

# **American Condescension and the Fate of the Ultimate Populist**



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Unable to afford to print newspapers, transport delegates, rent large halls, or even keep their leaders in the same place for any appreciable length of time, the populists of the rural underclass had one ~~oratory~~ ~~oratory~~. A solo speaker, living in a Spartan manner, could travel from community to community, and address motivated crowds. The interchange unlike the newspaper was authoritarian, was democratic. The populist orator had to in some ways reflect the interests of congregations ~~held to~~ ~~held to~~. The Populist ~~appeal~~ ~~appeal~~ was the most democratic appeal. Unlike large conventions, ~~elite~~ ~~elite~~ get-togethers, common people could ask questions, boo, applaud, stamp their feet, or cheer. When Abraham Lincoln spoke of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," we can imagine how he too experienced this essential taste of democracy, during his ~~deleaves~~ ~~deleaves~~ and small appearances. Though it was true that the populist orator also had to be part entertainer, without the lighter aspects h



in Franklin County even before he got his law degree. A tribute to his talent, Davis was the youngest county judge in his area.

Like Tom Watson, the great Georgia populist, Davis began as a Democrat. Davis campaigned for John Ireland, who was elected a Texas Democratic governor in 1882. However, at a time when Weaver was still a Greenbacker, and Bryan and Watson still Democrats, Davis switched as early as 1884, becoming a lecturer for the Farmer's Alliance. In the early days, Davis was nicknamed "Methodist Jim" although he was a member of the Disciples of Christ. This was because his oratory was so emotionally stirring and fervent. He was a political Evangelist funded by the Alliance, who carried volumes of works by Thomas Jefferson wherever he went. Davis was less apt than either Weaver or Bryan to support fusion campaigns where populists would merge with other campaigns. He did campaign for Texas Governor, Jim Hogg, because the Farmer's Alliance endorsed Hogg. Nevertheless, Davis became a fervent attacker of the Democrats, especially when President Grover Cleveland turned his back on inflationary policies.

Though Weaver and Watson were renowned as populist speakers, there was only one other populist who received such rave reviews as did Davis: William Jennings Bryan. As suggested by Bryan's nickname "Baby Demosthenes," and the "Boy Orator of the Platte," Bryan was renowned more for a studied speechmaking. Bryan had more money than Davis. He was funded by the Populist Party in

Nebraska included wealthier urban elements. Bryan, in fact, lived in Lincoln, and was a dominant figure in the newspapers. Davis, by contrast, was the fireball, and the true people's orator. "Methodist Jim" suggested a closeness to the common people. The name "Cyclone," also connoted Davis's amazing impact on the people he lectured. He acquired this nickname in a debate with General Watt Hardin in the state Capital

mesmerized for hours. Also, we note a Victorian dualism. Davis appealed to Christians of different denominations against reprobates and fools

Weaver from Iowa, and Bryan from Nebraska, came from a region that was more in favor of inflation, and even working class issues, than indirect "share wealth" attacks against the rich, and complaints about privation or destitution. Davis was a more essential representative of the rural underclass. He was very anti-corporate. Rich people became an abomination to him. Davis, like many rural tenants and small farmers like his father had a festering suspicion of the



Davis would not allow the audience to forget the tie between evil greed and the wealthy, nor the rising danger to the republic posed by this snowballing avarice. Then he would exclaim at the top of his voice as he spoke these exuberant words: "Why did we cede the power of coin money to the federal government?"

Davis was ready for a climax, to reinforce basic truths, to sear into people's memories that it was time for action:

"The greedy gang. Did the sovereign states expect these pillagers?"

"They are bonding the people." "Their money is hoarded!" "Why can't the states get money the way the banks do?"

"Why do the money marauders of Wall street..." need even more money?"

"What if everyone could get money on bonds?"

This would refer to Wall Street. Davis would bombard his audience with worthy thought-provoking questions to get the minds of his audience all flowing in the same direction. Often the response was that of an uproar, in agreement with Davis's probing. In all of this, people gasped over the encroaching danger, and his call for courage. Davis was not afraid to speak his mind.

Successfully the name of Populism was established through the talented orator of "Cyclone" Davis. Populism could only get to the people through oratory, due to its financial disadvantage and could not afford doing so through newspaper or whisper.

campaigns like the other parties did. Davis had also come from the true base of Populism, Northeast Texas, where people could vote for him.

