

Mr. Hill's Attack on Chicago Platform.

An Extract from David B. Hill's Article in the February, 1897, Forum.

The wisdom of making the silver question practically the sole or paramount issue in the recent campaign was seriously doubted by many influential democrats who were solicitous for the party's future welfare. "It is the part of a wise man . . . not to venture all of his eggs in one basket." To exchange Jefferson's sixteen democratic principles for one populistic principle was not regarded as the part of prudence. To risk everything upon a single issue—and that one of questionable propriety—seemed to be unnecessarily imperiling the fortunes of a great political party. But even if it was desirable that the free coinage of silver should be the sole or principal issue—an issue about which honest men may well differ—the platform declaring for such coinage should have been carefully drawn, its provisions therefor should have been surrounded with every appropriate safeguard, and it should have avoided troublesome details which needlessly invited criticism. The issues should have been presented in such a form as to satisfy or at least pacify conservative men and not frighten them. When the real question involved whether silver should be coined at all (other than for subsidiary purposes) it was the height of folly to declare for such coinage at a precise ratio. A general declaration in favor of the remonetization of silver, accompanied by a strong pledge for the maintenance of its parity with gold by the exercise of all the powers of the government to that end, and as a precautionary feature limiting the application of such silver coinage to debts thereafter contracted, would have been better and answered the charge of repudiation and dishonesty, and disarmed much opposition to the proposed change in our monetary system.

A prevalent suspicion that a safe system of bimetalism was not intended, but that silver monometallism was really desired—especially in view of the fact that a precise ratio was fixed so disproportionate to the commercial ratio existing between the two metals, and aggravated by absence of a promise of any effort to secure and maintain a parity—should have impelled the convention to explicitly declare, not for any specified ratio, but for whatever ratio would surely and safely maintain such parity. That was clearly the path of duty, prudence and patriotism—but unfortunately it was not pursued. There are those who think it would have been still better not to have declared at all in favor of the experiment of the free and unlimited coinage of silver, alone and without the co-operation of other great countries, but that a safer and more judicious course, under existing conditions, would have been the approval in general terms of international bimetalism, and there stopped. It is true that such a moderate plank would not have satisfied the populists—with whom a coalition was even then contemplated—but on the other hand it might have preserved democratic unity for the future and prevented the Indianapolis bolt.

But if a mistake was made in the form in which the silver question was presented to the country, it was supplemented and augmented by some of the other provisions of the platform which were equally if not still more objectionable. A radical change in the nation's monetary standard, such as was proposed, was itself sufficient to alarm the country without adding any other offensive provisions, or provisions of doubtful expediency, or especially those of a revolutionary

and unprecedented character.

Had reasonable judgment been exercised there ought to have been no difficulty in making the residue of the platform, aside from the silver plank, entirely acceptable to every democrat and to all conservative citizens; but instead thereof passion, prejudice, selfishness, sectionalism, and emotionalism seemed to rule the hour, while so many undemocratic, crude, and unsafe provisions were recklessly incorporated therein that the people became frightened and hundreds of thousands of electors who otherwise would have supported the ticket were needlessly alienated.

These unwise provisions, which, more than the silver question, tended to insure defeat, deserve some consideration:

First—THE INCOME TAX. This tax had never before been approved in a democratic platform, and had never been tolerated by the country, except as a temporary expedient in time of war. Yet this platform proposed to fasten it upon the nation in a time of profound peace as a part of its permanent fiscal policy. It is an unjust, inquisitorial and sectional tax. It is a tax upon thrift, industry and brains, and not upon wealth per se. It is a direct tax, and when not levied upon the states according to their population, as required by the constitution, cannot be levied at all. It was regarded in many quarters as an indefensible measure of confiscation, pressed by the improvident or impecunious states, as against the thrifty, progressive, and wealthy ones. It was urged by every political adventurer, ignoramus and demagogue in the country. The demand therefor was part and parcel of the same unseemly clamor concerning the alleged interests of "the masses against the classes" of which so much was heard in the recent campaign. The sectional character of the tax, and the motives for its adoption evidenced by the concerted and selfish struggle for its revival, are apparent when it is stated that the records in the office of the commissioner of internal revenue of the United States show that while the whole amount of the tax as returned to that department under the recent law from all the states was \$15,943,746.69 there was returned from the states which voted for the democratic-populistic candidates in the late election only the sum of \$1,880,201.38. New York's share of the burden was twice as much as all these democratic-populistic states—being one-quarter of the whole tax, the exact amount being \$3,784,489.04. Yet there are those who affect to be surprised that the people of New York did not hasten to support this platform with zeal and enthusiasm, instead of rejecting it by more than a quarter of a million majority.

