## Bryan’s “Cross of Gold” Speech: Mesmerizing the Masses

**Background Information:** One of the most famous speeches in American political history was delivered by William Jennings Bryan on July 9, 1896, at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The issue was whether to endorse “free silver”, which would have increased the amount of money in circulation. More money would have led to an increase in prices – inflation. Farmers could expect to receive higher prices for their crops, and this would have made it easier for them to pay off the debts they owed.

After speeches on free silver by several U.S. Senators, Bryan rose to speak. The thirty-six-year-old former Congressman from Nebraska hoped to be the Democratic nominee for president, and he had been skillfully, but quietly, building support for himself among the delegates. His dramatic speaking style and rhetoric roused the crowd to a frenzy. The response, wrote one reporter, “came like one great burst of artillery.” Men and women screamed and waved their hats and canes. “Some,” wrote another reporter, “like demented things, divested themselves of their coats and flung them high in the air.” The next day the convention nominated Bryan for President.

Although Bryan succeeded in becoming the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate and representative of America’s farmers, he eventually lost the election to the Republican presidential candidate William [McKinley](http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/mckinley.html). McKinley won 271 electoral votes to [Bryan](http://projects.vassar.edu/1896/bryan.html)'s 176. The popular vote was much closer: 7,102,246 to 6,492,559. Interestingly, McKinley won just 1 more state than Bryan (23-22) – however, the states McKinley won had bigger cities and larger populations, and thus provided more electoral votes.

**Excerpts from the Speech & Reading Comprehension Questions**

Never before in the history of this country has there been witnessed such a contest as that through which we have passed. Never before in the history of American politics has a great issue been fought out as this issue has been by the voters themselves. On the 4th of March, 1895, a few Democrats, most of them members of Congress, issued an address to the Democrats of the nation asserting that the money question was the paramount issue of the hour.

1. **What is the “money question”?**

We stand here representing people who are the equals before the law of the largest cities in the state of Massachusetts. When you come before us and tell us that we shall disturb your business interests, we reply that you have disturbed our business interests by your action. We say to you that you have made too limited in its application the definition of a businessman. The man who is employed for wages is as much a businessman as his employer. The attorney in a country town is as much a businessman as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis. The merchant at the crossroads store is as much a businessman as the merchant of New York. The farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day, begins in the spring and toils all summer, and by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of this country creates wealth, is as much a businessman as the man who goes upon the Board of Trade and bets upon the price of grain. The miners who go 1,000 feet into the earth or climb 2,000 feet upon the cliffs and bring forth from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured in the channels of trade are as much businessmen as the few financial magnates who in a backroom corner the money of the world.

1. **Does Bryan like businessmen? Why/why not?**

We come to speak for this broader class of businessmen. Ah. my friends, we say not one word against those who live upon the Atlantic Coast; but those hardy pioneers who braved all the dangers of the wilderness, who have made the desert to blossom as the rose—those pioneers away out there, rearing their children near to nature’s heart, where they can mingle their voices with the voices of the birds—out there where they have erected schoolhouses for the education of their children and churches where they praise their Creator, and the cemeteries where sleep the ashes of their dead—are as deserving of the consideration of this party as any people in this country.

1. **What group does Bryan believe are “as deserving of the consideration of this party as any people in this country”?**

We beg no longer; we entreat no more; we petition no more. We defy them! What we need is an Andrew Jackson to stand as Jackson stood, against the encroachments of aggregated wealth.

1. **Why does Bryan bring up Andrew Jackson? What does he suggest Andrew Jackson stood for?**

My friends, it is simply a question that we shall decide upon which side shall the Democratic Party fight. Upon the side of the idle holders of idle capital, or upon the side of the struggling masses? That is the question that the party must answer first; and then it must be answered by each individual hereafter. The sympathies of the Democratic Party, as described by the platform, are on the side of the struggling masses, who have ever been the foundation of the Democratic Party.

There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that if you just legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, that their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea has been that if you legislate to make the masses prosperous their prosperity will find its way up and through every class that rests upon it.

1. **Here Bryan argues that there are two classes of people? What are those classes? (Bonus Question: What famous non-American thinker -- who you studied with Ms. Bowman in 9th grade -- does Bryan’s language remind you of?)**

It is the issue of 1776 over again. Our ancestors, when but 3 million, had the courage to declare their political independence of every other nation upon earth. Shall we, their descendants, when we have grown to 70 million, declare that we are less independent than our forefathers? No, my friends, it will never be the judgment of this people. Therefore, we care not upon what lines the battle is fought. If they say bimetallism is good but we cannot have it till some nation helps us, we reply that, instead of having a gold standard because England has, we shall restore bimetallism, and then let England have bimetallism because the United States have.

1. **What happened in 1776? Why does Bryan bring this up?**

If they dare to come out in the open field and defend the gold standard as a good thing, we shall fight them to the uttermost, having behind us the producing masses of the nation and the world. Having behind us the commercial interests and the laboring interests and all the toiling masses, we shall answer their demands for a gold standard by saying to them, you shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns. You shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold.

1. **Why does Bryan use the word “crucify”? What famous image does the last sentence of this speech invoke?**