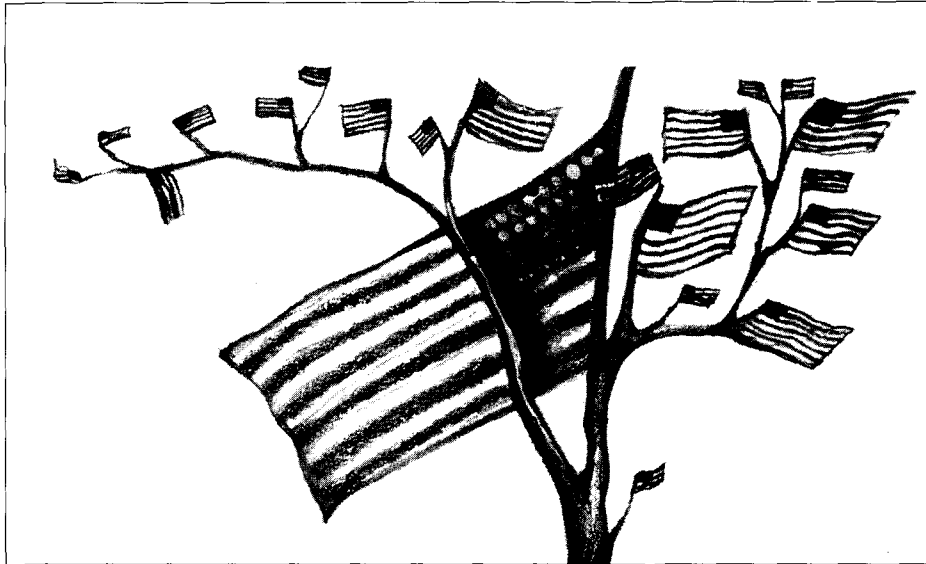


Who Can We Shoot?

by Bill Kauffman



Anna Myreck-Wódecki

Who better to kick off a discussion of American populism than Henry James? In *The Portrait of a Lady* Sockless Hank had Henrietta Stackpole define a “cosmopolite”: “That means he’s a little of everything and not much of any. I must say I think patriotism is like charity—it begins at home.” Likewise, a healthy populism must be grounded in a love of the particular, or else it is just a grab bag of (mostly valid) resentments.

James understood the consequence of the Spanish-American War to be “remote colonies run by bosses”; expansion diluted true patriotism and would “demoralize us.” His diagnosis is still sound, though the American people are now cast in the role of the Filipinos. The alliances and friendships concreting as the American Empire staggers through caducity and hastens, one hopes, to a long-overdue demise are every bit as refreshingly meet as those spawned in the depths of Manila Bay: a backwoods hippie wearing a “Buchanan ’96” button is descended from the sturdily Republican poet-editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich, who announced in 1899 that he would not “vote for McKinley again. I would sooner vote for Bryan. To be ruined financially is not so bad as to be ruined morally.”

The dire predictions of the anti-imperialists came to pass: gentlemen such as James and Aldrich were no match for Teddy Roosevelt. A century later Newt Gingrich, TR’s biggest fan, haunts our demoralized land. Gingrich may never have bagged an elk, but he is much like his heroes, the cousins Roosevelt and Harry Truman: a picked-on kid raised on war games who probably can’t throw a baseball as far as Olive Chancellor could.

When asked about his provenance by a fellow graduate student, Gingrich replied, “I’m from nowhere.” So were most of the blustery swindlers who disgraced the populist label while rising to prominence in the 1970’s and 80’s. They are the gas-

conading “populists” of the right who operate out of Northern Virginia post office boxes: Big Bad Foes of the New World Order who dwell in sprawling apartment complexes and could not name a neighbor if their lives depended on it. Anticommunist and pro-nothing, they cozened money out of credulous TV addicts for Ollie North and before him Jonas Savimbi—one of them dreamt of nominating his ebon god for President in 1988, if only that xenophobic native birth clause in the Constitution had not disqualified the Angolan. Today they trumpet “family values” from the mountain tops of junk mail, while down below in Chevy Chase their neglected children enter Riot Grrrl suicide pacts.

The populist “left” of the Dark Age was no better: it consisted of a few earnest student council presidents trudging door to door in strange neighborhoods gathering petition signatures to save the whales or the ozone layer, anything so long as it had nothing to do with the workaday lives of the lunkheaded proles who answered the doorbell.

But as Newt himself might crow, it’s the beginning of a new age, and vascular American populism is resurgent. You can tell because *Newsweek* and that hoary and reliable enemy of the Old Republic, the *New Republic*, portentously invoke Richard Hofstadter’s hilarious *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*—which ascribed all dissent from the Cold War Vital Center consensus to mental illness—and Alan Brinkley (Hofstadter born to a TV star) is trotted out to explain, like the girl in the Lou Reed song, why “down to you is up,” and why anything smacking of popular rage is not really populism.

