

The Nestor of Political Leadership

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The political horoscope reveals William Jennings Bryan as the veteran leader in public life today. Two years before Roosevelt was Governor of New York, four years before he was even vice-president; twelve years before Taft was President; sixteen years before Woodrow Wilson made the race, and twenty years before Hughes entered the presidential list, William Jennings Bryan was a national leader and in 1896 a candidate for the presidency of the United States. There is no one personality in the history of the country that stands out more clearly and strongly in personal leadership than William Jennings Bryan. Today he is younger in years than all the presidential candidates who came afterwards, except Hughes. In the full flush of his thirty-six years, William Jennings Bryan enjoyed the distinction of being the youngest candidate for President. His public career began in Congress in 1890, and it is said that even in his early years he begun discussion of public questions with people and has kept at it ever since.

As I sat with him at his winter home, "Villa Serena," at Miami, Florida, I thought of those days in Chicago when he led the Nebraska delegation in the convention hall and made his classic address that set ablaze his leadership and influence in national campaigns. It has never dimmed in the councils of his party. The visit inspired a retrospect of political history. Many important events in history have been recorded since William Jennings Bryan entered public life. Many of the things he has advocated amid jibes and jeers have become the statute law of the land. Enumerated they reveal a fascinating evolution of political events.

First, Tariff Reform; second, Election of Senators by the People; third, Silver; fourth Income Tax; fifth, Campaign Against Imperialism, with the Promise of Independence of the Philippines; sixth, Anti-trust Legislation; seventh, Eight-hour Labor Day; eighth, Currency Reform; ninth, Prohibition; tenth, Woman Suffrage; eleventh, Initiative and Referendum.

In the Currency bill Mr. Bryan was alone responsible for the important and vital feature of the measure which provided for the issue of government instead of bank notes, returning to the government its sovereign right to issue paper money.

Three of the great constitutional amendments made in these eventful years were incorporated in the program of William Jennings Bryan. First, Election of Senators by the People; second, Income Tax; third, Prohibition. The two more that he expects to see incorporated in the constitutional amendments during his lifetime are the Suffrage Bill, almost here, and Initiative and Referendum, on which he is training his guns for coming political battles. All this has been accomplished without the usual process of political backing or the support of large corporation interests. He launched his career without official influence or a hereditary name of national fame.

When credited with having contributed largely to these reforms he insisted upon saying: "No, it is the ideals that have won and not I. The ideals have given me what strength I possessed. Movements are not strong because of individuals, but individuals because of ideals." As he said this his lips closed firmly showing that dominant quality—determination.

Three times William Jennings Bryan has made the race for president, and has been a powerful influence in every convention of the Democratic party since he entered public life. While the reactionaries in his party have charged Mr. Bryan with leading the party to defeat, they forget that in 1896, 1900, and 1908, he polled over a million votes more than President Cleveland when he was elected president in 1892. In 1900 and 1908 he polled a million and a quarter more votes than Mr. Parker in 1904—but the startling revelation is that in all the three campaigns which he made, he polled more votes than Woodrow Wilson, elected President in 1912, whose nomination he made possible at the Baltimore convention.

Viewing his career as a cabinet officer, he has the record of having negotiated more treaties

than any other Secretary of State in the same length of time in the history of the nation. There were thirty treaties negotiated and signed by him, and these embodied his great plan of having all causes of war investigated before resorting to arms. On September 15, 1914, the representatives of nine hundred million people, one-half the population of the world, gathered at his desk in Washington and joined in signing treaties, which made war between the contracting parties a remote possibility. His peace treaty plan as he negotiated is regarded as one of the most important provisions of the League of Nations. It is the one thing in which there is no disagreement or contention, and this was the dominant idea embodied in Mr. Bryan's unparalleled collection of treaties.

In public or private life William Jennings Bryan continues on his way without a press bureau or personal plans for running for office. Without employing the usual methods in political propaganda or holding office, his leadership remains unchallenged as a vital force in party deliberations. There are millions of people ready to hear from the Nestor of American political life whenever he has a statement to make.

When I asked him what name or distinction in American history he would appreciate most, he replied with a twinkle in his eye, "Governmental Machinist."

"I have always felt," he continued, "that the government is a good deal like any other machine—it needs adjustment and changes to meet conditions, but principles are eternal."

Continuing he narrowed his eyes, and viewed the fringed palms in front of us: "I have personally criticized few public men in my utterances or writing, but when a public man gets in the way of an idea, I am ready for the fray. I first opposed Mr. Cleveland in my own party. I opposed Mr. Parker in the campaign for the nomination—the election which followed was one of the most disastrous defeats our party ever met. I opposed Mr. Harmon and Underwood in 1912. I opposed Tammany and Wall street domination which I felt imperilled the party. Even the interests that opposed him have now come to realize that he is needed to protect them from the indignation of the people, aroused by acts of usurping their rights, more than he needs them for his own political advancement. As Mr. Bryan quietly remarked, toying a stub lead pencil, "I am not trying to recover stolen property, I am simply trying to prevent wrongdoing, and in this I believe I am stemming the tide of radicalism, because after me may come—the extremists."

