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## WESTERN SILVER AND THE TARIFF OF 1890

By H. WAYNE MORGAN\*

A GROUP of far western senators known as "Silver Republicans" gained national influence and political importance in the last decade of the nineteenth century. They were, by and large, men of intellect and political ability, committed to the causes of the west, the foremost of which was the free coinage of silver. In the forefront of this group of congressional leaders stood Henry Moore Teller, "The Defender of the West," who spoke for Colorado in the United States senate for 30 years, and whose words carried such conviction and earnestness that none denied his sincerity even as they disagreed with him. Second in importance and first in volubility was William M. Stewart, who represented Nevada in the senate for 30 years. This tall, silver haired silverite, the "Moses of the West," resembling nothing so much as a biblical prophet, went on many a good crusade and lent his eloquence and zeal to the silver movement with a fervor that matched and sometimes exceeded Teller's. These two men were the best known far western silver leaders of the decade, but they were joined then and later by other talent: Edward O. Wolcott of Colorado; John P. Jones of Nevada; Fred Dubois of Idaho; Frank Cannon of Utah; and others.<sup>1</sup>

In an age of fierce party strife and dramatic electioneering they cast their lot with the Republican party despite its constant wariness of their pet shibboleth, free silver, and its final rejection of the doctrine in 1896. They might quarrel with their eastern brethren on the silver question, but they adhered to the historic principles of the Republican party, and to none more strongly than the protective tariff. Though it was often said that the west had no interest in the tariff, the judgement is not borne out by the facts.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Teller was a senator from 1876 to 1882, and 1885 to 1909; Stewart from 1864 to 1875, and 1887 to 1905; Wolcott from 1889 to 1901; Cannon from 1895 to 1899; Jones from 1873 to 1903; and Dubois from 1891 to 1897.

2. Cf. James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States From the Compromise of 1850 to the McKinley-Bryan Campaign of 1896*, Volume VIII (New York, 1920), 355.

At first glance it may seem strange that the western states should be interested in a protective tariff which was allegedly devised for eastern manufacturing interests. Their relative isolation and lack of diversified economic development seemed to belie their interest in tariff protection. The reasons for their support of silver are patent—it was their basic industry—but their reasons for adhering to the tariff are not far to seek. The very fact that their economies were undeveloped and isolated swung these states behind the flag of protection and made their arguments in favor of the tariff seem logical; how else could they prevent the undermining of what economic progress they had made except through protection? Foreign competition in wool, hides, and mineral ores would greatly reduce their incomes.<sup>3</sup> It was for these interests, as well as silver, that the western legislators fought in Congress.

The turbulent fifty-first Congress of 1889-1891, the "Billion Dollar Congress" of Czar Tom Reed which concerned itself with legislation on the three great issues of the day—tariff, trusts, silver—found the westerners ready to break with their party unless favorable silver legislation was adopted, but extremely reluctant to abandon the tariff protection which meant so much to their constituents.

The western silverites went to the sessions of the fifty-first congress with grim faces; for once they were united in their determination to secure legislative relief for the depressed silver industry which meant so much to their section.<sup>4</sup> But even as they talked of silver they thought of the tariff. In numbers and eloquence they had "a very decided advantage in tariff legislation," John Sherman remembered.<sup>5</sup> One source of influence was their threat to block the passage of the McKinley tariff bill unless they were rewarded with satisfactory silver legislation. It was rumored that they were willing to disrupt the party if necessary. They had waited

3. Western interests petitioned Republican leaders from other states as well as their own representatives. Cf. C. T. Stevenson to John Sherman, September 25, 1890; John Sherman Papers, Library of Congress.

4. Fred Wellborn, "The Influence of the Silver Republican Senators, 1889-1891," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 14 (March, 1928), 462.

5. John Sherman, *Recollections of Forty Years in the House, Cabinet and Senate* (New York, 2 vols., 1895), II, 1084-85.

long enough for remedial silver legislation and had only seen deepening economic troubles in the west. Now they were desperate and determined.

