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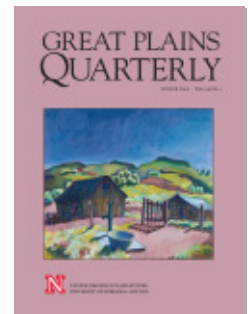
A Populist Approach to Foreign Policy: Governor William A.  
Poynter, the South African War, and the Indian Famine,  
1899–1901

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# A Populist Approach to Foreign Policy

Governor William A. Poynter, the South African War,  
and the Indian Famine, 1899–1901

DAVID LEE AMSTUTZ

A three-party political system developed in the United States during the 1890s. The Populist Party, which organized in 1892, competed with the Republicans and the Democrats in all levels of government. Although they did not succeed in capturing the White House, the Populists elected members to both houses of Congress as well as to governorships in western and southern states. The Populist Party was short-lived, quickly fading after 1900. It sometimes used a “fusion” strategy in which candidates were nominated by both the Populists and one of the other parties, usually the Democrats. During its existence, however, the Populist Party offered voters additional choices in selecting a path for the United States to follow.

Historians often describe the Populist Party

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as a revolt and a protest, but it functioned as a national party.<sup>1</sup> The Populists emerged from the Farmers' Alliance in the early 1890s, when dissatisfied members began making plans for a new party. Representing western agrarian interests and drawing inspiration from minor entities such as the Greenback Party of the 1870s, reform groups met in St. Louis to found the new party in 1891. The Populists held their first national nominating convention in Omaha on July 4, 1892. They selected James B. Weaver as their presidential candidate and drafted an official set of principles.<sup>2</sup>

The Omaha Platform, as the Populist agenda was known, identified three main concerns—finance, transportation, and land. The Populists intended to put more money in the hands of the common people. To further this end, they proposed unrestricted coinage of silver and gold at a ratio of 16:1, an increase in circulating money to at least fifty dollars per capita, a graduated income tax, and limits on state and federal taxation. To meet transportation needs, the Omaha Platform called for public ownership of the railroads, as well as



Fig. 1. William V. Allen, 1898. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2411-0084b.

the telephone and telegraph companies. Also, the government was to reclaim all lands owned by railroads and corporations not essential to their operation and open the land to settlers.<sup>3</sup>

As the Populists worked toward their domestic goals, the Spanish-American War of 1898 called attention to international matters. The United States defeated a European power and assumed control of Cuba, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam. These acquisitions signaled a change in foreign policy because the United States was expanding beyond North America.<sup>4</sup> People who celebrated this new growth compared it to westward expansion in the nineteenth century, while critics denounced it for a variety of reasons. The Anti-Imperialist League, which formed in November 1898, argued that a colonial empire was not in the best interest of the United States.<sup>5</sup> Leaders of the league feared that the military and administrative structures needed to control the Philippines would threaten

American liberty, as well as handicap the country with exorbitant costs.<sup>6</sup> These concerns became more pronounced when hostilities broke out between American and Filipino forces on February 4, 1899. Two days before the Senate ratified the Treaty of Paris, which recognized Spain's cessions to America, the United States found itself in a war for empire.<sup>7</sup>

The Populists adopted an active foreign policy in response. Although strongly opposed to empirical rule, or imperialism, Populists believed the United States should intervene in world affairs to promote republican governments. This outlook had a twofold objective. The Populists accepted the idea of self-determination of nations, and they also thought fostering democracy would safeguard American security. Clearly, the Populists did not desire isolationism, with the term being defined as the belief that the United States should avoid involvement in international matters.<sup>8</sup> Although their policies differed from

those of President William McKinley and others who favored an American empire, the Populists envisioned an equally active role for the United States in world affairs.

In 1898 six Populists held seats in the U.S. Senate, and twenty-six held seats in the House of Representatives. William V. Allen, a senator from Nebraska, took a firm stance on foreign relations. His views matched those of William Jennings Bryan, the former Nebraska congressman whom both Democrats and Populists had nominated for the presidency in 1896.<sup>9</sup> Allen and Bryan became two of the most vocal advocates of Populist foreign policy. Governor William A. Poynter, a Populist whom Nebraskans elected on a fusion ticket with the Democrats in 1898, forged close ties to Allen and Bryan.<sup>10</sup>

The three men formed something of a Populist triumvirate in Nebraska. When Republican senator Monroe Leland Hayward died on December 5, 1899, responsibility for appointing a successor fell to Poynter. Bryan recommended Allen, whose term in the Senate had expired the previous spring. Bryan's request angered Democratic hopefuls William Thompson and Gilbert Hitchcock, and yet Poynter gave the position to Allen.<sup>11</sup> The governor cooperated with Allen and Bryan on international matters. Poynter rejected the idea of imperialism, but he conducted international diplomacy and facilitated grassroots support for causes overseas. As a state executive, Poynter encouraged Americans to involve themselves in world affairs.

### An Anti-Imperialist Approach

Senator Allen and William Jennings Bryan both supported the Spanish-American War. The conflict resulted from Cuba's struggle for



Fig. 2. William A. Poynter, ca. 1897. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2413-01.

independence. A Cuban insurrection against Spanish rule began in 1895, and sympathizers began sending supplies to the revolutionaries. Spain expected the United States to control its ports and curtail the activities of pro-Cuban groups within its borders. President McKinley tried to handle the situation diplomatically, but relations between Spain and the United States deteriorated. After the explosion of the United States battleship *Maine* in Havana's harbor and grisly accounts of cruelties inflicted on Cuban civilians, McKinley asked Congress for a declaration of war against Spain on April 11, 1898.<sup>12</sup> Allen, whose affinities had rested with the Cuban dissidents since the revolt began, applauded the president's request.<sup>13</sup> Bryan withheld his approval until war seemed

inevitable. Agitating for Cuban freedom but cautioning that military force should only be used for just ends, the former presidential candidate organized the Third Nebraska Volunteer Infantry to serve in the conflict. The Teller Amendment, which promised that the United States had no territorial ambitions in Cuba, reassured Bryan of the war's righteousness.<sup>14</sup>

Allen viewed the war as humanitarian intervention—the use of military power to stop injustice and protect human rights. Given that at least one hundred thousand Cubans died as a result of Spanish policies, this perception is understandable.<sup>15</sup> On March 31, 1898, in a speech called “Cuba Must Be Free,” Allen described the United States as an “elder brother” to the island nation, saying that Americans needed to act as “guardians of liberty on this continent.” Deserting Cuba would be “a cowardice the people of the United States and the men of other generations would not palliate or excuse.” The senator launched into a tirade against imperialism. He stressed the importance of Cuba in a global context, saying the United States had to “convince the world that we believe the time has come at last when every foot of American soil occupied by the hideous monarchy of Spain should be wrested from her and be henceforth dedicated to the cause of human freedom.”<sup>16</sup>