Other public men have used the prestige of office to accomplish their reforms and ideals and many have been in office continuously during their public career. Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, Calhoun, and other men in history similar in temperament to Mr. Bryan were powerful wearing the official halo. They held public office when dealing with public questions, but Mr. Bryan has gone on, in office or out of office, with the work that absorbed his life energies, never depending upon mere official power to win for his principles.

Mr. Bryan regards the prohibition question as closed, for prohibition is now in the constitution. The adoption of the amendment by more than three-fourths of the states and the decision of the Supreme Court supporting the law at every step would seem to make it as final as the abolition of slavery. Opposing prohibition is simply lawlessness, the same as opposition to any other law. A President elected on a wet platform, pledged in advance to oppose prohibition is pledged to violate his oath of office to support the constitution and the law of the land. Mr. Bryan did not regard a pledged candidate of the "wets" or liquor interests as a legitimate candidate for the presidency any more than a representative of the burglars, pickpockets or firebugs would be in leading a campaign and making a political issue of violation of the constitution.

In his Miami home, located in a sequestered woods far up Brickell Drive, Mr. Bryan continued his usual activities during the winter. He had a Sunday school class, sometimes attended by fifteen people. He speaks frequently and never lacks a large audience whenever he ap-

pears. He says, "I feel the greatest privilege of an American is to discuss public matters with fellow citizens." Mrs. Bryan also had a class on Sunday and the helpmate partnership of those early days continues on. Mr. Bryan insisted that he did not know of any other person to whose judgment he would defer more than Mrs. Bryan's. This was the sweet and honest tribute of a devoted husband. Mrs. Bryan was then seated at a desk with a typewriter near at hand, indicating that she was keeping in close touch with the varied activities of her husband.

Some years ago, Mr. Bryan's cousin, Governor Jennings of Florida, helped him to select some land at Miami. With their own hands Mr. and Mrs. Bryan have helped to build up their beautiful home in the south. Located on a picturesque spot fanned by waving palms it is a haven for rest. Buttressed in the coral reef the shore line is festooned with rich tropical foliage of varied hue. The trees, flowers, and shrubs, seem to sing of the glories of nature in this spot. Here Mr. Bryan continues his work as ardently as if in his office at Lincoln. Telegrams were then coming from all parts of the country from his admirers and friends, renewing the pledge of their loyalty to his ideas and leadership and even suggesting his nomination for another race for the presidency. The house, simple and unpretentious, with its artistic courtyard has the atmosphere of home life. Here was a royal palm grown to great stature in seven years. Every species of palms was represented in the grounds. There was foliage suggestive of the temperate north blending with the luxurious leafage of the tropics. On the bay the water view, with an island directly in front, seemed to focus the vision on a scene ever changing but restful. The languor of the tropics was absent, for in this home Bryan activities were continued at the lively tempo characteristic of Mr. Bryan's career. On the walls in his home were the mementos of travels far and wide when Mr. and Mrs. Bryan made their trip around the world.

Having met and mingled with kings and emperors and the leaders of many nations, Mr. Bryan's life and ambition centered in the problems of governmental machinery as it relates to the people, protecting and carrying out definitely and concretely the purposes of a government by the people. A cosmopolite indeed, for there is scarcely a city in any state that has not heard the clarion notes of Mr. Bryan's voice. Almost every town, village and hamlet has had Bryan as a speaking visitor. His leadership has been a spoken eye-to-eye and word of mouth leadership. While others have planned political campaigns with tons of literature distributed and circuited within the cloister of four office walls, William Jennings Bryan has looked into the faces of the people. He insists that from them he has drawn the inspiration for his hopes and ideas in the adjustment of governmental machinery.

In searching carefully thru the biographies of famous men of our country, it is difficult to find a personality in public leadership who is a counterpart to William Jennings Bryan. When he hung out his shingle to practice law, he found in the study of law how much was needed to rectify the law as it applied to modern needs and government. Then and there he concentrated himself to a life work as a publicist, unconscious at first, but more conscious as the work proceeded. As he insisted, "When I started, I had no idea of entering public life so early, except possibly that I might serve for a term or two in Congress." The experience in Congress and the political situation as presented in 1896 led him on to his life work in pushing forward ideas rather than his own candidacy. When I met him in Chicago, after the Republican convention adjourned in 1912, a gleam in his eyes indicated something was going to happen to the slate that proclaimed Alton Parker chairman, and things did happen—the nomination of Woodrow Wilson resulted.

Whatever may be said about Mr. Bryan politically, none can gainsay his clean-handed, highminded, conscientious, Christian character and manhood. Unswerving in his principles, he has held the confidences of a large following thru the ups and downs of a political career and has always "come back." The consistency and purity of his personal life has always held for him a legion of devoted admirers. The history of these stirring times cannot be written without taking cognizance of the activities and achievements of William Jennings Bryan.