Campaign Issues in the Presidential Election of 1908

*Edgar A. Hornig**

Though few historians would dispute the contention that all presidential elections are significant in the stream of United States history, the quest for a comprehensive discussion of the issues in the presidential election of 1908 within the rich storehouse of American historical literature is likely to be unrewarding. Edward Stanwood in his *History of the Presidency from 1897 to 1916,* for example, devotes seventy two pages to the election of 1908 but surprisingly offers almost no information regarding the issues.[1] The best biographies of William Jennings Bryan, who in 1908 headed the Democratic party's ticket for the third and last time, constitute a barren source on this topic.[2] Henry F. Pringle's commendable two-volume biography of Republican candidate, William Howard Taft, though it refers to the bank, tariff, and publicity issues in passing, offers an incomplete treatment of the subject.[3] Edgar Eugene Robinson's *The Evolution of American Political Parties* presents an able comparison of the platforms and positions of the two major parties, but casts only a dim light upon the issues as they materialized during the campaign.[4] A very recent and creditable study of the history of presidential elections, except for brief paragraphs on the trust and publicity issues, offers next to nothing.[5] Even Mark Sullivan in his highly readable multi-volume study, *Our Times,* while he does provide a descriptive and illuminating account of President Theodore Roosevelt's role in the

---

* Edgar A. Hornig is Associate Professor of History at San Jose State College, San Jose, California. His doctoral dissertation was entitled "The Presidential Election of 1908" (Stanford University, 1955); he has also written "The Indefatigable Mr. Bryan in 1908," *Nebraska History,* XXXVII (September, 1956).

[1] Edward Stanwood, *A History of the Presidency from 1897 to 1916* (2 vols., New York, 1928), II, 141-213.

[2] See Paxton Hibben, *The Peerless Leader* (New York, 1929), 280-287; Morris R. Werner, *Bryan* (New York, 1929), 158; and John C. Long, *Bryan: The Great Commoner* (New York, 1928), 198-208.

[3] Henry F. Pringle, *The Life and Times of William Howard Taft* (2 vols., New York, 1939), I, 365-373.

[4] Edgar E. Robinson, *The Evolution of American Political Parties* (New York, 1924), 295-300.

[5] Eugene Roseboom, *A History of Presidential Elections* (New York, 1957), 343-355.

election, fails to discuss the subjects over which the campaign was fought.[6] As one might expect, the more widely used college textbooks are similarly unenlightening on the topic.[7] Hence, a more comprehensive discussion of the issues and of the positions assumed by the two major candidates in the 1908 presidential election is desirable.

The presidential election with which this paper is concerned occurred in the midst of an era of domestic reform. Since 1901 the Republican party had been dominated by the liberal-minded Theodore Roosevelt, whose rare popularity rested upon his reputation as war hero, trust-buster, friend of conservation, battler for reform legislation, and advocate of a "Square Deal" for labor. In 1908 Bryan, adoringly known as the "Great Commoner" in many segments of American society, was once again the ringmaster of the Democratic party, having wrested control of it from the conservatives. Bryan, champion of free silver in 1896 and of anti-imperialism in 1900, prepared in 1908 to fight for a host of domestic reforms. On the state and local level the early years of the century also witnessed reform-motivated activities of such leaders as Governor Charles Evans Hughes of New York, Robert M. (Fighting Bob) LaFollette of Wisconsin, and Governor William U'Ren of Oregon. Among groups which helped to develop reform consciousness in the public mind during the years before 1908 were the Populists of the 1890's, the forces of organized labor, the Socialists, and the Muckrakers, those widely-read journalists who publicized certain sordid aspects of the American scene. As might be expected, the campaign issues of the presidential election of 1908 mirrored various features of this era of reform.

Before discussing the campaign issues reflected in the activities of the two major parties and their candidates, one should note that third parties, attracting only 800,219 popular votes out of a total of 14,885,989 and no electoral votes, played a distinctly minor role in the election of 1908.[8] The Prohibi-

---

[6] Mark Sullivan, *Our Times: The United States, 1900-1925* (6 vols., New York, 1926-1935), IV, 289-315.

[7] Samuel E. Morison and Henry S. Commager in their popular study, *The Growth of the American Republic* (2 vols., New York, 1950), II, 409-411, scarcely refer to the issues. John D. Hicks in his lucid college textbook, *The American Nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), 354-355, gives but scant attention to the issues and viewpoints of the major candidates.

[8] Stanwood, *History of the Presidency*, II, 208.

tion party, thirty-nine years old in 1908, emphasized in its 321-word platform the plank suggested by its name.[9] Although presidential candidate Eugene Chafin conducted a nationwide campaign in twenty-eight states in which he emphasized the prohibition issue, the nominees of the two major parties gave but scant attention to the subject.[10]

The Socialist Labor party, well to the left of the Socialist party in 1908, nominated August Gilhaus of New York for president after convicted murderer, Martin Preston, declined the nomination from his prison cell in Nevada. Gilhaus stood on a platform which denounced the existing economic order and demanded that all land, as well as all the means of production and distribution, be put into the hands of the people as a collective body.[11] The limited role of the Socialist Labor party in the election is reflected in its winning only 14,021 votes, less than half the number won in 1904.[12]

The Populist party in 1908, close to death's embrace, advocated in its platform larger issues of money, government ownership and control of the railroads and utilities, and other reforms.[13] Presidential candidate Thomas Watson, confining his campaign largely to his home state of Georgia, captured a pitiful 29,146 votes.[14]

An entirely new party, the Independence party, burst upon the American political scene early in 1908. This organization was widely regarded as a tool designed to promote publisher William Randolph Hearst's political fortunes, since he financed, managed, and controlled it.[15] The Party's platform was similar in many ways to that of the Democrats, though it was more extreme with regard to injunctions and upheld such remedies as government ownership of railroads and utilities.[16] Though Thomas (Honest Tom) Hisgen was the presidential nominee, Hearst easily dominated the party's campaign through his attempts to discredit the major parties

---

[9] Kirk H. Porter, *National Party Platforms* (New York, 1924), 297-298.

[10] Edgar A. Hornig, "The Presidential Election of 1908" (Doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1955), 215-249.

[11] Porter, *National Party Platforms*, 318-319.

[12] Stanwood, *History of the Presidency*, II, 208.

[13] Porter, *National Party Platforms*, 294-295.

[14] Stanwood, *History of the Presidency*, II, 208.

[15] *Nation*, LXXXVII (July 30, 1908), 85; *Collier's*, XLII (October 10, 1908), 9; *Independent*, LXV (November 12, 1908), 1128.