While there were doubts about the lengths to which the westerners were willing to go in blocking the passage of a tariff bill in return for a silver bill, their adherence to the tariff was well known. Stewart never denied that he was a protectionist and with characteristic vigor and verbosity he answered many letters from constituents and critics who attacked the pending tariff bill in 1890. "I do not think that the country is suffering from protection; on the contrary, I believe that our protective tariff, although defective in many respects, is all that saves the country from ruin," he wrote one critic.<sup>6</sup> In response to demands from constituents, Stewart worked for protective duties on wool, mineral ores and other western products even before the tariff bill was sent to the senate.<sup>7</sup> Teller, then and later while the bill was being debated, supported protective duties on ores.<sup>8</sup> To the people of their states, the westerners justified protection on the grounds that while it benefitted the manufacturer and producer, it also benefitted the laborer with higher wages—the classic protectionist argument.<sup>9</sup> While the House Ways and Means Committee held hearings in the early spring of 1890, the westerners, especially Stewart, did their best for protection by assisting witnesses, bringing discreet pressure to bear, and making it clear that they stood for protection. In doing so they made it equally clear that their votes for the tariff would be secured at a price, and never ceased to remind their eastern colleagues that they held the balance of power in the evenly divided senate.

While debates on the tariff unfolded in the House, the Senate turned to silver. Stewart was confident that adequate

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6. William M. Stewart to Q. R. Cooley, February 17, 1890; William M. Stewart Papers, Nevada Historical Society, Reno, Nevada.

7. Stewart to Thomas Nelson, April 15, 1890; to W. G. van Horne, February 17, 1890; Stewart Papers.

8. *Congressional Record*, 51st Cong., 1st Sess., 9122ff.

9. Stewart to Hugh A. Teel, January 21, 1890; Stewart Papers. The argument was potent in Nevada, where competition from cheap Mexican labor was fierce.

remedial legislation would be passed.<sup>10</sup> It was the understanding among silverites, rightly or wrongly, that Harrison had pledged himself to silver prior to his election in 1888.<sup>11</sup> This supposed assurance, plus the fanaticism and real economic distress which motivated the westerners drove them on. Speaker Thomas B. Reed insisted that the silver delusion was temporary and that it would be dispelled as soon as prosperity showed its face in the west. Senator Stewart denied this. "Speaker Reed is mistaken; the excitement of the West is not temporary. It will last as long as contraction continues, and the people will have relief or know the reason why."<sup>12</sup> Though they talked constantly about the poverty of the "friends of silver," the westerners kept up a steady stream of correspondence and maintained strenuous speaking schedules that compensated for any lack of funds.<sup>13</sup> "Keep up the agitation," Stewart wrote a constituent. "It is the agitation from the outside that affects Congress."<sup>14</sup> Thus did they strengthen the image of their power, power that would place them in an excellent bargaining position if all else failed.

The debates in the Senate on the silver question revealed the stresses and strains at work within the Republican party in 1890, and as the days and weeks passed it became evident that once the tariff was passed by the House and sent to the Senate it would become the object of bargaining. Though the Senate seemed likely to pass a free coinage measure—which it did on June 17, 1890, by a vote of 42-25—any such bill would either die in the House or be vetoed by President Harrison. As early as January, Harrison had made it clear to Teller that he would veto any free coinage measure, and western hopes for free silver fell accordingly; the silverites

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10. Stewart to John A. Thompson, January 4, 1890; to T. B. Baker, January 4, 1890; *Ibid.*

11. George Rothwell Brown (ed.), *Reminiscences of Senator William M. Stewart of Nevada* (New York, 1908), 293.

12. Stewart to H. B. Kelly, March 11, 1890; Stewart Papers.

13. Cf. Stewart to L. H. Weller, February 3, 1890; *Ibid.*

14. Stewart to William D. Marvel, February 3, 1890; *Ibid.* In the same letter he wrote: "The pressure from outside is becoming strong and the feeling inside [Congress] is that something must be done."

