

Bryan and Roosevelt—Or Baltimore and Chicago

Claud G. Bowers in The Public Official Magazine: The conventions at Chicago and Baltimore were epochal. They mark the beginning of the end of the old order. The day of the ward heeler in national politics is henceforth dead.

The platform of platitudes is a relic of the past. The candidate who blows both hot and cold is a memory. The dawn of the people's day is here!

These two conventions are historic. They have had no parallel. They were revolutionary in that they displaced the old regime at Baltimore, and all but accomplished the same result at Chicago. In both battles they had "lovely fighting along the whole line." Both were replete with dramatic situations. Belasco's genius could have conceived nothing finer than many of the scenes, especially at Baltimore. Rienzi attempted nothing more spectacular than Roosevelt. Mirabeau, sending his defiance to the king, presented a picture no more inspiring than Bryan throwing down the gauge of battle to Wall street.

Whatever may be thought of either by individuals here and there the fact remains that these two conventions were elevated above the commonplace by Theodore Roosevelt and William Jennings Bryan. One failed pitifully in his mission, while the other, through supernal genius in generalship, snatched from defeat a matchless triumph. A study of the contributing causes is worth while.

II.

History will find something fascinating in the furious fighting of Roosevelt at Chicago, but will inevitably conclude that like the Don Quixote of old he was fighting wind mills. He tried to beat down opposition with a battery of vituperation. He assailed closed organization with a bombardment of epithets. He turned every adjective of abuse against his foes. And at every turn he was hopelessly out-generaled.

In anticipation of his weakness he initiated contests in the selection of delegates, hoping thereby to secure enough favorable decisions to give him a majority. This was his idea of political warfare—this and the copious flow of vituperation. The injustice of some of his contests cast a shadow on the others. As the tide of battle turned against him he tried to stem the flood by arousing the country by the fury of his denunciation.

Thief, crook, porch climbers, Apaches, garroters—these were the principal weapons he employed in battling for principle. His methods only cemented his foes in the convention, intoxicated his followers until they merely cursed and reeled, and shocked the sober thought of the country. Had he been battling for principle, unhampered by his personal ambition, he might have dominated the convention and named the nominee.

The close of his fight was a pitiful anti-climax. He had ridden the great white horse of progressive principles. He had disclaimed personal ambition. And yet when a compromise was proposed favorable to progressive principles he fairly shrieked—"I am the compromise." And when his party workers trembling at the havoc wrought by internecine war proposed to capitulate to the "principles" he claimed were involved by the selection of his own floor manager he indignantly renounced the idea and denounced his manager.

Thus defeated, demoralized, discredited, he emerged from the convention one of the most pathetic figures of this or any other age. From the moment the bugle sounded for the battle until taps were sounded over the battlefield he did not make a single masterful move to justify or explain the fulsome flattery of his idolaters.

III.

Now turn to Baltimore.

Here, too, the issue was progress or reaction. The men of power were largely arrayed on the side of retrogression. A careful review of the convention disclosed a majority of the convention inclined toward that conservative action which some think spells stagnation.

The selection of Alton B. Parker for temporary chairman was a challenge. With that the "Men of power cried havoc and let loose the dogs of war." It was a signal for the slaughter. That skirmish won, many of the most consummate politicians in the veteran corps conceived that the influence of Bryan would be nipped in the bud, the delegates would rush for the band wagon, and the domination of the ultra-conservative forces would have been assured. To these battle-scarred veterans of the old guard it seemed certain that the army of progress would be demoralized

the moment its great leader fell wounded upon the battle field. To some of the more sanguine it appeared probable that there would be a capitulation without the firing of another shot.

It was Monday evening.

The personnel of the convention had been scrutinized and it was evident that Bryan was destined to defeat. The commoner was cognizant of the situation. It was because he was familiar with this situation that he determined upon giving battle.

This was a master stroke of genius.

And why a master stroke of genius? Because the convention was against him, and the millions of reserves through the country were with him, and it gave him an opportunity to call in the reserves for the really vital battles of the convention.

His speech on Tuesday was a bugle call.

It was Danton urging the youth of France to the frontiers. It was Robespierre calling Paris to the defense of her representatives. It was Gambetta calling the virile men of France to the colors. It will rank among the few political masterpieces of audacity in the history of the world.

The bullet of the opposition grazed him, and left him standing, and in the rebound it found the heart of the enemy. Just as Danton's speech sent hundreds of thousands post haste to the frontier; just as Robespierre's speech surrounded the convention with the infuriated populace of Paris; just as Gambetta's appeal stirred the fainting heart of his country after Sedan, so did this powerful appeal of Bryan touch the heart of the country to an instant response. The wires were hot with the burning messages of protest. The word from the places where delegates are made, served notice on the convention that the eyes of the folks back home were upon it. After that his enemies snarlingly approached to lick his hands.

That day his enemies "showed him his place."

The next morning they heard from home, and they unanimously offered him the chairmanship of the platform committee—beseeched him to take it, awaited on his pleasure, sent committees to plead with him, allowed him to decline and name Kern of Indiana. A lesser man would have been flattered into a compliant acquiescence in the future actions of the convention dominated by his enemies—but Bryan is a super-man. The end of the fighting was not yet. He was battling for the substance and not the shadow.

It was Thursday night. The hall was packed to suffocation with 20,000 people eager for the nomination. The wife of the president of the United States, becomingly gowned in purple, occupied a conspicuous seat on the platform. A storm of applause broke over the convention when Bryan appeared near the chairman.

He is preparing for the supreme contest.

In the midst of his preparations he lays down his pencil, strides smilingly to the first lady of the land, offers his hand and bows like a courtier. "Flowers over the garden wall." Then the smile passes. His face is stern. His form is tense. He stands before the convention.

Because he is struggling for the substance and not the shadow of victory he offers his resolution pledging the nominee against any sort of affiliation with J. Pierpont Morgan, Thomas F. Ryan, and August Belmont.

It is a bomb.

It splutters and explodes. The convention is in turmoil. Hisses, cheers, and groans. Men shout their dissensions like demented creatures. Flood of Virginia rushes to the platform showing his teeth as if to bite.

Fists are shaken in the direction of the commoner.

Insults are hurled at him—and he stands there stern and unrelenting—clad in the armor of a righteous cause. Little creatures, safe in the cloak of obscurity, take courage from the storm to join in the work of the mob. The galleries looking, figure that Bryan is lost.

The roll is called.

And the men who hissed and hooted voted for the resolution—voted for it because there stood the leader before them, and behind them, ready to spring, crouched the millions of democrats back home.

Marvelous triumph. Bryan has put an end to denunciation in generalities and for the first time in the history of