Allen's outlook reflected a new interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine. President James Monroe's 1823 doctrine had closed the Americas to further European colonization, but the United States did not have enough power to enforce it. Rather, the young nation trusted that Great Britain would block future attempts to claim more holdings in the new world. Nonetheless, the proclamation delineated European and American spheres of influence

and warned Europe not to interfere with any newly formed republics. Further, it promised that the United States would stay out of previously established colonies.<sup>17</sup> But in 1898 Allen advocated the invasion of a European sphere to roll back empirical rule. The senator certainly planned for Cuba to become an American sphere of influence, but he wanted a “soft sphere” that would permit self-rule. “Hard spheres” based on imperialism ran contrary to Allen's way of thinking.<sup>18</sup>

Shortly after the war began, Bryan began to worry about American designs on Spanish territory. The Nebraskan criticized the U.S. Navy's victory over the Spanish fleet in Manila Bay. Taking control of the harbor appeared to set the stage for a land grab in the Philippines, something that would have defeated Bryan's purpose in supporting the war. Bryan's willingness to command the Third Nebraska Volunteers showed as much courage as Theodore Roosevelt's founding of the Rough Riders, and the only reason the Nebraskan did not distinguish himself in the war is that McKinley, as commander in chief, stationed Bryan's regiment in Florida. Bryan never wavered on his view of what America's policies should be, however. Like Allen, Bryan sought to replace European (imperial) spheres of influence with American (republican) ones.<sup>19</sup>

Bryan returned to political life as soon as he received his discharge from the army. In December 1898 the Nebraskan traveled to Washington DC, encouraging the Senate to ratify the Treaty of Paris, which the United States had negotiated with Spain. Bryan believed that officially ending the war would allow McKinley to withdraw troops from the new territories. Then the United States could grant independence to the Philippines. The Senate





Fig. 3. W. V. Allen and his supporters, 1899. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2877-788.

passed the treaty with a vote of 57 to 27, only one more than the required two-thirds majority. Bryan's position frustrated anti-imperial Democrats and members of the newly formed Anti-Imperialist League. These groups wanted to block the McKinley administration in any way possible, and approving the treaty seemed like a concession to imperialism.<sup>20</sup>

Bryan's endorsement of the treaty may have been a political blunder in that it hampered him in unifying anti-imperialist forces, but it was completely consistent with his beliefs. The Nebraskan advocated an active role for the United States in world affairs. Bryan recommended keeping fueling stations for American vessels in Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines, and he thought annexation of Puerto Rico might be acceptable under some circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Bryan also wanted the United States to hasten the end of colonialism. Conquering imperial Spain, embracing the treaty that ended the war, and bestowing self-rule on the former colonies fit perfectly with Bryan's ideologies. Senator Allen shared these views. The senator, who had voted for the treaty, proposed a resolution saying the United States had no intention of annexing the Philippines.<sup>22</sup>

Undermining imperialism and promoting American spheres of influence became a two-pronged thrust of the Populist platform. After the outbreak of the Philippine insurrection, two Nebraska Populists derided McKinley's actions in the House of Representatives. William Stark put forth a constitutional argument against forcible annexation. Because the Constitution applies to all states in the Union, the congressman reasoned, any new state would be subject to American taxes. Annexation would amount to taxation without representation. Stark quoted from the Declaration of Independence, saying that "resistance to tyranny

is obedience to God." He concluded: "It is easy to write the word 'relinquished,' as applied to Spanish dominion in Cuba, and 'ceded' in the treaty provisions concerning the islands of the other hemisphere. It is easy to designate forcible annexation as 'criminal aggression' when applied to Cuba, and 'benevolent assimilation' in speaking of the Philippines, but are not the rights of these alien people identical?"<sup>23</sup> Samuel Maxwell maintained that America's purpose in the Philippines had been to drive out the Spanish rather than to make war against the Filipinos. Noting recent problems in the British Empire, the congressman stressed the need for the United States to follow a different course. Maxwell said of Great Britain:

Her rule in India, if reports apparently reliable can be credited, has been that of an absolute tyrant. The people have no voice in the government, and no salaried offices of importance are given to the natives. She rules India with a rod of iron, and while she has made many improvements there calculated to benefit the country, they have been made as investments and not as works of charity and good will to the people. But five years ago the council of state for India in London, without notice, in one day closed India's mints, discredited the money which had been almost exclusively in use from time immemorial, and caused intense suffering, sickness, starvation, and death among the poor.<sup>24</sup>

Bryan echoed these sentiments in his "America's Mission" speech of February 22, 1899. Although he condemned imperialism, Bryan spoke of America's influence on other nations:

Let it be written of the United States: Behold a republic that took up arms to aid a



Fig. 4. William L. Stark. Photograph taken between 1897 and 1903. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2411-5287.

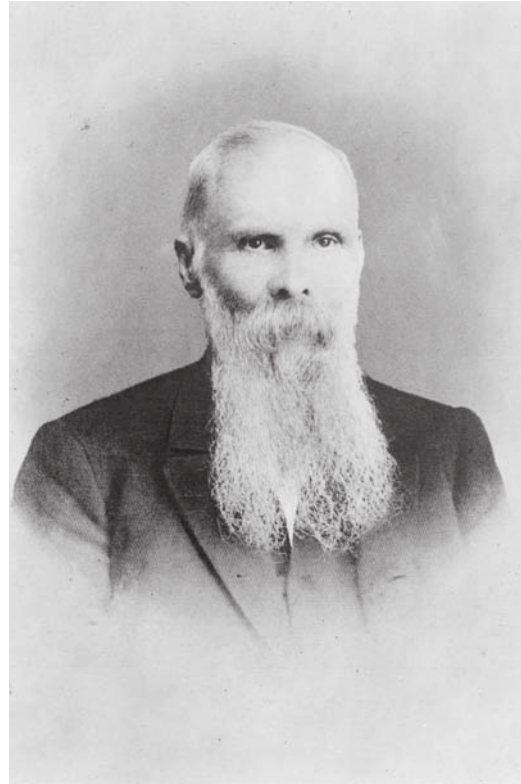


Fig. 5. Samuel Maxwell. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2411-3517.

neighboring people, struggling to be free; . . . [L]et this be the record made on history's page and the silent example of this republic, true to its principles in the hour of trial, will do more to extend the area of self-government and civilization than could be done by all the wars of conquest that we could wage in a generation.<sup>25</sup>

Governor Poynter championed these views. When Nebraska's legislature passed a resolution to honor the First Nebraska Volunteers for their service in the Philippines, the governor vetoed the measure. Poynter acknowledged

the soldiers' bravery but opposed the wording of the resolution, which condoned the war effort. Poynter described the servicemen as victims of a faulty value system that "compelled them to give their services and sacrifice their lives in a conflict at utter variance to the very fundamental principles of our government."<sup>26</sup> Still, Poynter took part in world events. The governor supported a war against empire in South Africa and promoted humanitarian relief efforts when a famine devastated India. These policies stemmed in part from genuine altruism, and yet they tried to extend American prominence around the globe.



