

## **DBQ 13: THE FARMERS' REVOLT**

### Historical Context

Farmers, farming, and country life have always held a special place in the hearts of Americans. Years ago, Thomas Jefferson expressed this when he said

*Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God,  
if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made  
His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue.*

Even today, poets, politicians, artists, movies, and advertisers romanticize the “simple joys and virtues” of country living. During our early history, and well into the nineteenth century, America remained largely a land of farms and small country towns. But in the late nineteenth century, farm life for many Americans became harsh and frustrating—far different from the happy myth. Farm income dropped as new farm lands were opened and new machines and methods increased crop yields. Those with smaller farms, poorer lands, or limited resources could not compete against larger, more mechanized farms. Farmers by the thousands went broke and fled to the cities.

For the farmers who failed, and for those who struggled and barely succeeded, these were difficult times. Working day after day, from dawn to dusk, and having little or nothing to show for their efforts; watching their wives work and worry themselves to early deaths; seeing their children abandon the farm for the cities—these were the personal agonies shared by thousands across America’s agricultural South and West.

The farm crisis came to a head in the 1890s with the organization of the Populist Party. This political party, made up mainly of Southern and Western farmers, hoped to wrest political control of the country from the Democratic and Republican parties and try to solve the problems plaguing rural America. In the presidential election of 1896, the Populists almost succeeded in winning the White House. But, in the end, they failed. Today, fewer than 3 percent of Americans live and work on farms.

- **Directions:** The following question is based on the accompanying documents (1–6). As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of each document and the author’s point of view. Be sure to
1. Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?
  2. Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes.
  3. Based on your own knowledge and on the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.
  4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
  5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

**Question: What caused the farmers’ plight in the late nineteenth century, and how did farmers propose to resolve these problems?**

**DBQ 13: THE FARMERS' REVOLT, CONTINUED****Document 1**

These are excerpts from the 1892 Populist Party platform. In 1892, the Populist Party met in Omaha, Nebraska, where its leaders nominated James Weaver for president. Here are some important statements and demands from the platform.

We believe that the time has come when the railroad corporations will either own the people or the people must own the railroads.

We demand free and unlimited coinage of silver and gold at the present legal ratio of sixteen to one.

We demand a graduated income tax.

Transportation being a means of exchange and a public necessity, the government should own and operate the railroads in the interest of the people.

**Document 2**

Washington Gladden was a prominent clergyman in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who believed in applying Christian principles to the social problems of the day. This is an excerpt from an article Gladden wrote in 1890. (From "The Embattled Farmers," published in the *Forum*, November, 1890.)

The American farmer is steadily losing ground. His burdens are heavier every year and his gains are more meager; he is beginning to fear that he may be sinking into a servile condition. . . . The causes of this lamentable state of things are many . . . protective tariffs, trusts . . . speculation in farm products, over-greedy middlemen, and exorbitant transportation rates. . . . The enormous tribute [payment] which the farmers of the West are paying to the money-lenders of the East, is one source of their poverty. Scarcely a week passes that does not bring to me circulars from banking firms and investment agencies all over the West begging for money to be loaned on farms at eight or nine per cent. . . .

**Document 3**

Here is an excerpt from a magazine article, "Causes of Agricultural Unrest," written by James Laurence Laughlin and published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in November of 1896. Laughlin was a professor of economics at the University of Chicago as well as a prominent supporter of the gold standard and opponent of the Populists.

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The simple facts that we produce more wheat than we consume, and that, consequently, the price of the whole crop is determined, not by the markets within this country, but by the world-markets, are sufficient to put wheat, as regards its price, in a different class from those articles whose markets are local. Feeling the coils of some mysterious power about them, the farmers, in all honesty, have attributed their misfortunes to the "constriction" in prices, caused, as they think, not by an increased production of wheat throughout the world, but by the "scarcity of gold." . . . This explanation of low prices as caused by insufficient gold is so far-fetched that its general use seems inexplicable.

**Document 4**

The poet Vachel Lindsay was born in Springfield, Illinois, in 1879 and was raised and educated in the Midwest. This stanza comes from one of his poems entitled "BRYAN, BRYAN, BRYAN, BRYAN: The Campaign of Eighteen Ninety-six, as Viewed at the Time by a Sixteen Year Old, etc." (Reprinted with the permission of Simon & Schuster from *The Collected Works of Vachel Lindsay*, New York: Macmillan, 1925.)