then looked more to compromise but prepared to fight a hard battle.<sup>15</sup>

It was with all this in mind that they faced the tariff bill, which was sent to them after passing the House as a strict party measure on May 21, 1890. The Bill was committed to the Senate Finance Committee, awaiting disposition and debate, which now depended more and more on the stand taken by the westerners. The silverites at once prepared to use the tariff as a blade by which a suitable compromise might be turned on the silver question. But the silverites were not without their own troubles. Some of the western senators were from newly admitted states and were unsure of their status within the party. Lacking the tenure and prestige of Teller and Stewart, they hesitated to disrupt the party and fall from grace by opposing passage of administration sponsored legislation. That would anger the eastern and mid-western party leaders, who made it clear to the westerners that they must obey party discipline or face the prospect of an empty cupboard when patronage was passed out.<sup>16</sup> To kill time and solidify their lines, as well as to display their strength and importance to the Republican leaders, the silverites voted with the Democrats to delay debate on the tariff bill.<sup>17</sup>

Delay was a potent weapon in their hands, for as long as the tariff was suspended, eastern interests were unsettled and more and more pressure would be brought to bear for a compromise on the silver question so that other legislation could be passed. The importance of this was not lost upon the westerners; Stewart was heard to say that "there will be no tariff legislation this session unless a silver bill is passed."<sup>18</sup>

How much of this western talk was bluff and how much was sincere no one can say. That the westerners were hard

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15. James A. Barnes, *John G. Carlisle: Financial Statesman* (New York, 1931), 219-220.

16. Elmer Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller, Defender of the West* (Caldwell, Idaho, 1941), 190.

17. *Washington Post*, July 8, 1890.

18. Quoted in Barnes, *John G. Carlisle*, 186. Wolcott, acting for himself and Teller, made it clear that the tariff would suffer unless silver legislation was passed. Matilda Gresham, *Life of Walter Quintin Gresham* (Chicago, 2 vols., 1919), II, 638.

pressed cannot be denied; their constituents flooded them with mail in favor of a silver bill, and their personal commitments to the silver cause were such that they may well have thought it worth the sacrifice of party favor and the tariff to secure adequate results. So intransigent a position, however, had its drawbacks; should they maintain it, they might attain nothing in the end, and destroy party unity as well. As the heat of summer descended upon Washington with no relief in sight and amid rumors that Congress would be in session forever, the Senate settled wearily to its task.

Free coinage was obviously doomed because of administration opposition, and the "sound money" element in the House, but compromise was still possible. If free coinage could not be passed, the amount of silver to be purchased monthly under the proposed purchase plan might be increased in a manner acceptable to both houses and the President. The westerners, plagued by heat, party pressure, and criticism, held their ground for the best possible compromise measure. Confusion and rumor mounted in the newspapers as the compromisers made their rounds. It was said that Harrison, worried over the delay of tariff bill, called the westerners to the White House, together with McKinley and Reed, and finally offered to sign a measure providing for the free coinage of American silver only in return for western support of the McKinley bill. Stewart and Jones of Nevada supposedly agreed; Reed and McKinley reluctantly agreed to steer the measure through the House; but the plan was upset by Teller and Wolcott of Colorado.<sup>19</sup> Similar stories drifted through Washington during June and July, but all were emphatically denied by the alleged participants. "No such interview ever occurred or the equivalent or the like of it," Reed wrote later with characteristic bluntness. "I will add that I never at any time heard even a rumor of such a proposition, nor of anything that could give rise to such a remarkable story."<sup>20</sup> McKinley denied with equal vigor that he had ever partici-

19. Edward O. Wolcott to Thomas B. Reed, March 15, 1894; copy in Henry M. Teller Papers, State Historical Society of Colorado, Denver, Colorado. Wolcott himself denied the story in the letter transmitting the charge.

20. Thomas B. Reed to Edward O. Wolcott, March 16, 1894; copy in *Ibid.*

pated in any such deals, implicitly or explicitly. "The so-called interview with President Harrison I never heard of until the letter of Mr Ezekial which you enclosed," he wrote. "The whole story is without foundation or truth. . . ." <sup>21</sup> In view of his already announced opposition to free silver of any kind, it is unlikely that Harrison made any move toward such an agreement. He realized that the cards were his to play; all the westerners could hope to gain was more generous purchase terms in the silver purchase plan.