They want populism to be Rush Limbaugh and Common Cause, and I am very sorry to indulge in hate speech, but we are talking Daniel Shays and the Loco Focos and Tom Watson and Huey Long and their swelling band of offspring who are gathering under the Tree of Liberty. (If you can’t beat ’em, co-opt ’em. How the corporate media clamored for an independent

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ticket of Colin Powell and Bill Bradley: at last, a third party Wall Street and the Pentagon can love!)

I should like to see, instead of
an America First Party, a
cluster of 75 or 180 smaller entities:
a West Kansas First Party, a Rhode
Island First Party, a Southern
Oregon First Party, and so on,
representing every nook and
cranny of all 48 states.

The post-Cold War populists—who are largely isolationist, decentralist, libertarian, ticked-off but sweetly naive in a Frank Capra way—know that the enemy is not a Nicaraguan Marxist or a Compton rapper but a regime represented by the likes of William Bennett and Robert Rubin. We will not find succor in the Democracy—the party that effaced all regional distinctions in constructing our national security state—and as for the Republicans, can anyone name a single instance when Wall Street and Main Street lined up on opposite sides of an important issue and the GOP sided with Main Street? Don't two words—Wendell Willkie—say all that need ever be said about who owns the party of Reconstruction, TR, and the Gulf War?

Our forefather, William Jennings Bryan, had the varmint in his sight in a speech at Springfield, Ohio, in the summer of 1896: “My friends, remember that relief cannot come to you from those who have fastened this yoke upon you. You may go to New York or Boston and find financiers . . . that know more about Europe than they do about the United States. They go oftener to London than to the great prairies of the West and South. If because of their more intimate acquaintance with foreigners they have exaggerated ideas of the necessity for foreign aid, you people who live between the Alleghenies and the Golden Gate—you who are willing to trust your all upon the Republic and rise or fall with it—you have the power and the right to take the reins of government into your own hands and administer the law, not for foreign syndicates, but for the people of the United States.”

The Wise Men who buried the republic were the children of those financiers. The fathers—robber barons and Wall Street sharks—shipped the sons from the hearthstone to exclusive boarding schools, where they spent their youths playing that epitome of boring internationalism, soccer, and learning a code of conduct which evidently countenanced the mass slaughter of one's countrymen in illegal wars, as long as the statesmen responsible knew which is the salad fork. The very best products

of the prep schools became the patrician radicals who are among the greatest American independents (and the palladia of American independence), but for every Edmund Wilson at the Hill School there were fourscore Harrimans at Groton, boys stripped of attachments to particular American places or ancestors or anything beyond the plunderbund.

They came to form a deracinated ruling class which entangled us in the most quotidian affairs of Europe because London and Paris were, to them, closer than Abilene or Green Bay. There's nothing very jolly about what Skull and Bones did to my country, Roger.

Yet to oppose them—to say that Henry Stimson and Dean Acheson and their epigoni, George Bush and Strobe Talbott, are traitors who subverted an America of which they know nothing—is so far outside the pale of acceptable speech that merely to make the observation is to invite the cavedropping of the ironically named Louis Frech. (Who'd have guessed that the first client of the Empowerment Agenda would be the FBI?)

Again, I summon the shade of Bryan, “that Heaven-born Bryan/That Homer Bryan, who sang from the West,” as Vachel Lindsay cried. In a campaign speech at Milwaukee, he said:

I want to call your attention to what some one has said about the influence of foreign nations and foreign personages in the affairs of our nation: ‘Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence (I conjure you to believe me, fellow citizens), the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake, since history and experience prove that foreign influence is one of the most baneful foes of republican government.’ There is the language which I desire to press upon your memories. It is not my language. Whose language do you suppose it is? What man, ‘trying to stir up the passions of our people against foreigners’; what demagogue ‘appealing to the mob to justify his course’; what anarchist do you suppose used those words? Those are the words of George Washington. . . . If it was true then, it is true now. My friends, I warn you against entrusting the destinies of this nation to legislative bodies which are beyond your control.”

Note that Bryan did not say “beyond your ken” or “beyond your power of recognition” but “beyond your control.” As Alexander Cockburn recently pointed out in the *Nation*, populists are fools to huff and puff at chimerical shadows (Jewish bankers! The Illuminati!) when the villains are hiding in plain sight.

Their creed was uttered a century and a half ago by Daniel Webster, who said, “There are no Alleghenies in my politics.” This was a fib—the only time Webster lived down to this motto was in his disgraceful promotion of the Compromise of 1850, when he abjured New England interests and forced a hated Fugitive Slave Act on his people. But the ignoble sentiment underlying Webster's aphorism is shared by every knave and commissar of the New World Order (no matter if wifey collects folk art).