[16] Porter, *National Party Platforms*, 286-293.

by publicly reading letters and affidavits selected to prove an intimate relationship between prominent Republicans and Democrats with corporate interests.[17]

In 1908 the Socialist movement was regarded as "most undoubtedly going—somewhere!"[18] Not only did its ranks include prominent intellectuals, various churchmen, and many labor men, but the Socialist party had scored impressive gains at the polls between 1888 (about 2,000 votes) and 1904 (about 400,000).[19] Its 1908 platform expressed a deep-rooted dissatisfaction with the nation's economic-political system and proposed a number of reforms which included a program of conservation, the abolition of child labor, and inheritance and income taxes. The Socialists also called for the collective ownership of railroads and all industries organized on a national scale; and they advocated such radical political reforms as the abolition of the United States Senate and judicial review.[20] Though Socialist candidate Eugene V. Debs, the ex-locomotive fireman from Indiana, conducted an energetic campaign in a three-car train called the "Red Special," his party attracted only 18,000 votes over the figure for 1904.[21]

Turning to one of the two major parties, the 1908 Republican platform, in addition to heaping praise upon Theodore Roosevelt's administration, complimented the American people upon their "recent safe passage" through the Panic of 1907; called for a revision of the tariff; praised the Sherman Anti-Trust Act of 1890, but admitted the need for amendments designed to curb monopoly; and favored a more accurate statutory definition of federal court procedure regarding the issuance of injunctions. The G.O.P. claimed that it had a proven capacity for governing the nation as the result of its having stood for such things as sound money, protection, and expansion, while the Democracy had advocated free silver, free trade, and the contraction of American influence. Among the planks of the platform which did not develop into campaign issues were those having to do with

---

[17] New York *Times*, September 8, 1908, p. 5; and October 30, 1908, p. 2.

[18] *Ibid.*, August 2, 1908, part 5, p. 9.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Socialist Party, *Proceedings of the National Convention of 1908* (Chicago, 1908), 135-145.

[21] Stanwood, *History of the Presidency*, II, 208.

postal savings, railroads, conservation, agriculture, the Negro, the army and navy, foreign commerce, veterans, and the overseas possessions.[22]

The Democratic platform, longer than its Republican counterpart, called for a law providing for pre-election publicity of campaign contributions and lashed out at the G.O.P. National Convention for its refusal to endorse a similar plank. The Democrats clearly favored an immediate downward revision of the tariff, attacked private monopoly, and recommended national legislation which would establish a license system for all corporations engaged in interstate commerce which controlled as much as 25 per cent of the product they manufactured. The Panic of 1907 was cited as proof of Republican incompetence to protect the public, and the Democrats pledged to support legislation establishing a fund for the guaranty of bank deposits. Lastly, the party responded to the wishes of organized labor by calling for trial by jury in cases of indirect contempt, opposing the issuance of injunctions in any cases in which they would not issue if no industrial dispute were involved, and endorsing legislation providing for a general employer's liability act and a separate Department of Labor. Among the many lesser planks which did not achieve importance during the campaign were those regarding the popular election of senators, the curbing of the powers of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, more democracy in government, the income tax, patronage, government spending, the rights of the states, civil service, pensions for veterans, overseas possessions, conservation, and Asiatic immigration.[23]

In June of 1908 the Republican National Convention, strongly influenced by President Roosevelt, nominated Taft of Ohio for the presidency. A few days later the Democratic party, once again dominated by its liberal wing, named Bryan of Nebraska as its standard-bearer. Judging from the campaign activities and pronouncements of both major parties and their spokesmen, the time-honored tariff question represented one of the major issues. The Republican party in its campaign textbook unabashedly endorsed the principle of protection as being highly advantageous to both labor and

---

[22] *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Fourteenth Republican Convention* (Columbus, Ohio, 1908), 115ff.

[23] Porter, *National Party Platforms*, 272-285.

industry, heaped unstinted praise upon the McKinley and Dingley tariffs of the 1890's, boldly asserted that the periods of protection in United States history had been periods of prosperity, and warned that free trade would lead to economic ruin.[24] In his speech of acceptance in late July, Taft lent his weight to the Republican doctrine of protection, stating that it made for increased wages and a richer standard of living. The G.O.P. candidate qualified his views, however, by adding that he opposed such tariff rates as exceeded the difference between the cost of production at home and abroad, that certain schedules were not high enough and should therefore be raised.[25]

Later in the campaign Taft promised, if elected, to implement that plank in the G.O.P. platform which called for a revision of the tariff by a special session of Congress immediately following his inauguration.[26] At Milwaukee in late September, he said that Republican revision of the tariff, contrary to the Democratic doctrine of tariff for revenue only, would adhere strictly to the principle of protection. He added, however, that schedules which were too high would be lowered and those which were too low would be raised.[27] A few days later, while seeking votes in the region of Sioux City, Iowa, Taft again talked about tariff revision—mostly downward.[28] In early October the former Secretary, citing numerous statistics before audiences of Kansas farmers, argued that Republican protective tariffs yielded higher agricultural prices than those resulting from Democratic measures.[29]

Though Taft's stand on the tariff question may have appealed to some voters, the adverse criticism it evoked was not limited to Democratic sources. On the eve of the election the pro-Taft editors of *Collier's* concluded that "Taft is discouraging on the tariff."[30] The *Nation*, also in the Republican

---

[24] Republican National Committee, *Republican Campaign Text-Book, 1908* (Philadelphia, 1908), 99-103.

[25] New York *Times*, July 29, 1908, p. 4.

[26] *Ibid.*, August 23, 1908, p. 1.

[27] *Ibid.*, September 25, 1908, p. 3.

[28] *Ibid.*, September 30, 1908, p. 2.

[29] *Ibid.*, October 4, 1908, p. 2.

[30] *Collier's*, XLII (October 31, 1908), 9.

nominee's corner, thought that the Ohioan's attempts to blame the depression of the mid-1890's on the Wilson-Gorman tariff were pathetic.[31]

On the side of the opposition, the Democratic campaign textbook asserted that Republican protective tariffs had increased the cost of living and encouraged the formation of trusts.[32] Early in his exhausting campaign in a speech devoted to the tariff at Des Moines, Iowa, Bryan argued that Republican promises of tariff revision were worthless, since the G.O.P. was too deeply obligated to protected corporate interests to pay off such promises. The Nebraskan also explained that the Democrats favored a revenue tariff approached gradually, since a protective tariff merely taxed all the people for the benefit of the few. A revenue tariff would stimulate business and provide more jobs by reducing the cost of materials for industry and by encouraging a two-way type of foreign trade.[33]

One notes with interest that even various pro-Taft periodicals were inclined to praise Bryan's tariff views. A political commentator for *Outlook* magazine, for example, conceded that the Democracy's standard-bearer had struck where the Republican party was most vulnerable, and that he had dealt courageously with the protective principle.[34]

While the subject of the tariff has permeated many American political battles, the issue concerning guaranty of bank deposits represented a unique feature of the 1908 election. Indeed, this topic, though usually overlooked by historians of the era, drew more attention and comment during the campaign, especially from Democratic ranks, than did the tariff. Its prominence was, of course, in part the result of the bank panic of the preceding winter. In the Middle West where the issue carried its greatest political appeal, the plan was already in operation in Oklahoma; in Kansas the Republican State Convention had early in 1908 declared in favor of trying the scheme on a state-wide basis. In states such as

---

[31] *Nation,* LXXXVII (October 1, 1908), 304. See also the New York *Times,* September 30, 1908, p. 5.