Texas was the birthplace of 1890s populism. But questions why Northeast Texas remained the base of Populism and not Lampasas or the Hill Country as Goodwyn concluded in his book, *A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*



jamboree of vulgar song and dance. Then he says it has descend into HELL.<sup>14</sup>

American Condescension is a cluster of attitudes that is more sensitive to ethnic name-calling, than to derision based on class. Davis has been forgotten and attacked because he was mixed up with the Ku Klux Klan. Davis agreed with what the people of North Texas believed in, therefore making his tie to his base stronger. The Klan was very much for prohibition, and reflected the attitudes of the people in his base. Davis was a democratic orator in this section, and has been shunned. But 'class' is the issue, why worry so much about ethnic stereotyping? It is clear that Davis has been investigated because he tolerated ethnic bigotry, while trying to stop economic bigotry toward the poor. American Condescension usually treats economic condescension as trivial, but focuses instead on ethnic stereotyping<sup>15</sup> as a major sin.

Davis had to entertain rural audiences for long periods of time. He is disdained today for what he said. But again, he reflected his people, he was not a "machista:" his ambivalence of women was also made known throughout his speeches. Davis saw how women have over men when he would say, "she makes him her hero and makes him her clown." In Davis's memoir, he had imprinted "The New Woman or Girl of Today" by Belle Barton Davis. In this essay, Belle, who wrote when she was at Trinity University, in Temple Texas in January 1896, discussed

women's rights. She wrote from a Biblical perspective. She claimed that God had established



he approaches peace by relating his work to a special epoch of human history: "When

boots, and a sombrero and find his enemies snickering. Davis was aware of the attitude that "if you are not printed you are not important." Because books and newspapers were expensive, Davis was belittled for being poor.

As many enemies as Davis had, he also had admirers who believed in what he did, like the group of friends from Titus County. Davis being the Quintessential Populist had a disciple by the name was Wright Patman. Davis left his legacy by handing the baton to Wright Patman. Patman was from Hugh Springs in, Cass County a few miles southeast of Titus County. Patman campaigned against chain stores, tight credit, hard money, and anything that would cause the destitution. He too suspected the rich, Wall Street, and, in a new twist, the Federal Reserve which he felt discriminated against the poor. Patman remained a Congressman from Northeast Texas, fighting for these principles until the 1970s. He used his power in the House of Representatives to launch the first inquiry into the money trail that led to President Nixon's Watergate scandal. Davis was important for Populism because of his legacy. Bryan, Weaver and Watson lacked such a legacy.

Davis had a complicated relationship with the man most people associate with Populism, William J. Bryan. Davis wrote about Bryan, a Populist democratic fusionist who was a Presidential candidate in 1896 in his memoir to show his admiration. Even though many extreme Texans hated Bryan because he had mixed the Populism with Populism, Davis admired him for his contributions to the people.



Davis was downgraded and belittled because of American Condescension, a cultural pattern that belittles the impoverished. This became his enemy, wiping out the memory of his attainments after his death. That reason Davis had gone down in history as simply another radical Jeffersonian, a flamboyant man who cynically played his living out of Populism. This criticism misses the fact that democracy depended most on oratory rather than print journalism. Davis had a great address system that fell in with the people, a harmony with the people he served, and a will to protect them. Ultimate Populist, more than any of the other more nationally known populists, also had a geographic base of people who supported him, and a legacy that lasted to the twentieth century.

## Figure 1: Presidential Election of 1892

Key:

- 6,000 or more Populist voters
- 2,000 to 5,000 Populist voters
- 1,000 to 1,999 Populist voters

Source: Mike Kingston et. al. Political History of Texas: (Austin: Eakin Press, 1992), 66-60, 76

## Figure 2: 1898 Gubernatorial Election

6,000 or more Populist voters  
2,000 to 5,000 Populist voters  
1,000 to 1,999 Populist voters

Source: Mike Kingston ePolitical History of Texas:



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<sup>12</sup> James L. Ranchino, *The Work And Thought Of A Jeffersonian In The Populist Movement*, James Harvey "Cyclone" Davis (Faculty of the Graduate School of Texas Christian University, 1964), 89-92.

<sup>13</sup> Davis, *Memoir*, 241,244.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 244, 256.

<sup>15</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn *The Populist Moment* (New York;Oxford,1978),

<sup>16</sup> Ranchino, *The Work And Thought Of A Jeffersonian*, 89-92.

<sup>17</sup> Davis, *Memoir*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

<sup>19</sup> Goodwyn *Populist Moment*, 324-325; Davis, *Memoir*, 239.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 137, 144.

<sup>25</sup> Ranchino, *The Work and Thought of a Jeffersonian*, 150-54; *Handbook of Texas Online*, Worth Robert Miller, "Davis, James Harvey [Cyclone]," accessed April 02, 2016, <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fda41>. [Accessed February 23, 2016].

<sup>26</sup> A measure of how Cyclone Davis has been forgotten is how he goes unmentioned in a recent biography of William Jennings Bryan: Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Knopf, 2006).