Author's Response

By Michael Kazin, Georgetown University

I am grateful to Joe Creech and Richard Fox for understanding what I tried to accomplish in *A Godly Hero* and for mixing their praise with clarifying criticisms about the book. When I decided to write about Bryan, I wondered if my fellow historians would be willing to view empathetically a man widely dismissed as a three-time loser, vainglorious orator, and fundamentalist yahoo. The rich insights of Creech's and Fox's essays help silence those doubts.

In a brief response, it's impossible to do justice to the breadth of their fine essays. So I'll focus on two of the more salient issues they raise: Bryan's significance in the narrative of twentieth-century reform and the legitimacy of what Fox calls "advocacy history."

Was Bryan a tragic figure, as Creech asks at the end of his essay? His electoral defeats and final humiliation at a Tennessee courthouse certainly enraged and saddened his many followers who took the fusion of evangelical pietism and populist democracy for granted. The eclipse of his reputation also symbolized, in the life of one man, the split between secular and Christian Americans that has bedeviled the broad left since Bryan's death. There is, of course, a huge exception to the latter assertion: the black freedom movement of the 1950s to the 1970s and the revived, multicultural Social Gospel it spawned. But, inside and outside the academy, most white liberals since the heyday of FDR have hoped that prophetic religion would slink away from the public square and never return. The trouble this has made for liberal causes and the candidates who support them since the 1960s is obvious.

Yet it is also true, as both Creech and Fox point out, that Bryan's utility as a prophet was limited by the constraints of his party and of his own political imagination. His confidence in what "The Democracy" could accomplish, once liberated from the dead hand of Grover Cleveland and his allies, was limitless. But it was a myopic faith. Not only did Bryan look the other way as his southern allies ripped the franchise away from black men, he made almost no effort to appeal to working-class immigrants from southern and eastern Europe.

He inherited his racial views from his father, a Stephen Douglas loyalist from southern Illinois. But his failure to reach out to the urban "other half" revealed a different sort of blinder. Although Bryan attended a law school

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in downtown Chicago and won two close congressional races with immigrant support, his sociology was a simple one that really included only two groups—"the people" and their exploiters. Rhetorically, he assumed that the United States was a nation of white, English-speaking Christians, most of whom hungered for moral leadership. Nothing better illustrates this worldview than his passionate stumping for prohibition. Bryan could not imagine that, once enshrined in law, it would fail.

Of course, Bryan was hardly the only reformer naïve enough to think a purified world was possible. In this respect, he hewed closer to the progressivism of Jane Addams or Woodrow Wilson than to the populism of Ignatius Donnelly and Tom Watson, who saw the dark side of history more clearly than its sunlit potential. Until the 1920s, Bryan's religious vocabulary did not include sin; Jesus, for him, was always the prince of peace, never the wielder of a sword. Despite his faith in the veracity of scripture, he had more in common with hope-filled Social Gospelers like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch than with grim premillenialists like Dwight Moody and Sam Jones.

As with many progressives, World War I changed his mind, if not his sensibility. He viewed the mass slaughter as not merely senseless but evil—and this propelled the Great Commoner to become a grand, if often clumsy, scourge of infidelity as well. Creech and Fox imply that Bryan's politics curdled in the twenties because of old age or an inability to deal with the fading of the limelight. But as Larry Levine documented in his great first book, Bryan became a virtual social-democrat at the same time as he was aiding the fundamentalist cause; he came out for public financing of elections, nationalizing the railroads and perhaps the energy industries (as governor of Nebraska, his brother Charles led on that issue), and a strong alliance between labor unions and organized farmers. Yet he could not abide the fact that millions of children in science classes were learning to mistrust the Bible. Darwinism, more as philosophy than biology, threatened to destroy the moral certainties on which he'd built his career.