[32] Democratic National Committee, *The Campaign Textbook of the Democratic Party of the United States, 1908* (Chicago, 1908), 71, 202.

[33] New York *Times,* August 22, 1908, pp. 1, 2.

[34] "Mr. Bryan on the Tariff," *Outlook,* LXXXIX (August 29, 1908), 961.

Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota popular interest in the idea caused it to become a dominant issue.[35]

According to the plan advocated by Bryan, a tax was to be imposed on national banks and upon such state banks as desired to participate, whereby an insurance fund for the guaranty of bank deposits would be established. Speaking in Kansas, the Democratic candidate insisted that it was logical to "make the depositor secure" since national, state, county, and city governments required security for their deposits, and that the idea was already working successfully in Oklahoma.[36] Appearing at a rally in Rochester, New York, he predicted that a guaranty fund would not invite reckless banking practices, but rather would promote a greater degree of mutual responsibility on the part of bankers as well as stricter supervision and superior regulation.[37]

The idea of insuring bank deposits attracted support from sources other than Bryan. The Democratic National Committee, for example, circulated one million copies of an endorsement of the plan which had been made by Republican Governor Robert Hoch of Kansas.[38] R. Goodwyn Rhett, mayor of Charleston, South Carolina, and president of the People's National Bank of that city, spoke in a number of eastern states, including New York, on behalf of the system.[39] During the months of September and October, almost every issue of Bryan's newspaper, *The Commoner*, carried articles advocating the proposal.[40] A number of pro-Taft newspapers expressed a measure of tacit approval by saying that they regretted the Ohioan's hasty condemnation of the plan.[41]

Being of a conservative viewpoint, Taft and most of his fellow Republicans, along with countless powerful interests throughout the nation, opposed the plan. The ex-Secretary of War warned that the scheme would encourage reckless banking practices by relieving a banker "of responsibility to and

---

[35] Henry L. West, "Business Depression and the Popular Mind," *Forum*, XL (October, 1908), 304. See also *American Review of Reviews*, XXXVIII (October, 1908), 395.

[36] New York *Times*, August 28, 1908, p. 4.

[37] *Ibid.*, September 17, 1908, p. 2.

[38] *Ibid.*, September 21, 1908, p. 2.

[39] *Ibid.*, October 25, 1908, p. 5.

[40] *Commoner*, VIII (October 16, 1908), 3.

[41] *Current Literature*, XLV (October, 1908), 365.

fear of the depositors" at the expense of responsible bankers.[42] He also claimed that, contrary to statements from Bryan, the scheme was producing unfortunate results in Oklahoma.[43]

The *Wall Street Journal, Collier's, Nation, World's Work,* and *Harper's Weekly* were among the many influential publications of 1908 opposing the idea. In early October the conservative-minded American Bankers' Association adopted resolutions which mercilessly branded the scheme as unsound in principle, impracticable, revolutionary, subversive of sound economics, encouraging to bad banking, and conducive to panics.[44]

Because the election of 1908 occurred during an era of reform, the labor question constituted still another major area for discussion and disagreement. According to *Forum's* political pundit, Henry L. West, there was more speculation and uneasiness regarding the attitude of the laboring man during the campaign than in any previous presidential contest.[45] During their stumping activities, both major candidates showered as much verbiage on labor as any other subject, while President Roosevelt, Samuel Gompers, and the press also awarded it intensive consideration.

Generally speaking, Bryan's remarks on labor were more reform-minded and inclusive than those of his opponent. Addressing a major rally in New York City, the Democratic nominee called for the establishment of a separate Department of Labor with a cabinet officer at its head. He insisted that labor organizations be exempt from the operation of the anti-trust laws for the reason that the difference between the labor organization and the industrial combination was too great to be covered by one statute. Bryan urged that "the law relating to injunctions should be so modified that an injunction shall not issue in an industrial dispute except under conditions that would justify an injunction if there were no industrial dispute." Lastly, he advocated trial by jury in cases of indirect contempt because in such cases, the candidate maintained, the judge attempted to combine in himself the deliberation of the lawmaker, the zeal of the prosecuting attorney, and the impartiality of the judge. As if to add a

[42] New York *Times,* August 27, 1908, p. 3.

[43] *Ibid.,* September 27, 1908, p. 4.

[44] *Ibid.,* October 2, 1908, p. 4.

[45] Henry L. West, "The President and the Campaign," *Forum,* XL (November, 1908), 417.

clincher to these four important points, Bryan reminded his New York audience that the wishes of union labor had been callously rebuffed at the Republican National Convention but had been warmly embraced by the Democracy's assemblage.[46]

Not infrequently during the campaign Bryan reached for the labor vote by attacking Taft's record as a judge. For example, he reminded an enthusiastic Labor Day throng in Chicago that the ex-judge was known as "the father of government by injunction"; according to Bryan, Taft's opposition to trial by jury in cases of indirect contempt indicated prejudice against the jury system.[47]

Bryan's White House aspirations and views on labor were energetically supported by President Samuel Gompers of the American Federation of Labor. In the middle of July, the union leader visited Bryan at his home in Lincoln, Nebraska, to assure him that the labor vote would be counted heavily for him in November.[48] Gompers stumped the key states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and New York on behalf of the Democrats. He also wrote in the *Federationist,* organ of the American Federation of Labor, lauding the Democratic party and pleading with union men to vote the Democratic ticket. Gompers emphasized that, while the Republican platform had rejected the demands of labor, the Democratic platform had incorporated labor's wishes.[50]

In early October, Gompers issued a circular in which he charged that Taft and his party favored the extension of a despotic government vested in the judiciary, while the Democracy and Bryan stood for government by law vested in the people.[51] On the occasion of an important address at a labor meeting in the Grand Central Palace of New York City on the eve of the election, the A.F. of L. chieftain claimed that labor had nothing to hope for from the Republicans. Since Taft was said to have been anti-labor as a judge, Gompers called upon organized labor to vote for Bryan.[52]

---

[46] New York *Times,* September 19, 1908, p. 2.

[47] *Ibid.,* September 8, 1908, p. 4.

[48] *Ibid.,* July 14, 1908, p. 1.

[49] Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography* (2 vols., New York, 1925), II, 269.

[50] New York *Times,* July 22, 1908, p. 3.

[51] *Ibid.,* October 13, 1908, p. 2.

[52] *Ibid.,* November 2, 1908, p. 2.