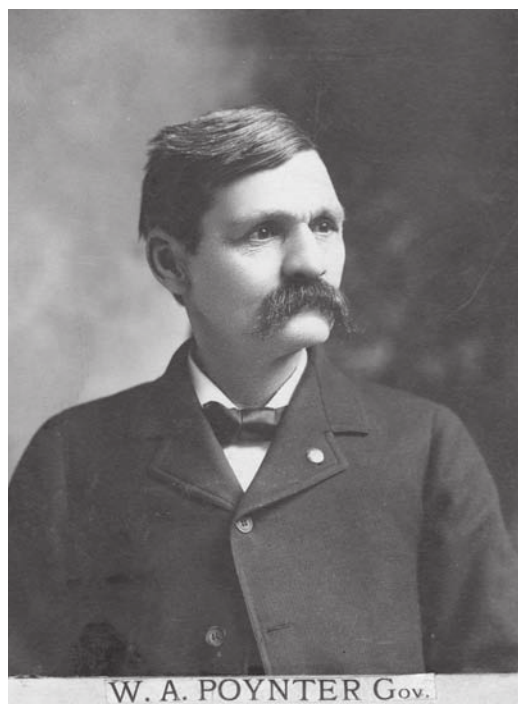


Fig. 6. Governor William A. Poynter. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2413-02.

### War in South Africa

The South African War began in October 1899. This conflict, commonly called the Boer War, occurred because of mounting tensions between Great Britain and two South African territories—the South African Republic and the Orange Free State. Dutch colonists had formed these states in the nineteenth century. The Treaty of London, signed in 1884, defined relations between these territories and the British Empire, allowing the South African Republic to manage its own domestic affairs but requiring British approval for international treaties. Interest in the Dutch states grew with the discovery of diamonds and gold, and a thriving British mining industry developed

in the South African Republic. The Dutch, or Boers, resented the British presence, while the mining interests experienced frustration with the disorganization and inefficiency of the South African Republic's leadership. The Jameson Raid of 1895–96 inflamed the situation. British industrialist Cecil Rhodes financed this venture, which was an attempt to overthrow the government of the South African Republic. The coup proved unsuccessful, but it exacerbated the growing hostilities that led to war four years later.<sup>27</sup>

Officially, the United States remained neutral, but McKinley's administration leaned toward Great Britain. The two nations became increasingly friendly after the settlement of the Venezuela boundary dispute in 1896.<sup>28</sup> Britain, seeking a diplomatic ally against France and Germany, provided intelligence to the United States during the Spanish-American War and also allowed American ships to fuel at British ports in China.<sup>29</sup> U.S. secretary of state John Hay wanted to continue these good relations. Along with Theodore Roosevelt and Alfred Thayer Mahan, Hay believed the best way to nurture American prosperity was to maintain friendship with Britain.<sup>30</sup> London had been the world's leading financial center since the Franco-Prussian War, and the United States depended on British capital to finance railroads and industries in the late 1800s. As America neared great-power status, McKinley's administration stressed a positive relationship with Britain, as well as protective tariffs. The president also came to favor formal adoption of the gold standard. Coinage of silver ceased to be an issue by 1900, largely because new supplies of gold had been discovered. Much of this gold, interestingly enough, came from the South African Republic, also known as the Transvaal.<sup>31</sup>



Fig. 7. William Jennings Bryan. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG3198-17-04.

Despite the administration's position, many Americans supported the Boers. People did so for a variety of reasons—ethnic and cultural ties, mistrust of Britain, identification with the Boers' struggle for independence, and opposition to McKinley and the Republicans. The pro-Boer elements in the United States were diverse. They included private charities, as well as members from all three political parties.<sup>32</sup> The Populists favored the Boers because they struggled against imperialism. Bryan assumed that any republic would guarantee the rights of its citizens and extend glad tidings to the United States. The Nebraskan declared, "The Boers in their struggle to maintain their republic have the sympathy of all the American people except those who have abandoned the doctrine that governments derive their just

powers from the consent of the governed."<sup>33</sup> While this perspective was more idealistic than Secretary of State Hay's, it was no less a call for an American presence in world affairs.

### State and National Efforts

Governor Poynter took up the Boer cause as soon as the war began. Two weeks before the first battle, the governor began communicating with Boer sympathizers in New York City. When asked to serve as the honorary vice president of a pro-Boer meeting, Poynter replied, "I am glad to allow my name used in the furtherance of such a laudable object. Every citizen who loves republican principles and believes in our grand declaration of independence must sympathize with any people struggling for liberty."<sup>34</sup> This statement shows the optimism of Populist ideology. The governor assumed that any group who took up arms against imperialism was automatically virtuous, and he conveniently forgot about the mistreatment of black Africans in Dutch South Africa.<sup>35</sup>

Bryan shared this idealism, believing that the United States should help establish republican governments by providing an example. The former presidential candidate refused to sign a petition asking President McKinley to moderate between the British and the Boers. Noting the ongoing war in the Philippines, Bryan claimed it would be hypocrisy to cooperate with the administration while professing support for the Boers.<sup>36</sup>

John V. L. Pruyn, chair of the American Committee to Aid Red Cross Work in the South African War, wrote to Governor Poynter on November 28, 1899. Based in New York, the committee planned to collect donations that would be channeled into the Red Cross

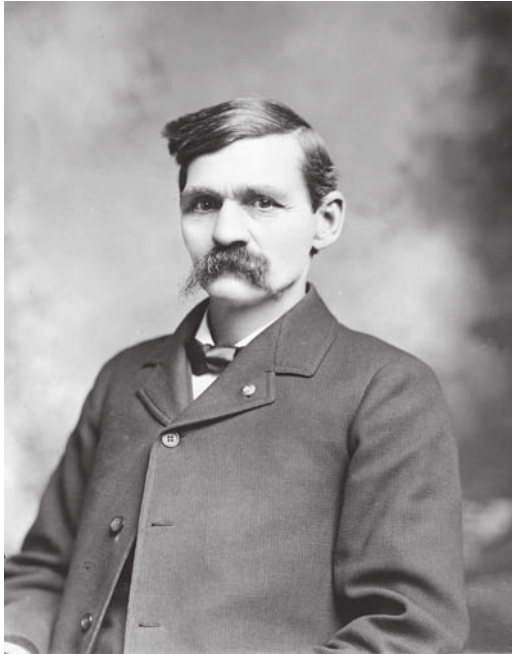


Fig. 8. Governor William A. Poynter. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2413-03.

