

Document B: William Jennings Bryan, 1896 (Modified)

The merchant at the corner store is as much a businessman as the merchant of New York. The farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day...is as much a businessman as the man who [works on Wall Street].

We come to speak for this broader class of businessmen....It is for these that we speak. We are fighting in the defense of our homes and our families. We have petitioned, and our petitions have been scorned. We have entreated, and our entreaties have been disregarded. We have begged, and they have mocked us.

We beg no longer; we entreat no more; we petition no more. We defy them!

You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard. I tell you that the great cities rest upon these broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in this country.

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.

Source: The speech above was delivered by William Jennings Bryan at the Democratic National Convention in July 1896. It is considered one of the most famous speeches in American history. The passage is an excerpt.

William Jennings Bryan's "Cross of Gold" Speech

Questions

1. Where is Bryan speaking? What is his purpose?
2. Based on the speech, how do you think farmers and workers were feeling about business and industry? Find a quote to support your answer.
3. What is the main point of his speech?
4. What makes this speech so powerful? Pick the line that you think is most powerful and explain your choice.
5. Why do you think Bryan was a popular speaker in the 1890s?
6. What images and rhetorical devices did he use to excite this audience?
7. How did the audience feel when they listened to this speech?
8. Do these themes resonate today? Which parts of this speech could we expect to hear from today's politicians? Which parts seem outdated?