

William Jennings Bryan and the ideals of the Declaration of Independence, 1895

Introduction

In 1895, William Jennings Bryan wrote to I. J. Dunn, an Omaha lawyer and president of the Jackson Club, to decline an invitation to speak at the local Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner, an annual event held by the Democratic Party. Bryan, a politician from Nebraska, was already a national political figure who had served two terms in the House of Representatives (1890 and 1892) and would win the Democratic nomination for president of the United States in 1896. His letter expresses his political beliefs and draws upon the ideals of Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson.

Bryan compared contemporary events in business and banking to Jackson's destruction of the Bank of the United States and then concentrated on Jefferson's statement in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal":

Of the self-evident truths set forth in that immortal document the declaration that "All men are created equal" is the most important because it is the most fundamental and comprehends all the others. Its application now would solve aright the questions which vex the civilized world, and would both remove the abuses of legislative power encouraged by our own government and add to the laws we now have such additional statutes as are necessary to protect each citizen in the enjoyment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Bryan would become the youngest major-party presidential candidate when he earned the Democratic and Populist nominations in 1896 at the age of thirty-six, and would run two more times (1900 and 1908). Throughout the rest of his political career, Bryan would support legislation that helped achieve his understanding of Jefferson's ideal:

- **Economic reform:** government control of currency and banking, regulations regarding trusts and corporate monopolies, the Federal Reserve Act, the Federal Trade Commission, the Federal Farm Loan Act, tariff reform
- **Public policy:** government regulation of the railroad and telegraph/telephone as well as safety devices and pure food processing, establishment of departments of health, education and labor, promotion of public parks, defense of rights of minorities, legislation to provide for liberal equal-time consideration of Darwinian evolution and Biblical creationism in the public schools
- **Labor reform:** workers' compensation, the minimum wage, the eight-hour day, improved conditions for seamen and railroad employees, prohibition of injunctions in labor disputes

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- **Political reform:** regulation of political campaign contributions, voting reform, public disclosure of newspaper ownership and the signing of editorials, the Sixteenth, Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Amendments to the Constitution (graduated income tax, direct election of senators, prohibition of liquor, woman suffrage)
- **Anti-imperialism**