of the Netherlands and used to provide hospitals and supplies. Pruyn sided with neither the British nor the Boers. Rather, he stressed the need to care for the wounded on both sides: "The British Army, as we are informed, is well equipped with Red Cross facilities, but the Boer forces, we learn, are dependent almost wholly upon volunteer physicians and surgeons—a number so small that both the British and Boer wounded within the Boer lines must necessarily suffer."<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, an attorney named I. J. Dunn invited Poynter to a pro-Boer meeting in Omaha. Dunn asked the governor to preside over the gathering, where guests planned to express "sympathy with the Boers in their struggle for independence and maintenance of their republic."<sup>38</sup>

Senator Allen encouraged Poynter to at-

tend the meeting. Allen compared the Boers' struggle to the American Revolution, saying, "All true Americans having in view liberty for themselves and for their posterity, and desiring to encourage the liberty loving people of the world, can do nothing less than express hearty sympathy with the Boers in this struggle, and with the people of all nations who are aspiring to the liberty we ourselves enjoy." The senator referred to the Monroe Doctrine, describing it as a pledge to avoid alliances with European empires and insisting that the United States had nothing to gain from ties to Great Britain. Despite a bit of isolationist rhetoric, Allen told Poynter that extending "active sympathy to those who are struggling for liberty . . . will do much to republicanize Europe." Allen did not advocate military intervention as he had in the Spanish-American War, but he once again proposed strategies for rolling back imperialism.<sup>39</sup>

At the gathering, which took place on December 11, 1899, Poynter raised the matter of Red Cross relief efforts. The group arranged for the *Omaha World-Herald* to collect donations.<sup>40</sup> Owned by Gilbert Hitchcock, this newspaper expressed a Democratic view rather than a Populist one, but Poynter tried to unite pro-Boer elements in his state.<sup>41</sup> The governor informed Pruyn's committee that the paper was accepting contributions.<sup>42</sup> Poynter referred donors to the *World-Herald*,<sup>43</sup> and he also corresponded with a pro-Boer organization in Chicago, explaining that any questions about contributions in Nebraska should be addressed to the paper. The governor readily joined an international cause. Even though Poynter believed setting an example to be the best way of overturning imperialism, he addressed practical matters in another hemisphere. The governor directed American dol-

lars to another continent, and he cooperated with a European organization to do it.<sup>44</sup>

Yet another group hurried to recruit the Nebraska governor. The National Boer Relief Fund Association (NBRFA) contacted Poynter in February 1900. This group, led by George W. Van Siclen of New York, stressed the importance of caring for those left destitute by the war. He maintained that “unless the public purse strings are untied now, they will be left to starve.” Van Siclen urged Poynter to become a member of the NBRFA’s General Committee. This body included prominent individuals from across the country. Its function was completely honorary, but the NBRFA hoped that endorsements would encourage contributions.<sup>45</sup> Poynter agreed to be a member. Four other governors (three Democrats and one Populist), six United States senators (two Democrats, two Republicans, one Silver Republican, and one Populist), and twenty-seven congressmen (twenty Democrats, five Republicans, one Silver Republican, and one Populist) also served on the committee.<sup>46</sup>

Poynter vigorously denounced Great Britain when he welcomed Maude Gonne to Omaha. A women’s rights crusader and fervent Irish nationalist, Gonne was known as the Irish Joan of Arc. She delivered a public address on March 1, 1900. Gonne lambasted Britain and equated the movement for Irish independence to the Boers’ struggle in South Africa. Rejoicing in the fact that the Boers had scored some military successes, Gonne maintained that the “two little republics” would prevail. Poynter spoke at the event as well. The governor refuted the idea that Britain was a mother country to the United States, saying that “she has never been a kind mother to us and is not deserving of our sympathy.” Ernest Stuht, chairman of Omaha’s Boer Hospital Re-



Fig. 9. Drawing of Miss Maude Gonne. *Omaha World-Herald*, March 2, 1900.

lief Committee, also attended the meeting.<sup>47</sup> Stuht served on Omaha’s city council and changed his party identification from Republican to Populist in January 1900.<sup>48</sup>

### A Diplomatic Governor

George Van Siclen’s NBRFA involved Poynter in international diplomacy. The Boers had explored the possibility of an alliance with the United States, but the idea seemed unlikely because of John Hay’s pro-British leanings. When the South African Republic and the Or-





Fig. 10. The Boer envoys. Front row, left to right: Daniel Wolmarans, Abraham Fischer, and Cornelius H. Wessels. Back row, left to right: W. J. Leyds and H. P. N. Muller. 1900. Image in Wikimedia Commons.

ange Free State dispatched envoys to Europe, however, Van Siclen invited the diplomats to visit America. The Boers accepted the offer, and Van Siclen began planning for the envoys' arrival.<sup>49</sup> The NBRFA leader imagined a nationwide tour in which the Boers would present their cause to the American people. Van Siclen wrote to Poynter, suggesting that the envoys visit Nebraska: "Let us show to them that the sympathy of the American people is on the side of those brave republicans opposed to unjust aggression, and let the whole world as well as our officials, hear and heed the voice of this nation."<sup>50</sup> Van Siclen took a bold stand by initiating discussions between the U.S. government and the Boer envoys.

Poynter proved to be a willing and capable associate. The governor responded to Van Siclen, saying that if the envoys were able to visit his state, he would "be pleased to take the matter up with parties interested and make the necessary arrangements."<sup>51</sup> The Boer diplomats were Daniel Wolmarans of the South African Republic and Abraham Fischer and Cornelius Wessels of the Orange Free State.<sup>52</sup> Once they arrived in America, Poynter consulted with Senator Allen about arranging a visit to Nebraska.<sup>53</sup> The senator instructed the governor to wire the envoys directly and extend a formal invitation.<sup>54</sup>

Allen had pressed for diplomatic engagement with the Boers since the start of the war. The senator drafted several resolutions for the president to inform the Senate about relations with the South African states, and he also introduced a resolution of sympathy for them.<sup>55</sup> Similar proposals came from a variety of senators—Silver Party candidate Richard F. Pettigrew from South Dakota, Silver Republican Henry M. Teller from Colorado, and Republican William E. Mason from Illinois.