So was Bryan a premature New Dealer? Yes and no. His presidential campaigns certainly rehearsed the themes and some of the programs that liberals would campaign and win on from Wilson to FDR to LBJ. "The power of the government to protect the people is as complete in time of peace as in time of war," he declared in 1922. "The only question to be decided is whether it is necessary to exercise that power." Yet, as John Reed's mocking 1916 portrait illustrates, Bryan neither sympathized with nor understood the appeal of the cultural modernism that is the birthright of liberal intellectuals. Nearly all his leading supporters (including his activist children) became strong backers of the New Deal. But I suspect that it would have been dif-

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ficult for the old man to stomach the repeal of prohibition and the ubiquity of Catholics and Jews in the leadership of his party. Bryan was a creature of what Robert Handy called the Protestant century—its messianic certainties as well as its ethnic prejudices. The prospect that it was passing alarmed him to the core. Perhaps that is why the Bryan depicted in *Inherit the Wind* still overwhelms the Bryan that Levine, Paolo Coletta, Robert Cherny, LeRoy Ashby, Elizabeth Sanders, and I have struggled to portray.[3]

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I did not write *A Godly Hero* primarily because I wanted to help revive a liberal coalition of evangelicals and secularists. I doubt any book, even one by Barack Obama, could do much to accomplish that feat; a biography of a long deceased, much ridiculed politician doesn't stand a chance. What led me to study Bryan is the same thing that often leads biographers to choose their subjects: intellectual curiosity stirred by a prior interest—populism and popular religiosity, in my case—and the discovery of a cache of documents I had not previously encountered: letters to Bryan from adoring followers from all over the nation.

But I do admit that this biography, like almost every book and lengthy essay I have written, has a political subtext. My first article to make its way into a national publication, forty years ago, was about the history of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The piece was published the same month that, as a co-chair of SDS, I helped to shut down my university in a strike against a variety of social sins—from allowing the ROTC on campus to balking at establishment of a Black Studies program. Although I long ago migrated rightward to the more sober precincts of the Democratic left, I still tend to heed the call of "relevance" when I decide to spend months or years on a project.

Is this unusual? Richard Fox writes, "Professional historians have learned to be leery" of history written with such a motivation. I seldom disagree with anything Fox writes, but I wonder about that statement. Wasn't Charles Beard implicitly advocating an anticorporate progressivism when he wrote *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (1913) and collaborated with Mary Beard on *The Rise of American Civilization* (1927)? From *The American Political Tradition* (1948) to his essays on "The Paranoid Style" and "Pseudo-Conservatism,"[4] Richard Hofstadter left no doubt about the type of con-

[3]Lawrence Levine, *Defender of the Faith: William Jennings Bryan; The Last Decade, 1915-1925* (New York, 1965); Paolo Coletta, *William Jennings Bryan*, 3 vols. (Lincoln, NE, 1964-69); Robert Cherny, *A Righteous Cause: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (Boston, 1985); LeRoy Ashby, *William Jennings Bryan: Champion of Democracy* (Boston, 1987), Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago, 1999).

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temporary politics he favored, although his preferences shifted rightward over time. Similarly, William Appleman Williams's unabashedly anti-interventionist, quasi-Marxist scholarship rocked the field of diplomatic history.

Since the 1960s, such advocacy has become commonplace. Most labor, women's, black, Latino, and gay and lesbian historians gladly acknowledge that they are inspired by the deeds of activists in the past and hope that their work furthers the same causes in the present and future. Among the nineteen presidents of the OAH since 1990, at least thirteen sprang from and wrote out of a commitment to one or more of those social movements.[5] Whether one applauds or condemns our discipline's leftward tilt, it has shaped four decades of scholarship and is unlikely to change anytime soon.

Given the politics of the profession, it may have been somewhat perverse to write an empathetic biography of Bryan. The first review it received in a national periodical spanked me for trying to whitewash such a racist fool, although other critics on the left were more favorable. But I am pleased that both Fox and Creech recognize my ambivalence toward what Bryan believed and accomplished. His life-work enthralled and instructed me; I did not find it inspiring.

[4]Collected in Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1965).

[5]In chronological order, the list of thirteen includes Mary Frances Berry, Lawrence W. Levine, Eric Foner, Gary B. Nash, Linda K. Kerber, William H. Chafe, David Montgomery, Darlene Clark Hine, Ira Berlin, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, James O. Horton, Vicki Ruiz, and Nell Irvin Painter.

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