We are too versicolored a country to be embraced by a single American populism: our politics must be filled with Alleghenies. (Those who in 1864 called themselves the Union Party sustained a brutal military occupation of their Southern brothers for another dozen years.) While patriots today share common foes—the whole *New York Times-Heritage*

Foundation Vile Center—I should like to see, instead of an America First Party, a cluster of 75 or 180 smaller entities: a West Kansas First Party, a Rhode Island First Party, a Southern Oregon First Party, and so on, representing every nook and cranny of all 48 states. I say 48 because the revolution's got to start somewhere, so at our house we fly a 48-star flag, honoring the contiguous United States, not those grating pretenders Alaska and Hawaii, rotten fruits of empire given statehood in that burst of insanity known as the Cold War.

The most thoughtful opponents of stitching the 49th and 50th stars on the flag were Senator John Stennis, the courtly Mississippian, and Senator J. William Fulbright, the Confederate anti-imperialist. In the Alaska statehood debate, Stennis asked if, after admitting this frozen expanse to the Union, we would then have to “admit Hawaii? And then are we going to admit the Virgin Islands? Are we going to admit Puerto Rico? Are we going to admit Guam? Okinawa?” (In time, Senator, in time.) Stennis wondered “whether we shall take a disconnected area, whether it be in the Pacific, in South America, in Africa, or anywhere else . . . in the bosom of our nation? We are changing the pattern of our Union once we launch out on this program.” And so Old Glory was defaced by the cosmopolites.

But lo and behold, a lively native nationalist movement has arisen in Hawaii (members identified by “Kingdom of Hawaii” license plates), and the crustier Alaskans have long favored secession, so to the dispossessed sons of Queen Liliuokalani and in atonement for my rapacious landsman William Seward I recommend the policy laid out by the New Zealand band Midnight Oil in its song about Maori land claims:

The time has come
A fact's a fact
It belongs to them
Let's give it back

And in what has become a hackneyed phrase—but one that can never really lose its tang—let's take back our own country.

There is a famous scene in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in which a tenant farmer confronts the man evicting him from his shack:

“It's mine. I built it. You bump it down—I'll be in the window with a rifle. You even come too close and I'll pot you like a rabbit.”

“It's not me. There's nothing I can do. I'll lose my job if I don't do it. And look—suppose you kill me? They'll just hang you, but long before you're hung there'll be another guy on the tractor, and he'll bump the house down. You're not killing the right guy.”

“That's so,” the tenant said. “Who gave you orders? I'll go after him. He's the one to kill.”

“You're wrong. He got his orders from the bank. The bank told him, ‘Clear those people out or it's your job.’”

“Well, there's a president of the bank. There's a board of directors. I'll fill up the magazine of the rifle and go into the bank.”

The driver said, “Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the East. The orders were, ‘Make the land show profit or we'll close you up.’”

“But where does it stop? Who can we shoot? I don't aim to starve to death before I kill the man that's

starving me.”

We are not starvelings, and we know whom to shoot. (Figuratively speaking, of course—we should obey the example of Saint Dorothy Day and leave murder as an instrument of policy to the United States government.)

The new American populism has 1,000 offshoots, but a Southern League partisan in Alabama and an anti-nuclear dump activist in Allegany County, New York, are comrades in the nascent movement that is opposed, as Jerry Brown said in *Chronicles* (November 1994), to “a global focus over which we have virtually no control. . . . We have to force larger institutions to operate in the interest of local autonomy and local power. . . . Localism, if you really take it seriously, is going to interrupt certain patterns of modern growth and globalism.”

Plenty of us do take localism seriously, not in its denatured form (block grants! expedited HHS waivers! hoo boy!) but in the way our fathers understood it, which is to say the octopus must be slain, starting with its most dangerous tentacles (abolish the FBI and CIA, slash the war budget, strip absentee owners of TV and radio licenses, and then in the second hour . . .). This train may not be bound for glory, but at least we're not going to Pyongyang or Port-au-Prince or Kuwait City.

What began with Henry James shall end with Pete Townshend. Hey you patriots of all bloodlines, you Tacoma sons of Wobblers and Nebraska sons of Grangers and Tuskegee sons of Washington and Chicago daughters of America Firsters: let's get together before we get much older. c

Driving in Winter

by Hayden Head

Times are hard—hard like falling ice tapping
On my hood and windshield. The broken bits
Constitute an awkward arced mosaic,
Like San Vitale drained of green and gold
And life. Like winter. The blades are trapping
Constellated tesserae, and each fits
Compacted in an angle. Archaic
It seems to dream of times before this cold . . .
Belisarius sails with flags flapping,
Out of the east where Justinian sits
Codifying laws in tomes prosaic,
His image fixed by God knows who of old . . .
But random patterns of ice on machines
Suggest that, yes, we might return to dreams.