Some senators hoped the resolutions would motivate President McKinley to act as a mediator in the conflict or convince European nations to aid the Boers.<sup>56</sup> Allen held fast to Populist ideology, however, thinking that any criticism of imperialism would promote democratic values. When the senator learned that the Boer envoys would arrive in America, he proposed allowing them to speak on the floor of the Senate.<sup>57</sup> This resolution did not pass, but it demonstrates Allen's willingness to collaborate with foreign dignitaries.<sup>58</sup> The senator served as part of a delegation that escorted the envoys from New York to Washington. Allen welcomed the Boers, telling them a vast majority of Americans supported the South African Republic and the Orange Free State.<sup>59</sup>

Once the envoys arrived in the capital, a series of miscommunications complicated their tour. The Boers met Secretary of State Hay without proper introductions and in the company of anti-McKinley congressmen.<sup>60</sup> Senator Allen decried Hay's treatment of the envoys, claiming that the secretary refused to address them as diplomats. Even though the United States had a consul in Pretoria who was in fact Hay's own son, the secretary would not recognize the South African Republic and the Orange Free State. Frustrated by what he believed to be a pro-British conspiracy, the senator could do little but encourage Poynter to arrange a tour for the envoys in Nebraska.<sup>61</sup>

The Boer delegation visited Omaha on June 9, 1900. Of the three envoys, only Cornelius Wessels appeared, because Wolmarans and Fischer had appointments farther east.<sup>62</sup> Mayor Frank E. Moores, a Republican, greeted Wessels. The envoy complimented the mayor, describing the United States as a beautiful country. Wessels expressed a deeper love for the Boer republics, however, saying, "If Great

Britain had asked for gold, we might have paid it. But she asked us for our liberty, something we could pay only with our lives. It has been said that [colonial secretary Joseph] Chamberlain has objected to many things we have done. I think that if America were a weak nation, Chamberlain would find many things here upon which to base some objections.”<sup>63</sup> Poynter chaired a reception for the Boer delegate. In his opening address, the governor stressed the need for self-determination of nations. The Boer republics developed their own governments, which suited their needs and were “better than any nation can bring to them.” Poynter attributed the basest of motives to Great Britain, saying the entire world had recognized the South African Republic and the Orange Free State until Englishmen discovered gold and diamonds in the region. Then Britain decided the Boer republics had no right to be autonomous states. Poynter concluded by urging South African refugees to migrate to America rather than live under British rule. The governor declared, “As chief executive of the beautiful state of Nebraska, I invite you to come to us.”<sup>64</sup>

Wessels gave a moving speech in which he discussed the hardships of the war. Although he lamented that Britain had gained the upper hand militarily, the envoy insisted that the Boers could still emerge victorious. The delegate acknowledged the racial divisions in South Africa. Wessels maintained that very few natives had been living in South Africa when the Dutch settled in the area. The Africans came to the Dutch territories in search of work, and the Boers did not own the natives as slaves. The envoy concluded with a simple but sincere request: “I beg of you, as American people having a free country of your own, to do something for my countrymen.”<sup>65</sup>



Fig. 11. Cornelius H. Wessels, 1900. Image in Wikimedia Commons.

Elizabeth Shirley, an Omaha schoolteacher who had worked to raise funds for relief in South Africa throughout the spring, also addressed the group. Shirley returned to Poynter's anti-British theme. Shirley asserted that “England may place her stamp upon the letters of our official representative but she cannot place her stamp upon our hearts.” The local activist went on to condemn the injustice of allowing “two little republics to be crushed by a great monarchy without the interference of any other people.”<sup>66</sup>

William Jennings Bryan attended the reception although he was not a featured speaker. Informally, Bryan reiterated the need to promote American values by fostering the growth of republican government. The former presidential candidate remarked:





Fig. 12. Cornelius H. Wessels, 1900. Image in Wikimedia Commons.

I trust the day will never come when those fighting for liberty will look to the American nation in vain for sympathy and aid in their struggle. . . . [T]here are men among us who say that because England sympathized with us in the Spanish-American War, we ought to say nothing against such a friendly nation. I deny that such sympathy binds us to act for England. We did not need the sympathy of England during the Spanish-American War. We need the sympathy of no nation on this earth. We have received nothing that obligates us to remain passive and helpless while liberty is being crushed. We should not be unmindful of our duties to the people of this world struggling for their liberty—we the greatest nation on earth founded on liberty.<sup>67</sup>

While Wessels's message resonated with pro-Boer elements in Nebraska, the envoys' tour of America was less effective than it could have been, largely because of poor coordination. Moreover, the pro-Boer organizations across the country had difficulty working together. Van Siclen, for all his eagerness, managed to alienate Montagu White, the former consul of the South African Republic in London who moved to the United States after the war started. These tensions led to speculation that Van Siclen had not been honest with money collected for widows and orphans.<sup>68</sup>

Wessels and Daniel Wolmarans appointed Charles D. Pierce, consul general of the Orange Free State, as the new trustee and treasurer of Boer relief funds.<sup>69</sup> The NBRFA could do little but conclude its operations. The as-



sociation turned its assets over to the Boer envoys and entrusted Pierce with all future donations.<sup>70</sup> The consul general contacted Poynter, asking if the governor knew of any local charities that had yet to send in their collections.<sup>71</sup> Poynter had no record of how much money had been donated. While sympathy for the Boers existed in Nebraska, the governor admitted that “there has been but very little permanent organization work looking toward the raising of funds.”<sup>72</sup>

Still, Poynter expressed a willingness to support the Boer cause after the NBRFA disbanded. The governor received several petitions regarding the matter as he neared the end of his term. Both Elizabeth Shirley and John Rush, who helped arrange Wessels’s visit to Omaha, asked the governor to issue a proclamation requesting aid for people in South Africa. Poynter told Rush, “This is the first petition I have received, but should sufficient of them be forwarded to me to lend color to the request, I shall be pleased to issue the proclamation.” The governor gave a similar reply to Shirley.<sup>73</sup> When W. M. Cain forwarded another petition to Poynter scant days before the governor’s term expired, Poynter explained that he would leave the document on file for governor-elect Charles Dietrich.<sup>74</sup>

As a state executive, Poynter did everything he could to further the Populists’ anti-imperial agenda. Perhaps most importantly, hosting Cornelius Wessels in Omaha reinforced William Jennings Bryan’s certitude that the United States should make common cause with other republics. Bryan secured the Democratic nomination for the presidency in 1900. The candidate accepted the nomination on August 8, 1900, in Indianapolis, and he delivered a powerful speech against imperialism, the issue upon which he would base his cam-

paign. Bryan regretted that “when a war is in progress in South Africa which must result in the extension of the monarchical ideal or in the triumph of a republic, the advocates of imperialism in this country dare not say a word in behalf of the Boers.”<sup>75</sup>

### Disaster in India

When a famine devastated India, Poynter reacted much as he had to the crisis in South Africa. The governor coordinated local charities in aiding another country. Poynter’s actions in this matter differed from his response to the Boer War, however, because imperialists and anti-imperialists found a common ground. William Jennings Bryan and his supporters in both the Populist and Democratic camps opposed British rule in India, but Americans from all three parties cooperated in assisting the stricken nation.<sup>76</sup> Doing so meant working with British officials. Nonetheless, anti-imperialists like Poynter rallied to the cause.