By late June the crucial moment had come. The silver men realized that further alienation of eastern Republicans would be fatal, lest they in turn refuse to pass any silver legislation at all, even if it meant failure of the tariff. The eastern interests, for their part, were willing to compromise with silver and the west to pass the tariff and other legislation. In the end a compromise was reached among the senators who were most concerned with the problem, for the westerners would not proceed until they were assured of relief. A bill in hand was worth more to them than two in the hopper, and only after they were assured of the compromise Sherman plan of July 14, 1890, would they proceed. <sup>22</sup> The westerners recognized that their victory had not been won for silver but for parliamentary dispatch and to facilitate administration legislation. "That is why the Republicans yielded not to free coinage, but to what they thought was a lesser evil, what they thought would answer the purpose of satisfying the Silver Republicans and secure their votes," Teller said years later. <sup>23</sup> Western pressure was indeed responsible for the compromise which took form under the guidance of John Sherman, whose name adorned the bill despite his insistence then and later that he would gladly never have supported it.

21. William McKinley to Henry M. Teller, March 17, 1894; *Ibid.* McKinley, himself a convinced bi-metallist, voted against free coinage in the House of Representatives where he was chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, and next to Reed, the most influential Republican leader.

22. Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller*, 192; Thomas F. Dawson, *Life and Character of Edward O. Wolcott* (New York, 2 vols., 1911), I, 210; Effie Mona Mack, "Life and Letters of William M. Stewart," (Unpublished dissertation, Ph.D., Berkeley, 1930), 222-23. Teller was the least satisfied of the silverites with the resulting compromise.

23. *Congressional Record*, 54th Cong., 1st Sess., 4561; April 29, 1896.



In fact, the compromise—or some compromise—was acceptable to eastern and midwestern politicians, for their constituents had also been smitten by the silver siren. Moreover, many of them were sincere bi-metallists. Harrison and his Secretary of the Treasury, William Windom, had seen the writing on the wall and were willing to support some measure favorable to silver.<sup>24</sup> While the administration supporters would not accept free coinage, despite the Senate's willingness to adopt such legislation, they sought to prove the sincerity of their bi-metallism by compromising on the Sherman plan, which called for the monthly purchase of 4,500,000 ounces of silver by the issuance of United States Treasury notes, which in turn, so the silverites hoped, would bring monetary inflation and a rise in the price of silver.

Once assured of favorable silver legislation and convinced that they had done as well as they could, the westerners joined the regular Republicans and assisted in bringing the tariff to the floor for debate. Once committed to the compromise the westerners adhered to the bargain and voted dutifully for the McKinley bill. Stewart was active on behalf of his interests, and was busy in committee room and corridor, listening to visitors and gathering information. One of the cardinal principles of the McKinley bill as passed by the House was free sugar, a measure designed largely to reduce the revenue. The beet sugar growers of Nevada and the west rushed to Stewart; the Senator's head was seen to nod; he agreed. Free sugar would ruin the beet growers. Free sugar appealed especially to farmers and workers who felt that a tax on sugar was a tax on their tables. "The sugar question is in a bad way," Stewart wrote a constituent. "The farmers of the West have got an idea that it was a tax upon them without any benefit, which is an absurd idea. Now of all times we need a duty on sugar."<sup>25</sup> As finally passed, the act provided a bounty for domestic sugar growers in lieu of tariff protection.

24. Robert F. Hoxie, "The Silver Debate of 1890," *Journal of Political Economy* (September, 1893), 535-587.

25. Stewart to L. L. Robinson, June 19, 1890; Stewart Papers.

Debate on the tariff in the Senate began in late July and moved forward with the heat at a snail's pace. Stewart was active on behalf of wool, ore, and other interests. He rose several times during the debate to defend the protective principle; the tariff was not a tax, he insisted in reply to standard Democratic charges. If it brought higher prices in the beginning, it brought higher wages and greater productivity in the end, while prices ultimately declined.<sup>26</sup> When Senator Gray insisted that the nation's prosperity was due to free trade within the country, Stewart cornered him with the assertion that such free trade was maintained by protection, which kept out foreign competition.<sup>27</sup>

On the whole, the silverites spoke little during the long tariff debates, which consumed so much time and temper in the hot weeks of late summer, and they seemed unruffled by the interminable delays which prevented voting on the measure. Teller opposed all attempts at closure on debate, sponsored by Nelson Aldrich and other party leaders anxious to expedite business.<sup>28</sup> It was doubtless a blessing that the silverites did not speak, for when one of them arose the chamber generally emptied. They sang but a single song—free silver—and no matter what the subject at hand, it came in time to a history of the silver movement. Stewart, darkly clad, his motions accented by a flowing white beard, could speak endlessly upon the subject. Teller spoke with more authority and greater precision, but his monologues were quite as extensive. The Founding Fathers were called forth to testify; figures poured forth like the water from the rock which Moses struck.

