, "having left larger marks on the nation

than many a winner has done." Why, then, does Bryan still get labeled a reactionary?

Part of the reason is the poor reputation of those who are viewed as trying to impose their moral standards on others. Hardly anyone at the end of the 20th century suggests that making alcoholic beverages illegal would solve the manifold problems associated with drinking. And, notwithstanding Tom DeLay's recent remarks, no one of prominence in the Christian Right is eager to mount a serious challenge to the teaching of evolution. Americans remain among the most religiously observant people on earth, but most have also accepted the reality of their nation as a quilt of pluralisms—creedal, cultural, and demographic—that neither should nor could be unraveled.

The political consequences of that assumption lie at the root of Bryan's image problem. In policy, the Commoner was a forerunner, but his strong bond with his followers ended up limiting his understanding of how the nation was changing. He was too good a politician to believe that the white evangelical Protestants who flocked to his speeches and flooded him with adoring mail were, even then, a working majority (in fact, he never won more than 47 percent of the vote).

Yet Bryan's deepest concerns were always the same as theirs, and, as he grew older and abandoned his hopes for the presidency, electoral wisdom gradually gave way to crusading zeal. In the 1920s, he disagreed with his more bigoted supporters who parroted Henry Ford's anti-Semitic theorizing or joined the Ku Klux Klan. But he refused to exclude them from the ranks of the well-meaning majority, as eastern, big-city progressives such as Alfred E. Smith demanded. The New York governor, after all, was a "wet" and the spawn of Tammany Hall. Bryan could not allow his kind to win the cultural war within the Democratic Party or in the nation at large. After they did triumph with Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s, their heirs—urbane liberals of immigrant stock—drew the portrait of Bryan as benighted and passé. Gradually, evangelical Protestants of the middling classes and the middle of the country moved toward a Republican Party that lauded them as part of a "silent majority."

The tribal bitterness of a losing faction is difficult to erase from historical memory. Thus, historian Richard Hofstadter concluded that Bryan, at his death, "had long outlived his time." And viewers of the popular play and movie *Inherit the Wind* come away wondering how a major party could ever have considered this humorless zealot a suitable nominee for the presidency.

Yet dismissing the man sells both him and our political history short. During the campaign of 1896, a teenager in Springfield, Illinois, sent a poem of praise to the Democratic candidate. In the last stanza, Vachel Lindsay (who grew up to be a writer of some distinction) wrote:

> Hail to the fundamental man
> Who brings a unifying plan
> Not easily misunderstood,
> Chanting men toward brotherhood.
> So be you glad, American,
> When, after planning many weeks
> The folks by thousands come to town
> And Bryan SPEAKS.

Those awkward lines suggest why, more than a century later, Lindsay's boyhood hero deserves our attention. Bryan did indeed have a knack for making significant public issues sound urgent, dramatic, and clear—and encouraged average citizens to question the words and interests of the powerful. That attribute made reform, economic and moral, seem both more attractive and more feasible. It is a skill lacking in our contemporary leaders, as tolerant as most now are of religious and racial diversity. Bryan's sincerity, warmth, and evangelical ardor won him the hearts of many Americans who cared for no other politician in his day. We might listen to their reasons before we decide to mistrust them.