Louis Klopsch initiated the American drive to provide relief. Klopsch, owner of the American edition of the London-based *Christian Herald*, appealed to Secretary of State Hay when the famine hit in late 1899. The editor requested a vessel that could be used for transporting food supplies. Hay agreed, and Klopsch spearheaded a nationwide effort to collect grain.<sup>77</sup> Second assistant secretary of state Alvey Adee notified Klopsch when Lord George Curzon, the British viceroy in India, asked the United States for monetary aid: “Recalling your interest in the business of Cuban relief in 1898 and your efforts to assuage suffering in Russia, India, and Armenia, I take the liberty of sending you a copy of a press item which has just been given out expressing the willingness of the Indian Government to

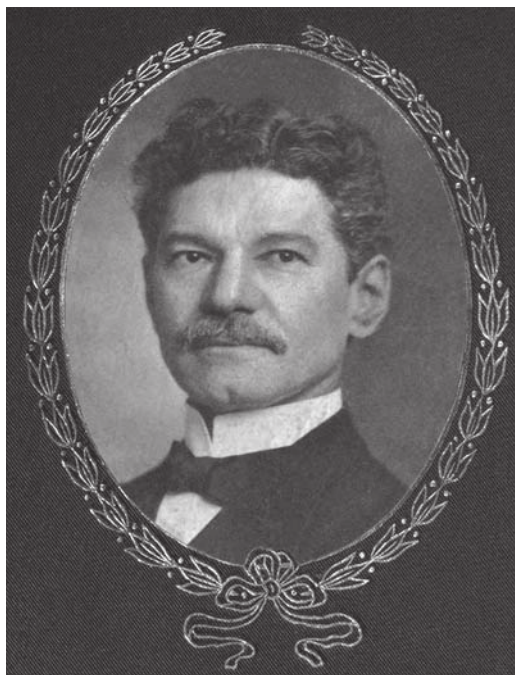


Fig. 13. Louis Klopsch, 1910. Image in Wikimedia Commons.

receive famine contributions from this country.”<sup>78</sup> The *Christian Herald* editor assailed imperialism, warning aggressive countries that “God shaves nations,” and yet he collaborated with McKinley’s administration.<sup>79</sup>

George Lewis Hosford, a Lincoln-area resident and minister with the Nebraska Methodist Episcopal Church, discussed the famine with Poynter. Hosford advised the governor to communicate with the state’s newspapers and ask them to seek contributions. To avoid the impression that the money would benefit the British government, Hosford specified that the fundraising drive should make no reference to Lord Curzon. The charity was to be called the Nebraska Commission for India Famine Relief. While he obviously approved of Secretary of State Hay’s decision to ship foodstuffs to In-

dia, Hosford did not want to lose any support from anti-imperialists.<sup>80</sup>

Poynter complied with Hosford’s request. The governor wrote to the *Lincoln State Journal*, the *Omaha World-Herald*, and the *Omaha Bee*, encouraging the papers to promote the relief campaign. Poynter stated, “I believe this to be a laudable undertaking, and if thought advisable by you to espouse it, have no doubt the generous people of Nebraska would cheerfully respond to the call.” Hosford had appointed J. H. Auld, cashier of the City National Bank of Lincoln, as treasurer for the state’s famine donations. The papers were to forward all collections to him.<sup>81</sup> In a formal proclamation, the governor stressed the need for contributions: “The people of Nebraska are noted for their liberality to which no appeal has ever been made in vain. Their attention is now called to the terrible suffering prevailing in India, where, on account of unfavorable conditions, tens of thousands of the people are dying of starvation. Sympathy and duty demand that we lend them assistance from our abundance.”<sup>82</sup>

Mayor Frank E. Moores of Omaha quickly espoused the cause. In an address on April 20, 1900, he noted that Hosford’s commission requested Omaha to raise one thousand dollars. The mayor challenged his constituents to exceed this amount, maintaining, “If we but realize the fearful conditions existing in India, our philanthropic citizens would of their abundance give double the amount asked for.” Hosford also spoke at the address. He stressed the severity of the famine, noting that millions of people faced starvation. The state of Kansas sent a trainload of corn for shipment to India, and Hosford urged Nebraskans to follow this example.<sup>83</sup>

C. C. Bonney, chairman of the Chicago



Fig. 14. Frank E. Moores, ca. 1901. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2411-3874a.

India Famine-Relief Committee, suggested that Poynter designate certain days as collection times for both grain and money in Nebraska. Bonney had corresponded with Lady Mary Curzon, wife of Lord Curzon, and he forwarded her reply to Poynter.<sup>84</sup> Lady Curzon welcomed American aid: “My husband and I will be rejoiced to receive any help that Chicago may be willing to give toward our terrible India famine. The government is relieving nearly 5,000,000 persons, and the worst is yet to come. We guarantee that every dollar subscribed will go to the relief of genuine human suffering.”<sup>85</sup> Poynter’s secretary, Fred



Fig. 15. Mary Curzon, Baroness Curzon of Kedleston, 1902. Image in Wikimedia Commons.

Jewell, assured Bonney that Nebraskans had collected “a large amount of corn, as well as considerable money,” which the commission sent to the *Christian Herald* in New York.<sup>86</sup> Jewell’s reassurance proved well founded. By the time Klopsch’s first ship set sail on May 10, 1900, Nebraskans had donated ten thousand bushels of corn, and they raised more than five thousand dollars.<sup>87</sup>

Poynter continued to support the famine relief effort. After Klopsch’s first shipment, the governor encouraged other states to work with Hosford, who had become western manager for the *Christian Herald’s* India relief fund. Poynter emphasized the severity of the famine to Governor Leslie M. Shaw of Iowa and Governor John Lind of Minnesota, saying, “Nebraska has already contributed quite liberally to this fund, and I bespeak your cooperation with Mr. Hosford in this work.”<sup>88</sup> As Poynter neared the end of his term, he expressed





Fig. 16. William A. Poynter. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2413-05.

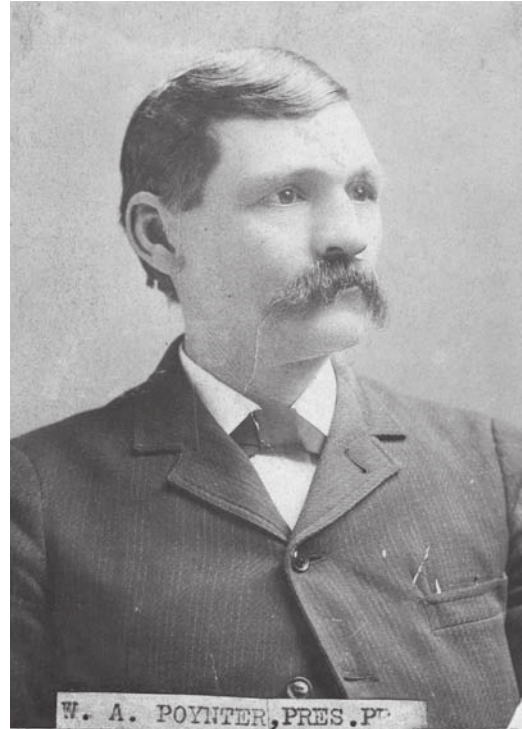


Fig. 17. William A. Poynter. Image used with permission from the Nebraska State Historical Society, item RG2413-04.