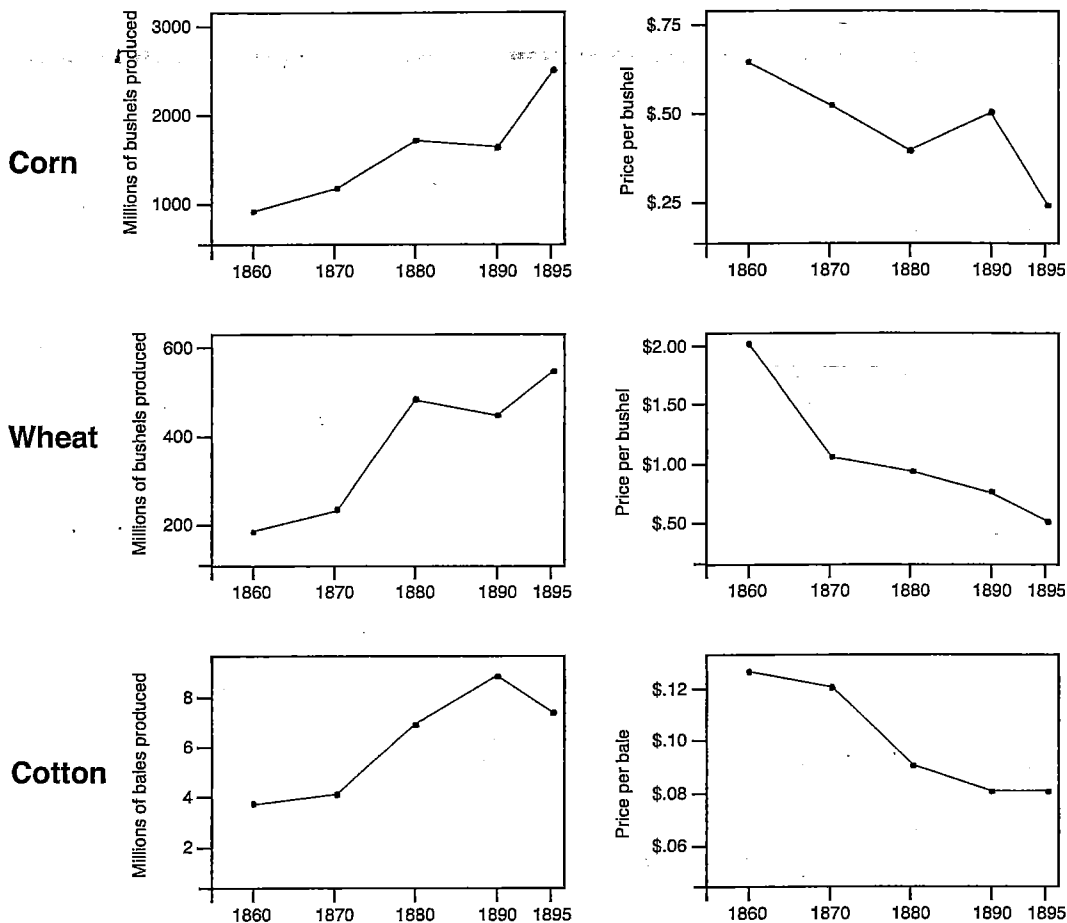
Election night at midnight:  
Boy Bryan's defeat.  
Defeat of western silver.  
Defeat of the wheat.  
Victory of letterfiles  
And plutocrats in miles  
With dollar signs upon their coats,  
Diamond watchchains on their vests  
And spats on their feet.  
Victory of custodians.  
Plymouth Rock,  
And all that inbred landlord stock.  
Victory of the neat.  
Defeat of the aspen groves of Colorado valleys,  
The blue bells of the Rockies,  
And blue bonnets of old Texas,  
By the Pittsburgh alleys.  
Defeat of alfalfa and the Mariposa lily.  
Defeat of the Pacific and the long Mississippi.  
Defeat of the young by the old and silly.  
Defeat of tornadoes by the poison vats supreme.  
Defeat of my boyhood, defeat of my dream.

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**DBQ 13: THE FARMERS' REVOLT, CONTINUED**

**Document 5**

**Production and Prices, 1860–1895**



**Document 6**

Here is an excerpt from a letter written by a farmer to the editor of a Populist newspaper in Lincoln, Nebraska. (F. Houchin to the editor of *Wealth Makers*, May 1, 1895. Reprinted with the permission of Harvard University Press from *A Populist Response to Industrial America*, by Norman Pollack.)

We will get permanent relief only when the government owns the railroads and when we have government banks where we can get money at a small rate of interest.