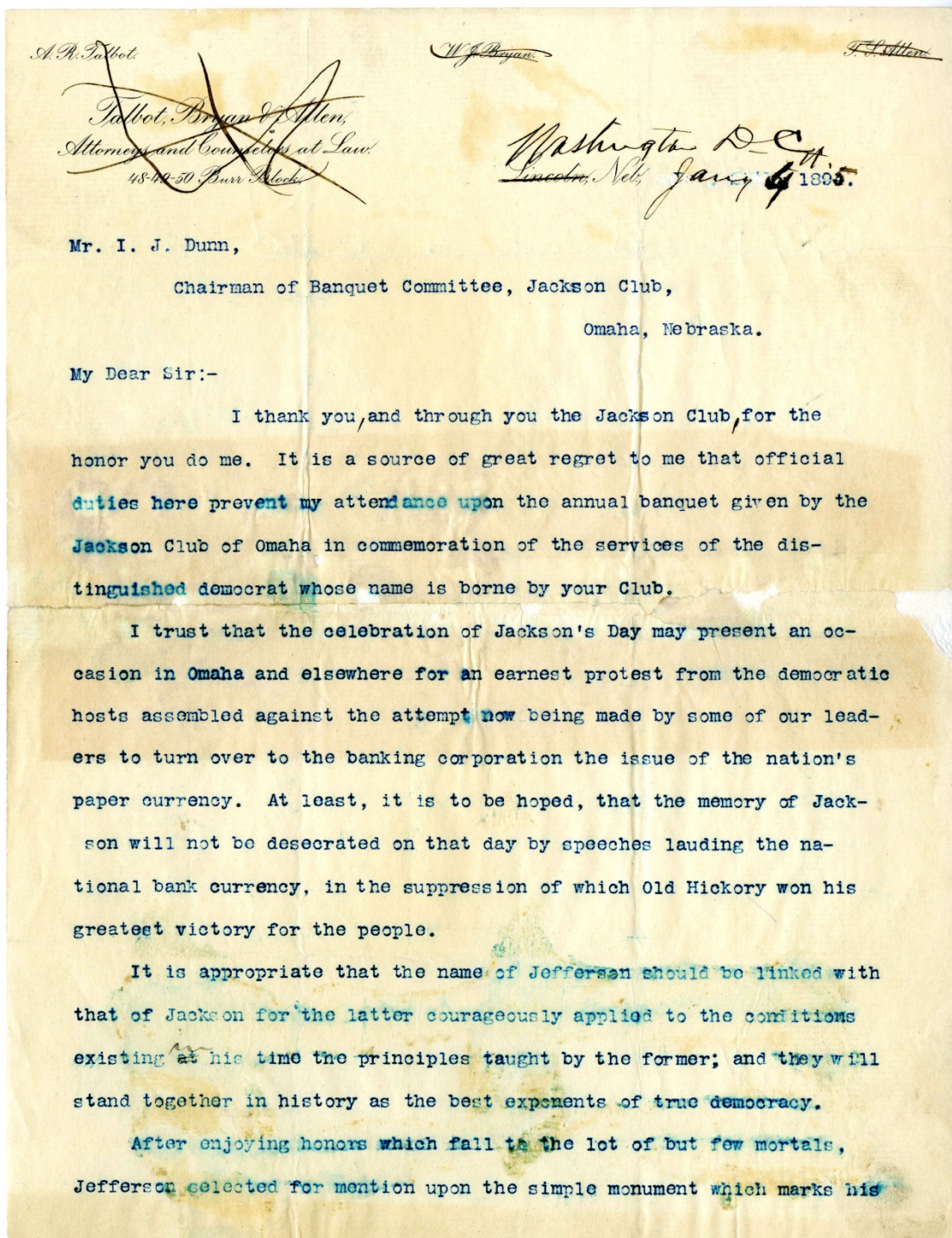
Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the letter. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions using evidence from the document:

1. From his letter, first identify and then explain William Jennings Bryan's concerns about the proper role of government.
2. In what way did Bryan fear that the ideals within the Declaration of Independence were being threatened?
3. How did Bryan explain his admiration and respect for Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson?
4. With which of today's major political parties and / or political philosophies would Bryan most agree? Explain and defend your response.
5. What positions did Bryan support that were most responsible for his nominations as a presidential candidate and his defeats in three national elections?

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Image



William Jennings Bryan to I.J. Dunn re: views on free coinage of silver, January 1, 1895 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07189), p 1.

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A. A. Talbot *W. J. Bryan* *F. L. Allen*