gratitude to the people of Nebraska for their generosity. The governor issued a proclamation officially recognizing November 29, 1900, as Thanksgiving Day. In his message, Poynter maintained: "The energy and industry of our people have been abundantly blessed. In our abundance we have not forgotten those in distress, but have contributed to the assistance of the starving in India, as well as to those made desolate by storm and flood in our own country. For the blessing of such a spirit of Christian civilization, let us thank God."<sup>89</sup>

### A Populist Foreign Policy

In responding to the South African War and the Indian famine, Governor Poynter demon-

strated a distinct philosophy about international relations. Poynter's views clearly aligned with those of Populists in the national levels of government. This foreign policy rested on the assumption that republicanism, in which citizens choose representatives to act on behalf of the people, allows society to reach its full potential. Believing the antimonarchical values of the American Revolution to be the pinnacle of republican thought, the Populists envisioned the United States as a moral and political role model for the rest of the world. Leaders such as Poynter, Senator Allen, and William Jennings Bryan foresaw a position of leadership for their country in world affairs. By discouraging imperial rule and advocating



republicanism, the Populists encouraged self-determination of nations and tried to create a world that would be friendly to the United States.

Bryan summarized the Populist approach to foreign policy in his newspaper, the *Commoner*. In late 1901, the presidential candidate proclaimed:

It is not too much to say that the battle which the Boers are waging against Great Britain is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, among all the heroic struggles in the world's history. No thoughtful American would suggest that the United States take actual part in the war. There are, however, some things the United States can do, which would be natural for them to do, and which will in time be essential for them to do, if the administration would reflect the very apparent sentiment and sympathy of the people. American presidents have never hesitated to express public sympathy with a people struggling for liberty and a republican form of government. There is in such sympathy something besides the sentimental; there is an intensely practical feature. The United States of America furnishes a living protest against the monarchical theory of government. Every monarchy that is transformed into a republic strengthens the United States. Every republic that is erected on foreign soil is distinctly a benefit to our own republic.<sup>90</sup>

Bryan continued to support the Boers until the Peace of Vereeniging ended the South African War in 1902. This agreement secured the South African Republic and Orange Free State as parts of the British Empire but allowed them considerable autonomy, including the authority to determine who could vote. In

1910 the South African Republic (Transvaal), Orange Free State, Cape Colony, and Natal united in the Union of South Africa. This entity was a dominion of the British Empire but controlled most of its own domestic affairs.<sup>91</sup>

The Populists adopted a twentieth-century outlook because they wanted the United States to involve itself in world affairs. The party's strategies included support for military intervention in the Spanish-American War, international diplomacy during the Boer War, and above all else, leading by way of example. The Populists expanded the nineteenth-century interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine, which informally divided the Americas into American and European zones. In 1898 the Populists favored invasion of a European zone, and in 1899 they directed their anti-imperialist impulse toward the continent of Africa. The Populists understood that isolationism was not feasible for the United States.

The Populists also believed the United States should serve as a benefactor to less fortunate nations. In their campaigns to provide relief for displaced persons in South Africa and famine victims in India, party members called for American initiative. The Populists held a vastly different concept of American leadership than their imperial counterparts, but as a party of loyal opposition, they collaborated with Republicans and Democrats to supply aid to India. At state and local levels, relief efforts depended on donations from grassroots elements that did not always function cohesively. Nebraska made a sizeable contribution to India under Poynter's leadership, however, and any inefficiency shows the difficulty of coordinating a variety of private organizations rather than a lack of purpose. Governor Poynter eagerly supported every aspect of his party's foreign policy.

In their attempts to foster the growth of republican regimes, the Populists pioneered the democratic theory of peace. This concept maintains that democratic states are less likely to make war on each other.<sup>92</sup> The Populists considered their ideas to be virtuous from a moral standpoint, but they also believed re-making other nations in America's image would promote peace and protect the security of the United States. Populism was utopian in the sense that it assumed the best of human nature. Leaders like Poynter, Allen, and Bryan did not doubt that removing a despotic regime would pave the way for democracy. The Populists took for granted that if given an opportunity for self-rule, a nation would establish a truly democratic system. The policy of apartheid, or strict racial segregation, that developed in South Africa after World War II confirms that reality does not always match the ideal, but the belief that cultivating democratic systems will encourage peace has been a central tenet of American political thought since the Populists' time. In various guises, the idea has motivated Democratic and Republican leaders, shaped public opinion, and guided foreign policy, and it continues to exert an influence today.

The Populist approach to foreign policy differed from the institutional liberalism that originated in the Wilsonian era. With the American entry in World War I, President Woodrow Wilson embraced institutional liberalism, or the idea that international organizations should resolve disputes and keep peace. Wilson opposed imperialism, contending that every nation should be represented equally on a global level, and yet he called for a supranational body to oversee world affairs.<sup>93</sup> William Jennings Bryan, who served as secretary of state under Wilson from 1913 until

1915, strongly advocated mediation to bring an end to the war. Bryan resigned his position after a falling out with the president but ultimately supported the Treaty of Versailles, which provided for a League of Nations to act as a peacekeeping institution.<sup>94</sup> Bryan had moved squarely into the Democratic camp by this time. The Populist Party declined in the early years of the twentieth century, and immediately after World War I, debate about American foreign policy centered on whether the United States should join the League of Nations. Bryan retained a trace of his earlier ideology because he disagreed with President Wilson about all nations being represented equally in the League. Harkening back to his Populist idea of American leadership, Bryan argued that the United States should play a larger role than that of smaller nations.<sup>95</sup> This idea, that the United States should take the lead in extending democracy around the world, appeared in many instances after World War II and became a parallel theme to institutional liberalism in recent American history.

## Notes

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3. Clanton, *Congressional Populism*, 20–23.

4. Michael J. Nojeim and David P. Kilroy, *Days of Decision: Turning Points in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2011), 15.

5. Kendrick A. Clements, *William Jennings Bryan: Missionary Isolationist* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 32.