Yet for all their verbiage, there were grains of wheat in the chaff of the westerners' speeches, especially those concerned with tariff protection. The tariff was a canon of faith as well as a party principle with them no less than with their eastern counterparts. The rates accorded them on wool, hides, and ores were crucial to the economic development of their states. With silver depressed, they could ill afford lower duties

26. *Congressional Record*, 51st Cong., 1st Sess., 9337.

27. *Ibid.*, 9127.

28. See Teller's remarks on August 4, 1890, in *Ibid.*, 8105; Ellis, *Henry Moore Teller*, 193.

on their other products. To choose between gold and the tariff required the wisdom of Solomon and the dexterity of David. ". . . I do not yield to any member of this body in my devotion to the protective system," Teller declared during the debates. "I believe in it. I believe it is essential to the prosperity of the American people."<sup>29</sup> The long efforts at compromise on the silver question pursued by the westerners is eloquent testimony to their unwillingness to abandon their party principles and especially protection except as a last resort. Their final decision to do so came only after soul searching that reduced Teller to tears in the Republican national convention in 1896. Their failure in that election was to prove to many of them that they could not survive outside the Republican party.

Still the tariff debates went on though party leaders and business interests pressed for action. Delay was now chargeable to the Democrats. By late July, 1890, Stewart thought that the tariff bill would be passed in a month or six weeks.<sup>30</sup> September came and the debates and debators began to run down. There was a rush to pass the tariff, complete unfinished business and get home for the pending congressional elections in November. Stewart spoke not only for his exhausted colleagues but also for an enervated public when he wrote: "Both houses are tired out, anxious to get away, and nothing can be done until the tariff bill is disposed of, and then it will be difficult to keep them together on any other important business."<sup>31</sup> The westerners, along with many regular Republicans, had their private doubts about the McKinley tariff, but faithful to their pledge, they voted for it. "Upon my judgment I would never have voted for the McKinley Bill," Teller later admitted frankly.<sup>32</sup> The bill was passed and became law with Harrison's signature on October 1, 1890. Congress adjourned and the harried legislators departed to explain the fifty-first Congress to their constituents.

Would the silver men actually have forced the defeat of

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29. *Congressional Record*, 51st Cong., 1st sess., 8105.

30. Stewart to F. A. McDermid, July 26, 1890; Stewart Papers.

31. Stewart to C. C. Goodwin, September 2, 1890; *Ibid.*

32. *Congressional Record*, 54th Cong., 1st Sess., 4561-62.

the tariff in order to attain silver legislation? The final answer to the question will never be known, for their movements are shrouded. That they were grimly determined to attain success for silver was amply evident then and later on; but that they would have disrupted the party, created a stalemate, thrown away their party influence, and abandoned the tariff to which they were as fully committed as the easterners is not so evident. The hopelessness of passing free coinage legislation after Harrison's stand became clear swung them more and more to compromise. Their threat was no doubt as potent as the possibility of their carrying it out, for the party's control of the Senate as well as the tariff hung in the balance. This, as well as the willingness of many eastern and mid-western Republicans to compromise on a silver purchase plan led in the end to a solution which, by no means permanent or even palatable to all westerners, at least delayed the evil day of reckoning.

The role of the westerners in the great tariff debates of 1890 was that of orthodox protectionists; their adherence to the doctrine was never questioned. The dilemma they faced was a possible choice between silver and the tariff; ultimately they had parts of both and were permitted to eat a portion of their cake and have it too. The tariff question, like its silver counterpart, was by no means dead; half the coming decade would be consumed by these two issues, and the tariff question was not finally settled until passage of the ultra-protectionist Dingley bill of 1897. But as they made the long journey home to face their constituents in the fall of 1890, the western silverites could proclaim their adherence to protection, and could still, in that sense at least, consider themselves orthodox Republicans.

[Territorial New Mexico was also interested in tariff protection for silver. Editor.]