A Golden Divide

How one speech reshaped the election of 1896

USH.C.2.3.B "Explain the impact of William Jennings Bryan and his Cross of Gold message on the political landscape."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Circle the words that summarize Bryan's message. Then number three different political effects of that message so you can trace its impact on the election.

The Speech That Divided an Election

1 In 1896, a dispute over money split the United States. The government maintained gold as the basis for the dollar, and many people argued that a limited money supply made debts harder to repay. Farmers who borrowed to buy land and equipment often faced falling crop prices. Supporters of free silver wanted the government to coin silver freely at a ratio of sixteen ounces of silver to one ounce of gold. They hoped more money would raise prices and ease debt. Many bankers and other creditors favored gold because they feared that cheaper dollars would weaken the value of loans they were owed.

2 At the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, William Jennings Bryan argued that the gold standard hurt working people. His speech ended by warning delegates not to "crucify mankind upon a cross of gold." The vivid image cast the currency fight as a struggle between ordinary workers and powerful financial interests. Delegates cheered, and the thirty-six-year-old Bryan soon won the party's presidential nomination. His call for free silver gave Democrats a powerful campaign message and drew support from many farmers and miners. It also drove some gold-supporting Democrats away from their party's nominee; a group of them formed the National Democratic Party and nominated another candidate.

3 The Populist Party, which had long called for changes to help farmers, also nominated Bryan, although it chose a different vice presidential candidate. That decision linked a smaller reform party to a major-party campaign but cost Populists some independent identity. Bryan traveled widely to deliver speeches, turning his message into a national campaign. Republican William McKinley defended the gold standard and won the election, with strong support in the industrial Northeast. Bryan carried many states in the South and West but not enough to win. His defeat showed the limits of his coalition, while his campaign made economic power and currency policy central political arguments.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How did Bryan's Cross of Gold speech affect his standing at the Democratic convention and the party's campaign?

2. How did Bryan's message draw some people toward the Democrats while pushing others away?

3. How did the Populist Party's decision to nominate Bryan change its place in the election?

4. What did the election result show about the limits of Bryan's support, and what political impact did his campaign still have?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a 70- to 100-word newspaper editor's note aimed at either a farmer with debt or a merchant who favors gold. Use two details from the passage to explain how Bryan's message might affect that reader's political choice, then clearly label one prediction about a party alliance or campaign strategy.

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PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Circle the words that summarize Bryan's message. Then number three different political effects of that message so you can trace its impact on the election. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How did Bryan's Cross of Gold speech affect his standing at the Democratic convention and the party's campaign?	**Delegates cheered Bryan, and he soon won the nomination. His free-silver message became a powerful part of the Democratic campaign.**
2	How did Bryan's message draw some people toward the Democrats while pushing others away?	**His free-silver message attracted many farmers and miners. Some gold-supporting Democrats rejected his nomination and formed a separate party.**
3	How did the Populist Party's decision to nominate Bryan change its place in the election?	**It linked the Populists to a major-party campaign, but the party lost some independent identity.**
4	What did the election result show about the limits of Bryan's support, and what political impact did his campaign still have?	**Bryan won many states in the South and West but lost the election to McKinley. His campaign made economic power and currency policy central political arguments.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

If you are a farmer struggling to repay a loan, Bryan's warning about a "cross of gold" may speak to you. He argues that the gold standard hurts working people, and his free-silver plan aims to raise prices and ease debts. You might therefore support him instead of a candidate who defends gold. The Populists have also nominated Bryan, so his campaign now joins voters from two parties. Prediction: This alliance will spread his message, though it may make the Populists less independent.

Accept notes addressed to either type of reader if they accurately connect at least two passage details to a possible political choice. The prediction must be identified as a prediction, not presented as a fact from the passage.