6. Alan Raucher, "Anti-Imperialists and the Pro-India Movement, 1900-1932," *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (February 1974): 84.
7. Clanton, *Congressional Populism*, 154.
8. Clements, *William Jennings Bryan*, 13.
9. Clanton, *Congressional Populism*, 147, 154, 180-81. Four of the six senators were fusion candidates, as were seventeen of the twenty-six representatives. William V. Allen was not a fusion candidate. He had only been endorsed by the Populists.
10. Louis W. Koenig, *Bryan: A Political Biography of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1971), 281. It took a lot of pressure from Bryan to get the Democrats to endorse Poynter.
11. Paolo E. Coletta, "A Tempest in a Teapot? Governor Poynter's Appointment of William V. Allen to the United States Senate," *Nebraska History* 38 (June 1957): 155.
12. Paul T. McCartney, *Power and Progress: American National Identity, the War of 1898, and the Rise of American Imperialism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 87, 88, 97; Clements, *William Jennings Bryan*, 28.
13. Clanton, *Congressional Populism*, 145; McCartney, *Power and Progress*, 110.
14. Clements, *William Jennings Bryan*, 28-29.
15. McCartney, *Power and Progress*, 93, 99.
16. William V. Allen, "Cuba Must Be Free Speech," in William V. Allen Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
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19. Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 87-89.
20. Kazin, *Godly Hero*, 90; Gerald Leinwand, *William Jennings Bryan: An Uncertain Trumpet* (Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), 74.
21. Clements, *William Jennings Bryan*, 32-33.
22. Kazin, *Godly Hero*, 91; Clanton, *Congressional Populism*, 153.
23. *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 3rd sess., 1899, 32:1144.
24. *Congressional Record*, 55th Cong., 3rd sess., 1899, 32:1145.
25. Donald K. Springen, *William Jennings Bryan: Orator of Small-Town America* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), 143.
26. Nebraska Legislature, House of Representatives, *House Journal of the Legislature of the State of Nebraska, Twenty-Sixth Regular Session, Begun and Held at Lincoln, January 3, 1899* (Lincoln, 1900), 1000-1001; Robert W. Cherny, "Anti-Imperialism on the Middle Border, 1898-1900," *Midwest Review* 1 (1979): 26-27.
27. Richard B. Mulanax, *The Boer War in American Politics and Diplomacy* (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1994), 14.
28. Stuart Anderson, "Racial Anglo-Saxonism and the American Response to the Boer War," *Diplomatic History* 2 (Summer 1978): 220.
29. Mulanax, *Boer War*, 66, 69.
30. Anderson, *Racial Anglo-Saxonism*, 223, 230; William M. Tilchin, "The United States and the Boer War," in *The International Impact of the Boer War*, ed. Keith Wilson (Cheshum: Acumen Publishing, 2001), 109-10.
31. Steven Bryan, *The Gold Standard at the Turn of the Twentieth Century: Rising Powers, Global Money, and the Age of Empire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 27, 37, 51-52.
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33. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 4, 1899.
34. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 28, 1899.
35. Denis Judd and Keith Surridge, *The Boer War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 2, 85.
36. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 6, 1899.
37. John V. L. Pruyn to William Amos Poynter, November 28, 1899, William Amos Poynter Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln.
38. I. J. Dunn to Poynter, December 6, 1899; Dunn to Poynter, 7 December 1899, Poynter Papers.
39. William V. Allen to Poynter, December 11, 1899, Poynter Papers.
40. Poynter to Tunis G. Bergen, December 13, 1899, Poynter Papers. Bergen was the treasurer of Pruyn's committee.
41. Coletta, "Tempest in a Teapot," 155.
42. Poynter to Bergen, December 13, 1899, Poynter Papers.
43. J. A. LaBille to Poynter, December 14, 1899; Poynter to LaBille, December 16, 1899, Poynter Papers.
44. Fred Jewell to M. Vander Ploeg, December 23, 1899, Poynter Papers.

45. George W. Van Siclen to Poynter, February 20, 1900; Alfred Chasseud to Poynter, March 6, 1900, Poynter Papers.

46. Van Siclen to Poynter, May 10, 1900, Poynter Papers; Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, 1774–Present, accessed August 25, 2013, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/biosearch/biosearch.asp>; National Governors Association, accessed August 25, 2013, <http://www.nga.org/cms/home/governors/past-governors-bios.html>. The NBRFA's stationery lists the names of committee members in its margins. William V. Allen was the Populist senator.

47. *Omaha World-Herald*, March 2, 1900.

48. *Omaha Daily Bee*, February 17, 1900, 1.

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50. Van Siclen to Poynter, May 3, 1900, Poynter Papers.

51. Poynter to Van Siclen, May 7, 1900, Poynter Papers.

52. Van Siclen to Poynter, May 3, 1900, Poynter Papers.

53. Poynter to Allen, May 25, 1900, Poynter Papers.

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55. *Congressional Record*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., 1900, 33:935, 976, 2761.

56. John H. Ferguson, *American Diplomacy and the Boer War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1939), 188.

57. *Congressional Record*, 56th Cong., 1st sess., 1900, 33:5735.

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59. *Omaha World-Herald*, May 19, 1900.

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62. *Lincoln State Journal*, June 10, 1900.

63. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 9, 1900.

64. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 10, 1900.

65. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 10, 1900.

66. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 10, 1900.

67. *Omaha World-Herald*, June 10, 1900.

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70. Van Siclen to Poynter, July 6, 1900, Poynter Papers.

71. Pierce to Poynter, July 28, 1900, Poynter Papers.

72. Poynter to Pierce, August 1, 1900, Poynter Papers.

73. Poynter to John Rush, December 13, 1900; Poynter to Elizabeth Shirley, December 15, 1900, Poynter Papers.

74. Poynter to W. M. Cain, January 3, 1901, Poynter Papers. Dietrich, a Republican, apparently ignored the petition. See Charles Dietrich Papers, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, and *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Nebraska, 1854–1941* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1942).

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76. Raucher, "Anti-Imperialists and the Pro-India Movement," 85.

77. Merle Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad* (New Brunswick NJ: Transaction Books, 1988), 136.

78. Charles M. Pepper and Irving Bacheller, *Life Work of Louis Klopsch: Romance of a Modern Knight of Mercy* (New York: Christian Herald, 1910), 71.

79. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 17, 1900.

80. G. L. Hosford to Poynter, April 12, 1900, Poynter Papers. For information about George Lewis Hosford, see Norman F. Hosford and David H. Hosford, *The Hosford Genealogy: A History of the Descendants of William Hosford* (West Kennebunk ME, 1993), 264; *Fairbury Gazette*, September 24, October 1, 1898; *Valentine Western News-Democrat*, October 6, 1898; Thirty-eighth Annual Conference of the Nebraska Methodist Episcopal Church, accessed August 25, 2013, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nejeffer/meconfer.htm>.

81. Poynter to W. O. Jones, April 13, 1900; Poynter to Victor Rosewater, 13 April 1900; Poynter to R. L. Metcalf, April 13, 1900, Poynter Papers.

82. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 20, 1900; *Columbus Journal*, May 9, 1900. There is a copy of this message in Governor Poynter's papers, but it is dated May 17, 1900. The governor was on leave for several days in mid-April, and his absence may account for this inconsistency in dates.

83. *Omaha World-Herald*, April 20, 1900.

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86. Jewell to Bonney, April 20, 1900, Poynter Papers.



87. Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad*, 136; *Omaha World-Herald*, May 19, 1900.

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