Even a cursory study of the campaign reveals that union labor was divided in its willingness to follow Gompers' advocacy of the cause of the Democracy. Among those backing Gompers was Thomas Healey, president of the International Brotherhood of Firemen, who maintained that Gompers' work on behalf of the Democratic party was the logical outgrowth of decisions of the recent Washington conference of international unions.[53] Similarly, in late September the members of the Workingmen's Federation of the State of New York endorsed Gompers' efforts on behalf of the Democratic cause.[54] Among union men opposed to Gompers' activities was James L. Feeney, president of the Bookbinders' Union, who declared that Taft, not Bryan, was the friend of labor.[55] Frank A. Kidd, president of the Columbia (Washington) Typographical Union, not only denounced Gompers' appeal for labor votes for Bryan but explained the basis for his viewpoint. "Trade unionists," Kidd reasoned, "think alike on craft questions, but they differ widely on political . . . questions, and this difference is universally tolerated by labor bodies. . . . Therefore, any attempt to corral the political expression of workingmen is destructive of the basic principles of the trade union movement."[56]

The Republican viewpoint on the labor question, while not diametrically opposed to that of the Bryan camp, evinced greater satisfaction with the status quo. For one thing, Taft staunchly defended his course toward labor while he had been a federal judge by contending that he had no apologies to make for any of his decisions. He maintained that his rulings actually had furthered the development and standing of unions and that, instead of being an enemy, he was one of labor's greatest benefactors.[57]

Moreover, the corpulent candidate's stand on the subject of injunctions differed from that of his opposition. Appearing before a large Chicago audience, Taft patiently explained that the injunction was a judicial device which helped to keep not only lawless elements of labor within the law, but lawless capitalists as well. He contended that in various cases the

---

[53] *Ibid.*, July 23, 1908, p. 3.
[54] *Ibid.*, September 24, 1908, p. 3.
[55] *Ibid.*, July 18, 1908, p. 2.
[56] *Ibid.*, July 23, 1908, p. 3.
[57] *Ibid.*, October 13, 1908, p. 2.

injunction was the only adequate remedy for a man whose business was being injured by unlawful action on the part of former employees. Regarding the issuing of injunctions without notice, the ex-judge conceded that opportunity for abuse existed, but quickly added that there were cases when no other device seemed satisfactory. Finally, the candidate attacked the plank in the Democratic platform which called for a jury trial in cases of indirect contempt by claiming that such a procedure would "so hamper the administration of justice as to make the courts a laughing stock."[58]

On the occasion of an address in Buffalo, New York, Taft bid for the votes of workers by lauding the labor gains attained by the Roosevelt administration. Moreover, he voiced approval of such proposed and tepid reforms as enlarging the functions of the Commissioner of Labor and holding the United States government liable in the same way as a private employer for the injury of its workmen.[59] Campaigning at Cooper Union in New York City, a stronghold of pro-labor sentiment, Taft repeated his belief in the right of labor to strike and to organize, but he warned that labor might not unlawfully injure the property or business of employers. He lashed out against the legalization of the secondary boycott in labor disputes. In the same address Taft jabbed at Gompers by saying that the workingmen of the nation had too much intelligence and independence to allow themselves to be delivered by any leader from one party to another.[60]

While the Democratic stand on the labor question benefited from the backing of union-head Gompers, the Republican line was anchored by the politically astute President of the United States. Roosevelt, who worried over the labor vote during the campaign,[61] confided to his son, Kermit, that labor was a factor working against the G.O.P., admitting that "the labor people have just cause of complaint with the Republican Party taken as a whole, because Congress under the lead of [Speaker Joseph] Cannon treated them badly," as did the courts.[62] In an effort to help Taft win as large a seg-

[58] *Ibid.*, September 24, 1908, p. 2.

[59] *Ibid.*, November 2, 1908, p. 2.

[60] *Ibid.*, October 29, 1908, p. 2.

[61] *Ibid.*, October 10, 1908, p. 5.

[62] Theodore Roosevelt to Kermit Roosevelt, October 20, 1908, in Elting E. Morison (ed.), *The Letters of Theodore Roosevelt* (8 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1951-1954), VI 1303-1304.

ment of the labor vote as possible, the Chief Executive wrote to such labor leaders as Thomas Dolan, Secretary of the International Brotherhood of Steam Shovel and Dredgemen, stating that he belived Taft would follow labor policies similar to his own. On October 16, Dolan made the letter public.[63] Calling the same play a few days later, Roosevelt sent a message to Philip Grace, a member of the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen, in which he predicted that the wage workers of the country "have never had a better friend in the White House than Mr. Taft will prove himself to be." On October 25, Grace made public his communication.[64]

It is a point of considerable significance that the campaign of 1908 had no single paramount issue in the sense that free silver and imperialism overshadowed, respectively, the political battles of 1896 and 1900. The daily newspaper accounts of Bryan's speaking tours of 1908 reveal that he usually mentioned several issues in a single address, and that if he emphasized a certain theme one day he was apt to dwell upon a different one the following day. He discussed the tariff, the trusts, labor questions, Roosevelt's active role in the campaign, the Roosevelt policies, Taft, the popular election of senators, the income tax, the guaranty of bank deposits, and many other issues. None, however, towered above all others. Correspondent Charles W. Thompson, who covered the campaign of 1908 for the New York *World* and was with Bryan much of the time, said that the Democracy's candidate "brought out issue after issue, trying to find a good paramounter. They were all duds."[65]

Because no one issue predominated during the 1908 campaign, the candidates themselves became one of the most important issues. Upon the termination of the Democratic National Convention in July, the New York *Times* carried an editorial which asked, "Will the American people have the Roosevelt policies continued and administered by Mr. TAFT or by Mr. BRYAN? That is the real question before them for

---

[63] Roosevelt to Thomas J. Dolan, October 15, 1908, in Morison (ed.), *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, VI, 1286-1287. See also New York *Times*, October 17, 1908, p. 1.

[64] Roosevelt to Philip Grace, October 19, 1908, in Morison (ed.), *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, VI, 1296. See also New York *Times*, October 26, 1908, p. 3.

[65] Charles Willis Thompson, *Presidents I've Known and Two Near Presidents* (Indianapolis, 1929), 52. See also *Current Literature*, XLV (October, 1908), 362; *Outlook*, XC (October 31, 1908), 457.

decision,"[66] and later, in October, a political commentator for the *World Today* magazine maintained that "the real issue is the nominees rather than the platforms."[67] During the campaign, editorials in *Nation, World's Work,* and *Munsey's Magazine* expressed similar opinions.[68]

Both Bryan and Taft made a point of discussing each other's fitness for the presidency in their campaign speeches. For example, the Democratic candidate claimed, while speaking in Cincinnati on September 24, that Taft had never supported a reform which he had not advocated earlier and had secured the G.O.P. nomination only because of the President's powerful support, not because of his record. By way of contrast, Bryan argued that he had secured his nomination from the "rank and file of my party."[69] Taft, on the other hand, told his listeners at a Chicago rally that Bryan's record bore no demonstration of practical ability, and that he had been guilty of sponsoring unsound financial theories.[70]

Many influential periodicals at the time of the election of 1908 devoted considerable attention to the relative qualifications of the two major candidates. Typical was an editorial in *Outlook* by the editor-in-chief of the magazine, Lyman Abbott, which held that Taft was by temperament, equipment, and training better qualified for the presidency than Bryan.[71] Articles or editorials of a comparable nature appeared in *American Review of Reviews, Collier's, World's Work, Living Age, Nation,* and *Harper's Weekly.*[72]

Another batch of articles highly laudatory of Taft emerged during the campaign. For example, Charles Conant, writing for *Putnam's Monthly,* wittily concluded that the well-traveled ex-Secretary of War was qualified to administer the great interests of the United States "because he has been over

---

[66] New York *Times,* July 10, 1908, p. 6.