Talbot, Bryan & Allen
Attorneys and Counselors at Law
48-49-50 Burr Block

I. J. D. 2.
Lincoln, Neb.

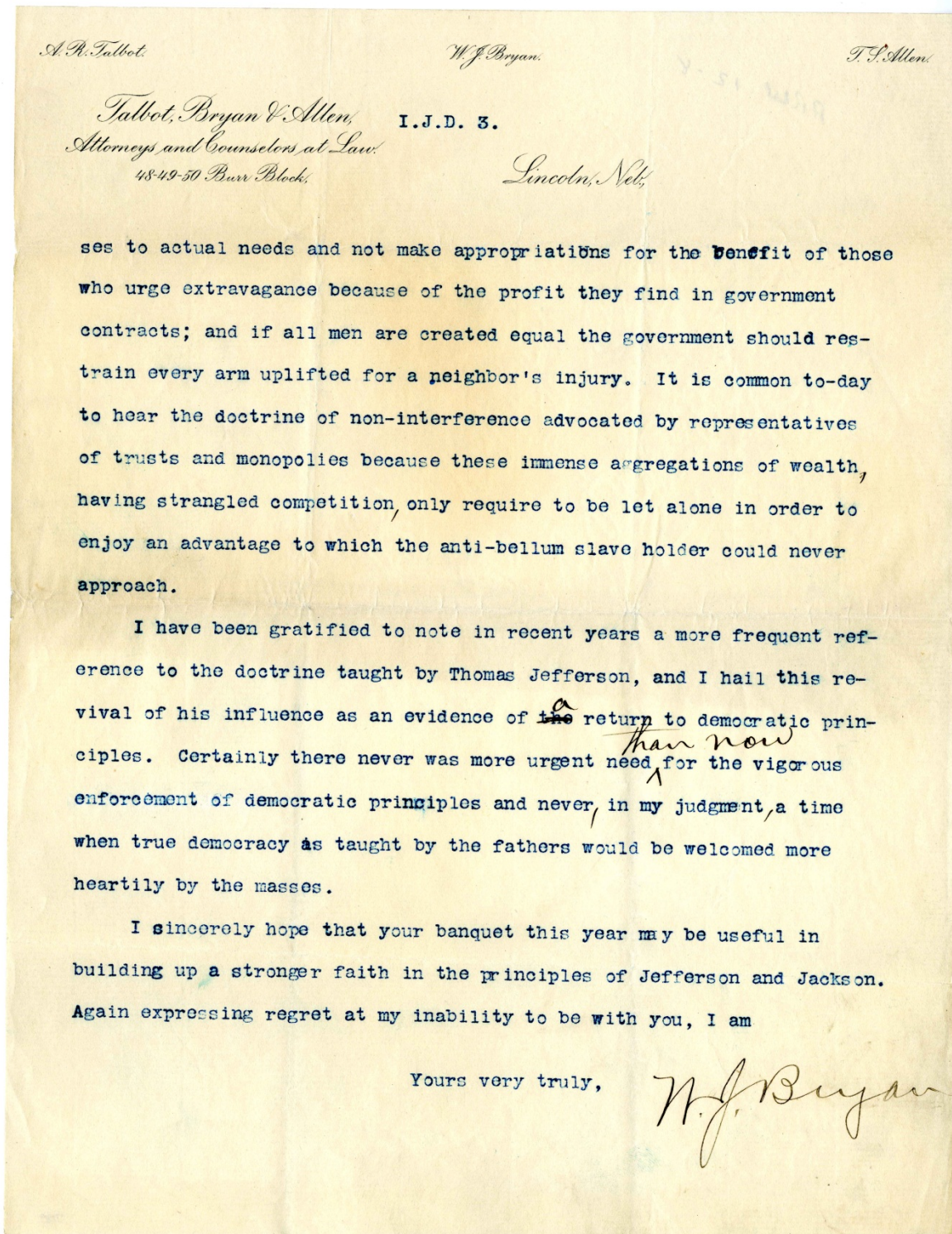
resting place the three things which he thought most important in the work of his life, namely, the authorship of the Declaration of Independence, ~~and~~ ^{*the authorship of*} the statute of Virginia securing religious liberty and the establishment of the University of Virginia.

He might have allowed his fame to rest securely upon the first of these great works, for the Declaration of American Independence will ever present to the lovers of liberty the principles which must underlie every ~~democratic~~ form of democratic government. Of the self-evident truths set forth in that immortal document the declaration that "All men are created equal" is the most important because it is the most fundamental and comprehends all others. Its application now would solve aright the questions which vex the civilized world, and would both remove the abuses of legislative power encouraged by our own government and add to the laws we now have such additional statutes as are necessary to protect each citizen in the enjoyment of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

If all men are created equal the government ~~will not~~ ^{*should*} ~~be~~ a protective tariff, collect money from the many and give it to the few; if all men are created equal, government should not legislate to make the dollar cheaper in the interest of the debtor nor dearer in the interest of the creditor, nor should it surrender to private corporations the sovereign right to issue paper money as well as other forms of money; if all men are created equal, the government should limit expen-

William Jennings Bryan to I.J. Dunn re: views on free coinage of silver, January 1, 1895 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07189), p 2.

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William Jennings Bryan to I.J. Dunn re: views on free coinage of silver, January 1, 1895 (The Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC07189), p 3.