Second—THE ATTACK ON THE SUPREME COURT. The platform criticises the decision of that court declaring the income tax law unconstitutional. If that were all it does, the plank might be overlooked or excused as simply a matter of bad taste, foolish and unnecessary, but unimportant. But it goes further and instead of acquiescing in the decision, it declares it to be "the duty of congress to use all the constitutional power which remains after that decision, or which may come from its reversal by the court as it may hereafter be constituted," to affect the imposition of an income tax. What does this extraordinary provision mean? What power has congress under the constitution over the supreme court, which it is thus declared to be its "duty" to exercise? Its power may

be regarded as almost absolute—especially if it desires to arbitrarily or recklessly use or abuse it. While it can not abolish the court itself, it can reorganize it by act of congress and therefore change its personnel—perhaps its whole complexion. Congress can increase or possibly diminish the number of judges; it can make "regulations" concerning the court's appellate jurisdiction largely restricting and hampering its usefulness and virtually destroying its efficacy. A reckless congress and a corrupt, and vicious, or unscrupulous president can "pack" the court and force an acceptable decision. In truth the scheme thus approved contemplated the reorganization of the supreme court by some of the methods permitted, to the end that a court should be obtained which would surely sustain the coveted income tax. Indeed this program was unblushingly avowed and defended by some of those most zealous in urging the adoption of this plank. A more dangerous or revolutionary procedure was never before outlined by a political party, and it is no wonder that it startled the judiciary and bar of the country, and aroused intense opposition almost everywhere. It is a fact not generally known and perhaps for the first time here stated that the platform upon this subject as originally prepared and presented to the subcommittee on resolutions at Chicago by the majority thereof, simply proposed an amendment to the federal constitution providing for or permitting an income tax. Such a provision, while of course objectionable in itself, and also because it foolishly assumed an untimely and unwise issue, was nevertheless an orderly and legitimate method of securing the relief sought; but upon discussion it was rejected by the majority as too moderate or as otherwise undesirable, and the hazardous provision before mentioned was substituted in its stead, and the democratic party thereby committed to a policy of virtual destruction, usurpation, and revolution.

Third—LEGAL TENDER PAPER MONEY. The plank which refers to paper money is somewhat ambiguous and was apparently so intended. The clause, "We demand that all paper money which is made a legal tender for public and private debts, or which is receivable for dues to the United States, shall be issued by the government of the United States," assumes that such money is hereafter to be issued and may properly be issued. There is an implied recognition of the propriety of issuing more legal tender paper money. That claim or admission may be satisfactory to populists who believe in fiat money, but can hardly be acceptable to democrats who have heretofore always favored hard money—coined money—money of intrinsic value. The true democratic theory is that congress has no constitutional power to issue any more legal tender paper money, and should not issue any whatever; but this plank proceeds on a different theory—a directly opposite theory. It ignores the fact—or it was seemingly framed in ignorance of the fact—that national bank notes are not legal tender and never have been, and that they are not money in the proper sense of that term, and no person is obliged to accept them as such. It antagonized national banks under a false idea of their true functions, and created a deceptive and shallow issue, inviting additional opposition. A demand for the substantial abolition or vital impairment of national banks, coupled with the nomination for vice president of a national bank official, was an exhibition of stupidity and inconsistency which added grotesqueness to the campaign.

Fourth—REPUDIATION AND AN ASSAULT UPON OUR NATIONAL are opposed to the issuing of interest-bearing bonds of the United States

in time of peace" was vicious as well as unfortunate. It was an attack upon the national credit. It was wholly an unnecessary financial issue, entirely foreign to the silver question proper, which should not have been encumbered with it. It antagonized all bonds of the United States, as of course none but interest-bearing bonds were ever contemplated. It opposed their issuance for any purpose whatever, and whether issued by the president or by congress. Even the populist platform was not so radical, as it excepted "Bonds issued by specific act of congress." Of course this plank was utterly indefensible, and it recklessly placed the democratic party in a false and humiliating position demanding explanation and apology. It was adopted with full knowledge of the embarrassing financial situation of the government. What was that status? The party had enacted a tariff bill (largely through the influence of the ultra friends of silver who would not listen to conservative counsels) which failed to furnish adequate revenues for the support of the nation, and the government found itself without sufficient coin with which to redeem its greenback currency upon presentation; and the two houses of congress being unable to agree upon a new tariff measure providing for additional revenue, the government was compelled to issue bonds to procure the necessary coin for redemption purposes, and by means of such redemption process was enabled to secure sufficient moneys for the payment of its ordinary running expenses. Under such circumstances there was no other alternative except the issuing of bonds, as every intelligent man knows; and if such deadlock shall continue there will still be no other alternative in the future.

To oppose the issuing of bonds under such circumstances—which was the only feasible method of protecting the credit of the nation, of preventing repudiation, and of honorably meeting its outstanding obligations and paying its routine expenditures—was regarded by the public as not only criminal folly, but little less than treason itself. The people were readily made to believe that such opposition was only another means or plan of undermining and destroying the government, and of accomplishing by ballots what bullets had failed to do. What loyal democrat—a follower of Douglas, McClellan, Hancock and Tilden—could conscientiously defend and vindicate such an infamous and unfortunate plank?

Fifth—FEDERAL AUTHORITY IN STATES. It was at least unwise to raise an issue as to the extent to which the federal government may interfere in local affairs in states even for the avowed purpose of the enforcement of federal laws. The Chicago riots or labor troubles, largely local in their character, should not have been either directly or indirectly dragged into a national contest, either for the commendation or condemnation of the federal administration or the state administration of Illinois. That conflict at the time was perhaps much misunderstood and confused in the public mind, and it was the height of political madness to expect to elucidate it in a brief national campaign, where much pre-existing prejudice, bitterness, and misrepresentation had to be explained away and overcome. No political party can afford to be placed in a false position upon the questions of the enforcement of law and order, the sup-

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