[67] *World Today,* XV (October, 1908), 993.

[68] *Nation,* LXXXVII (July 9, 1908), 23; *World's Work,* XVII (November, 1908), 10837; Judson C. Welliver, "If Bryan Is Elected to the Presidency," *Munsey's Magazine,* XL (October, 1908), 4.

[69] New York *Times,* September 25, 1908, p. 2.

[70] *Ibid.,* September 23, 1908, p. 3.

[71] Lyman Abbott, "The Personal Issue," *Outlook,* XC (October 31, 1908), 469-472.

[72] *American Review of Reviews,* XXXVIII (October, 1908), 396; *Collier's,* XLII (October 17, 1908), 9; *World's Work,* XVI (October, 1908), 10739; *Living Age,* CCLVIII (August 8, 1908), 381; *Nation,* LXXXVII (October 15, 1908), 351; *Harper's Weekly,* LII (October 31, 1908), 10.

the property."[73] An editorial in *American Review of Reviews,* also typical of these statements, insisted that "seldom if ever has any American party had a finer candidate."[74]

A fair number of articles appeared during the weeks before the election which expounded upon Bryan's virtues, though they were fewer in number than those which praised Taft. John Welliver, writing for *Munsey's Magazine,* reasoned that the Democratic candidate had had a remarkable preparation for the presidency as the result of information and experience gained during his travels throughout the nation.[75] An article in *Midwestern Magazine* advocated Bryan's election because of his remarkable personal integrity, high mindedness, immaculate ideals, modesty, magnificent appearance, oratorical superiority, and sympathy for those who are oppressed and weak.[76] The Reverend Robert Bisbee wrote an article for *Arena* which recommended Bryan's election and Taft's defeat because the Republican candidate was "utterly without the democratic spirit." Bisbee claimed that Taft was imperialistic, "the tool of privileged wealth," a "blundering administrator," lacking in independence, and ignorant on the subject of tariff reform.[77]

Lastly, a group of articles derogatory to Bryan appeared in various publications in which the Nebraskan was usually described as one of limited intellectual capacity who had recommended ridiculous panaceas. William Allen White, writing for *Collier's,* referred to Bryan's "lack of intellectual strength" and concluded that his "leadership is not trustworthy."[78] An editorial in the New York *Times* recalled that Bryan had advocated and abandoned free silver, anti-imperialism, and government ownership of railroads; it stated that "his shifting to other issues is evidence of an instability of mind highly undesirable in a Chief Executive."[79] Highly

---

[73] Charles A. Conant, "William H. Taft, The Peacemaker of the Philippines," *Putnam's Monthly & The Reader,* V (October, 1908), 13.

[74] *American Review of Reviews,* XXXVIII (July, 1908), 7.

[75] Judson C. Welliver, "If Bryan is Elected to the Presidency," *Munsey's Magazine,* XL (October, 1908), 11.

[76] *Commoner,* VIII (October 30, 1908), 1-2.

[77] Robert Bisbee, "Why Mr. Taft Should Be Defeated," *Arena,* XL (October, 1908), 316-320.

[78] William Allen White, "Twelve Years of Mr. Bryan," *Collier's,* XLII (October 17, 1908), 13.

[79] New York *Times,* September 2, 1908, p. 6.

analogous opinions were expressed in articles in such periodicals as *Harper's Weekly*, *Outlook*, *Nation*, and *Life*.[80]

Because many exploitive and predatory practices of big business had not yet been effectively curbed in 1908, the trust question was another issue of considerable prominence. Bryan, again assuming a more reform-minded position than his opponent, told a Rochester, New York throng that Taft and the Republican party intended merely to regulate the trusts, not prevent them. Moreover, he said that regulation under the "complacent Mr. Taft" would not be effective, since "Mr. Roosevelt, with all his strenuosity, has not succeeded in imprisoning a single trust magnate."[81] While stumping in Indiana, the former advocate of free silver emphasized that his party favored strict enforcement of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and the extermination of private monopoly. To accomplish the latter, Bryan called for a law preventing duplication of directors among competing corporations, and the requiring of a federal license of any corporation controlling 25 per cent or more of the product it produced as a means of preventing the company from controlling more than 50 per cent of the market. In the same address Bryan defined a trust as a "corporation which controls so large a proportion of the total quantity of any article used in this country as to be able to regulate the price and terms of sale." He concluded his remarks by assuring his listeners that, while his party did not oppose all corporations, "the Democratic Party draws the line at private mononoly."[82]

As one might expect, Bryan's trust policy evoked harsh criticism because it constituted a challenge to the status quo. The editors of the *Nation* labeled Bryan's plan for trust regulation as "plainly unworkable," claiming that it would be impossible to define 50 per cent of the total amount of any product.[83] Political analyst Samuel E. Moffett thought that the 50 per cent limitation idea would compel the United States Steel Corporation, the American Sugar Refining Com-

---

[80] *Harper's Weekly*, LII (October 31, 1908), 11; *Outlook*, LXXXIX (July 18, 1908), 595-597; *Nation*, LXXXVII (July 16, 1908), 46; *Life*, LII (August 6, 1908), 136.

[81] New York *Times*, September 17, 1908, p. 2.

[82] *Ibid.*, August 26, 1908, p. 3.

[83] *Nation*, LXXXVII (September 3, 1908), 195.

pany, the Standard Oil Company, and dozens of other corporations to dissolve or sell a large part of their plants.[84]

The Nebraskan's scheme for containing the great incorporated combinations represented a major reason for the hostility of most business interests to his 1908 candidacy; other factors included his tariff stand, labor policy, and former opposition to the gold standard.[85] James W. Van Cleave, president of the National Association of Manufacturers, urged businessmen to bury Bryan and Bryanism on election day under an avalanche of votes.[86] A number of corporations even applied economic coercion to insure Bryan's defeat. One business organization ordered $100,000 worth of engines with the provision that the contract might be canceled in the event of Bryan's election.[87] In early October Paul M. Sharples, proprietor of the Sharples Separator Works in Philadelphia, not only ordered his employees to appear in a parade feting Republican vice-presidential candidate James (Sunny Jim) Sherman, but he also threatened to close his factory indefinitely the moment that Bryan's election appeared imminent.[88] Similarly, a week before the election, President Edward P. Ripley of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad stated that if Bryan were elected the Santa Fe system would abandon extensions and improvements aggregating $3,000,000.[89] In such unethical and undemocratic ways, reminiscent of the campaign of 1896, did various corporate interests attempt to bully their employees for the purpose of insuring victory for their party and its candidates.

