

TEACHER GUIDE

1896 DOC. #1: Bryan "Cross of Gold" Poster

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Truly modern campaigning began in the last years of the 19th century. It included such elements as heroic imagery, appeals to women and to family values, and issues such as control of the money supply and global trade. All of these were present in the election of 1896.

In 1896 the country was deeply and emotionally divided over the issue of "Free Silver," which referred to the "free and unlimited coinage of silver" at the ratio of sixteen ounces of silver to one ounce of gold. Supporters of Free Silver saw silver as "the people's money," a symbol of liberation for farmers and working people. They viewed gold as a symbol of the oppression of rich over poor. Their slogan was "16 to 1." Opponents of Free Silver (known as "goldbugs") felt that gold alone should be the basis for the dollar.

William Jennings Bryan was a 36-year-old Congressman from Nebraska and relatively unknown when he gave his "Cross of Gold" speech at the Democratic convention in 1896. He was nominated for President on the fifth ballot, becoming the youngest major party nominee ever selected. His entire speech was reprinted nationwide in newspapers which helped to bring his name before the voters. The speech caused a sensation and overnight Bryan became the "workingman's hero."

> Project the document.

This Bryan campaign poster included the entire text of Bryan's "Cross of Gold" speech, which was labeled "The Speech that Won the Convention." The pictures beneath his portrait are of his young family. This is one of the first times that images of a candidate's family were used in a presidential campaign.

QUESTION **What messages about Bryan does the artist intend to convey? Give evidence to explain your answer.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER He is for Free Silver.

EVIDENCE "16 to 1" slogan and the pro-silver "Cross of Gold" speech

SUGGESTED ANSWER He is for the common man.

EVIDENCE images of a farmer and blacksmith

SUGGESTED ANSWER He is a patriotic family man.

EVIDENCE flags surround images of his family

> Have students read the opening and closing parts of the speech on the handout.

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Bryan "Cross of Gold" Poster

PowerPoint Slide

Text from two sections on student handout

QUESTION **What group is Bryan targeting in this speech and what is your evidence?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER **He is targeting supporters of Free Silver.**

EVIDENCE slogan: "16-1"; text: "clad in the armor of a righteous cause," "you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold"

SUGGESTED ANSWER **He is targeting workers.**

EVIDENCE images of farmer and blacksmith; text: "producing masses," "laboring interests and toilers everywhere," "you shall not press down upon the brow of labor"

SUGGESTED ANSWER **He is targeting voting men with young families.**

EVIDENCE Bryan's image is surrounded by pictures of his family

QUESTION **What qualities of character is Bryan trying to project? What evidence do you see?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER **He is trying to project qualities of humility, righteousness, and determination.**

EVIDENCE text: "the humblest citizen in all the land," "I come to you for a righteous cause," "we will fight to the uttermost"

QUESTION **How does Bryan use Christian imagery to support his messages?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER **The speech is graphically designed like a page from the Bible. The text includes: "cause as holy as," "crown of thorns," and "crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."**

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Can you think of contemporary examples in which candidates have used religious references in their campaigns?

Why don't we see such lengthy speeches in contemporary political advertisements?

ADDITIONAL INFO

Bryan's speech at the convention provoked a wild response of cheering and shouting that lasted for almost an hour. Bryan was carried around on the shoulders of some while others held up hastily-written banners with the words "No Crown of Thorns! No Cross of Gold!" Some of the delegates supported the gold standard and were shocked at the outcry for Bryan. The Democratic Party subsequently split over the Free Silver question with some conservative "goldbugs" leaving to form the National Democratic Party to fight Bryan.

Eastern businessmen, many of whom owned great reserves of gold, opposed Bryan's nomination. Wealthy Westerners with interests in the silver mines supported him. Many Populists who needed support for their agrarian platform decided to take on the Free Silver issue and supported Bryan in the campaign.

CONNECTIONS

(see thematic listing)

- Class/Labor**
- Family Man**
- Foreign Policy**