# Populism

"Gilded Age" politics were characterized by alotof corruption. To be fair, presidents like **Rutherford B. Hayes, James A Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, Chester A. Arthur, and Grover Cleveland**weren't all that corruptthemselves.They were, however, weak. They allowed themselves to be bossed around by the Rich Guys and the Industrial Giants. After all, the Supreme Court had ruled that they couldn't regulate big business, since it had protections under the 14th Amendment. What could they do?

The political spectrum was wide open for some enterprising gents to take the reins and try to drive the country in a different direction. Interestingly enough, the first group to have this kind of gumption were farmers.

Farmers weren't all that happy with the economic situation of the Gilded Age. All the surplus of the period meant that prices had dropped, and lower prices meant they couldn't pay their debts. Their real problem was that there wasn't enough money in circulation to pay off their debts in the first place. They pushed for a change to **silver currency,**which would put a whole batch of new money into circulation so that they could pay off debts more easily and,by causing inflation, make those debts less.

Obviously, the wealthy bankers didn't like this idea very much. However, determined farmers were adamant, so they started organizing themselves: first in the **Grange Movement,**then in the **Farmer's Alliances,**and finally in the **People's Party.**They called themselves **Populists.**

In 1892, the Populists put form their **Omaha Platform**that explained all of their goals. What they were sick of were the "middle men" like bankers and railroad tycoons who skimmed huge profits off of the economy but didn't actually produce anything. Farmers didn't think it was fair that they lost so much money simply trying to store, transport, and market their goods. They wanted to governmentto step in and help them make it easier to move goods from themselves (the producers) to consumers (all those people in grocery stores who just wanted some nice potatoes).

They pushed for government ownership of transportation and communication networks (like railroads and telegraphs). Their idea was that these could be federally operated in the same way the postal system was. Plus, they wanted a graduated income tax, direct election of US senators, the coinage of silver, and shorter workdays.

The Populists were so, soclose to winning a national election. Their ideas sounded good to a lot of people, including urban workers. More economic crises in the 1890s made people think that many of their ideas, like silver coinage, were great.

Their candidate, **William Jennings Bryan,**campaigned for "free silver," feeling his cause was such a righteous crusade that he made a speech—the famous "**Cross of Gold" Speech**—denouncing the gold standard. "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns," he cried, stretching out his arms like Christ. "You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

Populists lovedit. Other people thought the man was absolutely loopy. Sadly, Bryan lost—and as the economy improved, the Populists lost support. It only soundslike a sad story, though. The uplifting message is that many of the Populists' ideas would be realized by the Progressive Party only a few decades later. Not only that—today, we even have a "New" Populist Party.

## Sample Questions

1. "Horizontal integration" of a company

A) occurs when one company purchases its competitors  
B) is characterized by the purchasing of all the industries involved in production  
C) occurs when one company is the sole provider of a product  
D) results in a monopoly  
E) is characterized by a cartel that fixes production and marketing practices

The correct answer is (A).

Think of it this way: In "vertical integration," a company reaches its tentacles all the way up from a final product to all the industries that go into its creation. In "horizontal integration," a company's tentacles stretch acrossto absorb competing companies that are exactly like it. A company that owns the graphite, wood, and yellow-paint industries that make pencils is vertically integrated, while one that owns several pencil-making companies is horizontally integrated. Cartels and monopolies spring from both—as seen in the Gilded Age.

2. The Pinkerton police are an example of

A) the willingness of the federal government to protect strikers  
B) the nation's general distrust of the labor movement  
C) the federal government's willingness to use force to break strikes  
D) the independent, uncontested power of employers  
E) the organization and power of labor movements

The correct answer is (D).

Here's a crazy thing about the Pinkertons (besides the obvious, that their name sounds more like a lady's lingerie store than a private army): at one time, there were more Pinkteron agents than troops in the U.S. Army. That's because employers had so much power and money that they were able to hire private armies of their own to shut strikes down. The federal government didn't do a single thing to stop it.