On the Republican side, Taft successfully outlined his views on the trust issue in an address at St. Charles, Missouri. The candidate stated that he saw no reason to oppose such aggregations of capital as existed to effect economies, but when corporations attempted to monopolize business and control prices their actions became illegal and must be checked through federal supervision and prosecution of law violations. The Ohioan also explained that the aim of the

---

[84] Samuel E. Moffett, "Mr. Bryan's Convention," *American Review of Reviews*, XXXVIII (August, 1908), 184.

[85] *Independent*, LXV (October 29, 1908), 107-109.

[86] New York *Times*, July 22, 1908, p. 3.

[87] *Ibid.*, July 26, 1908, p. 1.

[88] *Ibid.*, October 10, 1908, p. 1.

[89] *Ibid.*, October 28, 1908, p. 3.

next administration would be the effective application of existing law, rather than the enactment of great statutes establishing new standards of business integrity. His opponent's trust policy was subjected to adverse comment in the same address when Taft argued that Bryan's call for a license for all corporations that make 25 per cent of any product sold in the United States would ruin many small corporations making special articles that had no relation to trusts.[90] The Republican campaign textbook, though defensively admitting to the existence of occasional corporation abuses, claimed that the record of the Roosevelt administration proved that the G.O.P. had acted vigorously to check such evils.[91]

During the heated weeks of the campaign, a concerted effort was made on the part of both major parties to affix the corporation tag, especially that of the Standard Oil Company, to the opposition.[92] Journalist William Randolph Hearst publicized various letters, allegedly purloined from the files of Standard Oil, in a attempt to stick the corporation label on both major parties.[93] Meanwhile, President Roosevelt, who bravely entered the fray by writing a number of well-publicized epistles, tried to fasten the stigma on the Democrats. This popular game of letters resulted in Oklahoma's Democratic Governor Charles Haskell and Republican T. Coleman Du Pont of Delaware, because of alleged or actual corporation connections, being forced out of their respective campaign organizations. One page of the Republican campaign textbook carried the unbelivable headline, "The Democratic Plan of Trust Regulations Is the Plan Proposed by Standard Oil Magnates."[94] In a speech in Harrington, Delaware, Bryan charged that the United States Steel Corporation was supporting the Republican campaign as payment for immunity from prosecution already received.[95] Sardonically, the *Nation* inquired about this game of tag, "Where is this process of purification to stop? We know of nobody really

---

[90] *Ibid.*, October 7, 1908, p. 3.

[91] *Republican Campaign Text-Book, 1908*, pp. 31-37.

[92] *Current Literature*, XLV (November, 1908), 471.

[93] New York *Times*, September 30, 1908, p. 1; October 25, 1908, p. 1; November 1, 1908, p. 1. See also Albert L. Gleason, "Mr. Hearst's Thieves," *Collier's* XLII (October 24, 1908), 8.

[94] *Republican Campaign Text-Book, 1908*, p. 52.

[95] New York *Times*, September 18, 1908, p. 1.

good enough to conduct this campaign, since we do not live in the days of St. Francis or St. Elizabeth."[96]

The only significant issue in addition to those already discussed had to do with publicity for campaign contributions and expenditures. Though no national statute existed in 1908 which compelled the national committees to make public the sources of their campaign funds, mounting public opinion on the subject was too strong to be ignored by either party. As a result, the Democratic National Convention adopted a plank for its platform which called for pre-election publicity of the sources of campaign funds. Moreover, on July 14, the National Committee pledged itself, under a plan suggested by Bryan, to publish before October 15 the names of all contributors of $100 or more, to limit the size of individual contributions to $10,000, not to accept money from corporations, and to publish a list of expenditures not later than one month after the election.[97] Though the G.O.P. national assemblage in June rejected a publicity plank by a vote of 880 to 94, Taft in his July acceptance speech defended himself on this issue by pointing out that the selection of New Yorker George Sheldon as treasurer of the Republican National Committee would put the records of that committee under the laws of his state and would require that a statement of receipts and expenditures be filed twenty days after the election.[98]

During his stumping activities, Bryan proudly reminded his audiences that the Republican National Convention had rejected a plank pledging publicity, whereas the Democratic platform had included such a feature. He also emphasized that the Democratic National Committee had promised to publish a list of its contributors before the election, rather than after, as the Republicans intended to do. Quite logically, Bryan reasoned that publication of contributors before the election was significant for the reason that such a list would reveal to the electorate the people to whom the party was indebted.[99]

Articles in Bryan's *Commoner* also hammered away at the importance of letting the voters know the identity of contributors before the ballots were cast. This highly partisan

---

[96] *Nation*, LXXXVII (October 1, 1908), 301.
[97] New York *Times*, July 15, 1908, p. 1.
[98] *Republican Campaign Text-Book, 1908*, pp. 24-25.
[99] New York *Times*, October 2, 1908, p. 3.

newspaper asserted that in 1904 the Republican party had not dared to inform the voters before election day of the contributions which it had received from men like Edward Harriman, Charles Depew, John Pierpont Morgan, and John D. Rockefeller. Yet Roosevelt and Taft dared to maintain in 1908, the *Commoner* pointed out, that the people must wait until after they cast their votes before being told by the Republican managers "of the interests by which the Republican campaign is being financed."[100]

On October 15 Herman Ridder, treasurer of the Democratic National Committee, made public the list of contributions that had been made to the Democratic national fund up to October 9. The largest contributor was Carl Hughes of Denver, a well-known corporation lawyer, who had given $5,000. Next on the list was Bryan himself, who had contributed the profits of the *Commoner*, $4,046. Ridder stated that subsequent subscriptions would be made public daily.[101]

In an address devoted largely to the publicity issue, Taft defended Roosevelt's contention that campaign contributions should be publicized after, and not before, the election. The G.O.P. hopeful argued that publication of contributions before the election would cause the motives of the contributors to be "misconstrued . . . and misrepresented," and that candidates would be "charged . . . as being completely under the control of those who make the contributions." Taft concluded that a rigid law requiring the publication of contributions and expenditures within ten days after the election was all that public policy demanded.[102]

The American press was inclined to praise the stands of both major parties and their candidates on the publicity issue. The editors of the New York *Times* opined, "Mr. Taft and Mr. Bryan are to be congratulated on the policy of publicity they have adopted as to campaign contributions. It is a step forward."[103] Understandably, however, various political analysts thought that Bryan's viewpoint on the matter was superior to that of Taft. For example, the editors of the *World's Work* lauded the Democratic stand by saying, "On this subject, Mr. Bryan undoubtedly has the stronger

---

[100] *Commoner*, VIII (October 9, 1908), 1.
[101] New York *Times*, October 16, 1908, p. 3.
[102] *Ibid.*, October 1, 1908, p. 1.
[103] *Ibid.*, September 17, 1908, p. 6.

position. . . . If publicity is a preventive of evils . . . prompt publicity is surely a better preventive than belated publicity."[104] In October even the editors of the pro-Taft *Nation* remarked, "When the Democratic Committee has given out a full account of its receipts . . . the Republicans will find it exceedingly awkward . . . to explain their unwillingness to take the country equally into confidence."[105] Parenthetically, it should be observed that both national committees fulfilled their promises to make public their contributions and expenditures soon after the election. Thus the first publicity of the funds of the national committee was supplied the electorate before such action was required by law.[106]

In addition to the foregoing topics of major status, the presidential campaign of 1908 included a number of minor issues such as the Panic of 1907. The Republicans naturally discussed the subject sparingly, while their opposition logically raised the issue frequently. Nevertheless, the matter failed to achieve primary significance in the campaign. The main reason why the Panic of 1907 did not assume a role of major proportions was that by the autumn of 1908 economic conditions were once again close to normal. The panic had started suddenly in October of 1907, spreading westward from New York. It had been acute while it lasted but was largely limited to business in the cities; therefore, its effects were not widespread. It was followed by no prolonged depression and was succeeded by rapid recovery.[107] By October of 1908, the New York *Times* was able to report that between February 14, 1908 and September 23, 1908 the total resources of the 6,853 national banks of the United States had increased by $631,000,000; individual deposits during the same period were up by $443,000,000.[108] Approximately one month before the election, the editors of *World's Work* reported that "the recovery in the business world has been marvelous," though

---

[104] "Campaign Fund Publicity, Before or After?" *World's Work*, XVII (November, 1908), 10851.

[105] *Nation*, LXXXVII (October 15, 1908), 349.

[106] Louise Overacker, *Money in Elections* (New York, 1932), 237.

[107] Wesley C. Mitchell, *Business Cycles and Their Causes* (Los Angeles, 1941), 75-107. See also Willard Thorp, *Business Annals* (New York, 1926), 140; and Wilford King, *The Causes of Economic Fluctuations* (New York, 1938), 42, 66-67.

[108] New York *Times*, October 22, 1908, p. 16.

it was admitted that many unfortunate effects of the panic were still apparent.[109]

The Republican campaign textbook, trying to brush away the Panic of 1907, asserted that the disturbance was merely financial, not industrial or commercial, in nature. The Roosevelt administration was applauded for establishing the National Monetary Commission to study the needs of the nation's monetary system.[110] In his acceptance speech Taft discussed the causes of the panic in passing and soothingly assured his listeners that "gradually business is acquiring a healthier tone."[111]

Conversely, the Democrats tried desperately to convert the panic into a vote-getting issue but with very limited success. Nathan Straus, chairman of the Democratic Businessmen's League, exaggerated to a New York audience, "The Panic which began last fall is the greatest panic the world has ever known."[112] The Democratic campaign textbook reasoned that the financial upheaval had destroyed the argument employed by Republican leaders that "Democratic legislation and hard times—decreased tariffs and panics—are found coexisting throughout our history."[113]

In October, Bryan claimed before a throng in the Iowa corn belt that the nation was in the "midst of a depression" for which Republican policies were responsible. He reminded his audience that the financial disaster had come after more than ten years of Republican rule.[114] Stumping before a partisan crowd at home in Lincoln, Nebraska, he observed that the Panic of 1907 made ridiculous the Republican argument that a Democratic victory would disturb business. "How can the Republicans," Bryan asked, "threaten us with a panic, when a panic came under the present President and is still upon us?"[115]

The Roosevelt policies constituted one of the campaign's unique issues in that they were endorsed by both major candi-

---

[109] *World's Work*, XVI (October, 1908), 10742.
[110] *Republican Campaign Text-Book, 1908*, pp. 54-56.
[111] New York *Times*, July 29, 1908, pp. 4-5.
[112] *Commoner*, VIII (October 23, 1908), 2.
[113] *Democratic Campaign Textbook, 1908*, p. 53.
[114] New York *Times*, October 7, 1908, p. 3.
[115] *Ibid.*, October 3, 1908, p. 2.

dates and did not inspire bitter disagreement or frequent comment. Their importance as an issue lay in the tendency of many American voters to support the candidate more closely associated with them. Taft, as Secretary of War, had become identified with the policies long before the 1908 campaign. When the Ohioan delivered speeches on Roosevelt's behalf in the election of 1904, his remarks literally defended every controversial aspect of the Roosevelt administration.[116] Four years later, while in quest of the 1908 Republican presidential nomination, he repeatedly offered unqualified endorsement of "The Trust-buster's" policies. Speaking at the Sandusky Opera House in Ohio during his 1908 campaign for the White House, Taft promised, if elected, to devote all his ability to clinching the Roosevelt policies. Taft went on to insist that Bryan had no right to label himself as their legitimate heir.[117] Displaying a measure of political sagacity, Taft wisely emphasized his belief in the course of the Roosevelt administration while stumping the progressive-minded western states.[118]

Attempting to score a few points in the game by disassociating the G.O.P. from the popular Roosevelt policies, the Democrats in their 1908 campaign textbook chided the Republican National Convention for having rejected certain reforms previously endorsed by the President. Mentioned in particular were publicity for campaign funds, ascertaining the value of railroads, and income and inheritance taxes.[119] In late August, Bryan provided the rare spectacle of a presidential aspirant offering tacit approval of the policies of the opposition. Seeking votes at his birthplace in Salem, Illinois, the candidate claimed that he was the proper heir to the Roosevelt "reforms" because he was the one from whom the Republican party had taken them.[120]

With both major candidates endorsing the Roosevelt policies, a powerful advantage in the campaign fell to the party in power. The G.O.P. could point to accomplishments;

---

[116] Pringle, *Taft*, I, 262-263.

[117] New York *Times*, September 9, 1908, p. 2.

[118] Oscar K. Davis, *Released for Publication* (New York, 1925), 111.

[119] *Democratic Campaign Textbook, 1908*, p. 19.

[120] San Francisco *Call*, August 27, 1908, p. 8.

the Democrats could merely offer promises. The editors of *Nation* pointedly summed up the situation by saying, "If Mr. Bryan can promise us nothing better than we have had under Roosevelt or than we should have under Taft, why should any one want to make him President?"[121]

Frequently during the campaign, Republicans tried to squeeze votes from the contention that a Bryan victory would lead to economic ruin for the nation. During the heat of the contest, for example, Roosevelt penned a letter to a New York labor leader in which the President injudiciously warned, "If Mr. Taft is not elected, a period of industrial chaos and business bad times will ensue in which the workingmen will suffer far more than any other class."[122] Candidate Taft, now more politician than judge, informed an audience in Cincinnati that Bryan's "election will mean a paralysis of business and we should have a recurrence of the disastrous business conditions of the last Democratic administration."[123] Even the august governor of New York, Charles Evans Hughes, and President Roosevelt's able Secretary of State, Elihu Root, were not above exploiting this approach as a means of corralling votes. Hughes told a cheering crowd in Indianapolis that the election of Bryan would spell business disaster and depression, whereas Taft's election would result in a continuation of prosperity.[124] Appearing before an enthusiastic rally in New York City, Root pictured Bryan as a Populist and a real danger to the nation. Root went the whole hog by predicting that Bryan's election to the presidency would be followed by curtailed production, another financial panic, unemployment, lowered wages, a ruined market for farm products and manufacturers, reduced income, and a long period of economic stagnation.[125]

In attempting to cope with the impact of this issue, the Democrats were on the defensive. Nathan Straus angrily told a meeting of Chicago Democrats that those who predicted disaster in the event of Bryan's election were either short-

---

[121] *Nation*, LXXXVII (September 17, 1908), 247.

[122] Roosevelt to Philip Grace, October 19, 1908, in Morison (ed.), *Letters of Theodore Roosevelt*, VI, 1301.

[123] New York *Times*, September 23, 1908, p. 3.

[124] *Ibid.*, September 29, 1908, p. 2.

[125] *Ibid.*, November 1, 1908, p. 3.

sighted or trying to obscure the real issues of the campaign.[126] The *Commoner* tried to strike back through the device of a cartoon in which "Business, Industry, and Labor of 1907" were depicted as three beaten, crippled souls being warned by Taft that the election of Bryan would result in panic and hard times.[127]

The above-mentioned Republican tactics of predicting disaster in the event of a Bryan victory were closely paralleled by the rattling of various "skeletons" in the Democratic candidate's closet. By way of illustration, the Republican textbook cited excerpts from speeches of 1906 in which Bryan had called for government ownership of railroads.[128] When during the 1908 campaign, Taft accused Bryan of favoring government ownership, the Nebraskan shot back by pointing out that both the Republican candidate and Roosevelt had at one time threatened the railroads with government ownership if they did not consent to effective regulation; and that threat, reasoned Bryan, represented substantially the position he had taken. The Democratic candidate also insisted that government ownership was not an issue in the 1908 election.[129] In late September the Republicans attempted to exploit the "skeleton" of free silver when vice-presidential nominee James Sherman asserted before a meeting of the Commercial Travelers' Sound Money League in New York City that Bryan was an enemy of the gold standard. "No one could say," Sherman declared, "that the pied piper of Nebraska would not wander off into the cloudy dreamland of free silver should insanity overtake the American people and Mr. Bryan be elected."[130] Admitting that he had favored the free coinage of silver, the Democratic candidate counterpunched by pointing out that William McKinley had voted for free coinage of silver in 1878, and that the Republican National Convention in 1896 had pledged itself to international bimetallism. Bryan justified his former advocacy of free silver by maintaining that the United States needed more money

---

[126] *Ibid.*, October 8, 1908, p. 3.
[127] *Commoner*, VIII (October 2, 1908), 1.
[128] *Republican Campaign Text-Book, 1908*, pp. 282-285.
[129] New York *Times*, September 25, 1908, p. 2.
[130] *Ibid.*, September 26, 1908, p. 3.

at the time, a need which was fulfilled by unexpected discoveries of gold. Lastly, Bryan stated that the money question, as in the case of government ownership, was no longer an issue.[131]

Though the presidential battlefield of 1908 featured no single issue of giant proportions, the debating of a number of topics during the campaign warrants the careful attention of students of recent American political and economic history. On the time-tattered subject of the tariff, Bryan strongly opposed protection by advocating a tariff for revenue only, maintaining that such a policy would benefit the domestic economy and promote a two-way type of foreign trade. On the other hand, though Taft vaguely talked about revision, he staunchly defended protection as being conducive to economic prosperity. The Democratic standard-bearer thus assumed the more advanced, reform-minded position, the one vindicated by time and present-day dedication of both major parties to a low-tariff program.

Regarding the bank guaranty issue, a topic frequently overlooked by historians of the era, Bryan again assumed the more liberal position by recommending that a tax be levied against all national banks and participating state banks for the establishment of an insurance fund for the guaranty of bank deposits. The conservative Republican camp claimed that the plan would invite reckless banking practices and promote financial panics. In view of the impressive success of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation during the last twenty years, the Taft-Republican position stands discredited and the popularization of the bank reform by the Bryan-Democratic side must properly be regarded as a constructive contribution.

On the widely-discussed and complicated issue of labor, Bryan once again proved to be reform-minded and responsive to the wishes of labor by advocating a separate Department of Labor, the exemption of labor organizations from prosecution under the anti-trust laws, a more limited use of the injunction in labor disputes, and trial by jury in cases of indirect contempt. Taft, though he voiced approval of the mild

[131] *Ibid.*, September 25, 1908, p. 2.

gains realized by labor during the Roosevelt administration, opposed the Bryan-backed labor reforms either openly or tacitly. In view of the congressional enactment during the five to six years that followed the election of 1908 of most of the reforms which Bryan helped to popularize (in 1908), the position of the Democratic camp on the labor question was the more foresighted.

Though Bryan's positions on the tariff, bank guaranty, and labor questions were not without merit, Taft appeared in the eyes of most voters to be the more qualified candidate for the awesome position of President of the United States. Not only did the Ohioan have the bulk of the press on his side and benefit from the backing of the ever-popular Theodore Roosevelt, but his experiences and accomplishments as a judge, Governor of the Philippine Islands, and Secretary of War appeared to most citizens to surpass any recommendations his opponent could present. Compared to his foe, Bryan appeared to many elements of the electorate as untried, shifty, inexperienced, and of limited intellectual capacity.

The pattern of Bryan as the liberal and of Taft as the conservative, which emerged on the tariff, bank guaranty, and labor issues, appeared again on the trust question. The more reform-minded Democratic candidate called for legislation preventing duplication of directors among competing corporations, a suggestion which a few years later became a feature of the Clayton Anti-Trust Act of 1914. Bryan also urged the enactment of a law requiring a federal license for any corporation controlling 25 per cent or more of a product it produced as a means of preventing the company from controlling more than 50 per cent of the market. This proposal never received more than fleeting consideration during the years that followed. More inclined to defend the status quo, Taft opposed Bryan's license scheme, favored no new trust legislation, and merely promised effective application of existing law.

While both sides and their candidates look presentable in the pages of history on the publicity issue, the Democrats may claim whatever edge existed. The Bryan camp not only included a plank in its platform which called for pre-election publicity of the sources of campaign funds, but actually published the names of contributors before election day.

Though the G.O.P. rejected a publicity plank at its convention, Taft voiced approval of post-election publication of campaign contributions. Both national committees made public their contributions and expenditures soon after the election.

Lastly, with regard to minor issues of the campaign, both Taft and Bryan endorsed the Roosevelt policies. The Republicans were on the defensive with reference to the Panic of 1907 and Taft's record as a judge; the Democrats, however, found themselves with their backs to the wall as the result of Bryan's former advocacy of free silver and government ownership of railroads.