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# Wright Patman: Twentieth-Century Populist

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History is etched in stone by the mason of the city for the city, but what history is remembered of the quarry from which the stone came? Much of American history is innately urban. It seizes on information that came originally from media capitals, and views the political workings of Washington D.C. or the economic decisions of great urban-based corporations as the sum of American history. This bias applies to the long and scattered history of the once popular Populist Party. It is widely accepted that the rural-based populist movement died with the merging of the democratic and populist parties in the late nineteenth century. But through leaders such as Wright Patman, a fifty-year Texas Congressman (1929-1976), the ideals of populism persisted. The basic principles associated with populism were ingrained in Patman from his poor-farm-boy childhood and he carried these ideals into his political career, and even to his death; Patman truly was a twentieth-century populist.

The Populist Party of the nineteenth century, widely known as the People's Party, was a third-party movement intended to relieve the difficulties facing the common man of the time. The ordinary people of the late nineteenth century were none other than

America's primary food producers, the farmers. Farmers were incredibly important to the nation but their income, or rather lack of income due to falling crop prices, made being a farmer exceedingly trying. The populist platform centered on resolving monetary issues. Specifically the platform included banking reform, graduated income tax, and free and unlimited coinage of silver. These issues again point back to the main issue of the party, which was getting money into circulation for the common people. This idea of giving money back stems from the fact that the members of the People's Party grew up in desperate situations. Experiences with indebtedness, and destitution—the absence of money—led individuals of the party to seek money and even become obsessed with earning and keeping said money. This led to the underlying principle found within the Populist Party, money fixation.[1]

Before examining Patman as the true populist, it is helpful to note some quasi-populists. Some historians credit President's Harry Truman, and Lyndon Johnson, for instance, for their "populist instincts." They view the twentieth-century populism of these presidents as both urban and rural, and imply that Americans living in smaller towns were every bit as interested in Housing Acts, increased minimum-wage, healthcare, and public works as urban Americans. But in fact, these Presidents did not fixate on the monetary issue. Populists like Patman were much more concerned about financial questions—low interest rates, bonuses, and the fight against the financial elite, including the Federal Reserve, than they were with insuring welfare for the urban workforce. The life of Wright Patman shows the persistence of a more genuine populist movement into the twentieth century, obsessed with eliminating destitution, and fixated on money. [2]

John Wright Patman was born into this impecuniosity August 6, 1893 in the small area near Hughes Springs, Texas known as Patman's Switch.[3] The narrow corner of the state between the Red and Sabine rivers was a stronghold of nineteenth-century populism. The area of Northeast Texas began before 1826 as a kind of "No Man's Land" between Spanish and American claims along the Arkansas border (Figure 1). Northeast Texas was also the home of the famous populist, James Davis. Known as the "Texas Cyclone" Davis was one of the most effective populist orators of the nineteenth century. It was an area filled with small tracts of land, tenant farmers, and sharecroppers. One son of a sharecropper, William Owens, later claimed it was a land "too pore [sic.] to sprout peas." These poor conditions nursed resentment toward the more fortunate and larger cities outside the area. Living in such conditions caused residents to become interdependent, creating a sense of family within the community. This accounts for Patman's strong connection to the people whom he represented, the people who kept Patman in office.[4]

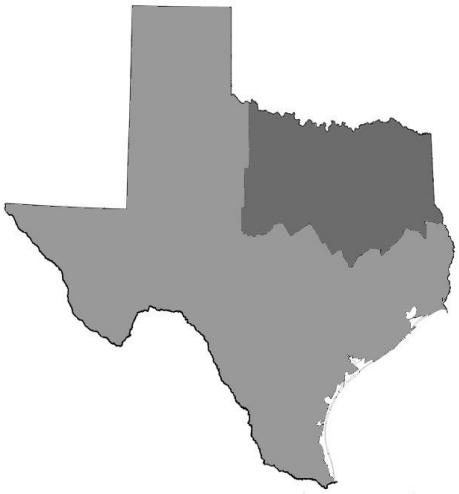


**Figure 1-Northeast Texas**

As the only male child of his household, Patman worked alongside his father to help the family make ends meet, and still the family, like many other families in the area, just barely survived, year by year. Patman did have one escape from his life of labor, education. Perhaps for this reason Patman became very driven not just in school but also in life. During his years in high school Patman rode his horse six miles every day to the nearest

school, located in Hughes Springs, in order to attain his education. Because Patman's family could not afford the tuition of the school Wright had to work as a school janitor in order to relieve the burden of debt off of his parents. By building fires in the morning and sweeping up at night Patman paid for the education he so desired. Patman's own money fixation also resulted in part from his romantic life. Patman's courtship of a young lady was promptly rejected because her father often had seen Patman, walking without shoes. This served to solidify his negative view of wealth, and lower status in the world.[5]

Church and religion were also very important to the area. But it was the kind of religious life that would help mold Patman as a populist fighter. His mother, Emma, was a rigorous Primitive Baptist, and she expected to hear Bible verses from her children as well as summaries over what was said at church every Sunday. Growing up in a strict church without musical instruments or a learned clergy, Patman gained a willingness to contest the elite later.[6] Unlike many of his fellow classmates, and the children with whom he grew up, Patman was able to graduate from High School in 1912 and even had the honor of graduating as the valedictorian of his class. Though he might have seemed a candidate for wealth and riches, a promising up-and-comer, Patman was pessimistic about how much could be gained, growing up poor and isolated. He blamed big city editors and clergymen for setting expectations and for leading "the youth to start a struggle to become congressmen, foreign ministers, major generals, or to get some equally absurd station in life." Patman argued that as a result, people "rush into some business they know nothing about, thinking that to be a lawyer or merchant, whether fitted for that position or not, is more honorable than being a farmer or mechanic."[7]

Patman's valedictorian address did support the ideas of self-discipline and self-improvement. However, Patman also saw how an exalted work ethic did not necessarily heighten the status of a young man. When he entered Cumberland Law School in Lebanon, Tennessee, he experienced another phase of destitution. At first it seemed that his future was brighter, as he had stored up extra cotton during his summers. But on the train ride to Tennessee, Patman's luggage and some of his money was stolen. He also learned that the warehouse where he had stored his cotton in Galveston had been destroyed. Once again, Patman had to fixate on money and conserving what little money he had. At Cumberland, Patman lived in a hideous shack miles away from campus, without running water. He was never seen taking a cool drink or even going out on a date with a young lady because he had to save every penny if he wanted to keep up with his tuition. On the other hand, because Cumberland was also inexpensive it was the perfect school for Patman. The law school did not require any previous college work and the LL.B degree was awarded after one year of legal training. However inexpensive, Cumberland also had alumni in high positions. Patman himself explained the school's success as:

> It's kind of like the dog going along on the farm. All at once a rabbit jumps up in front of the dog, and the dog takes after the rabbit. All his interest was to catch the rabbit and maybe get a bite of the rabbit meat, or at least win the race. But that rabbit was running for his life, and he always won because he had his life at stake. That's the way the boys were from Lebanon; they had their lives at stake and they were trying to win the race.

Though able to attend law school, Patman saw himself as a "rabbit running for his life," rather than a young man with blue horizons.

Not surprisingly, considering the poverty he knew in Tennessee, and his appreciation of his fellow Texans as noted in his valedictory address, Patman returned to Northeast Texas. Again, an economic struggle ensued. His first efforts at beginning in law ended in failure. This relative failure however, along with a sense of national duty, did lead to Patman's enrollment into the military and his later involvement with veteran affairs.[8] After being honorably discharged from his duties as a first lieutenant of the U.S. Guards, Patman began a serious political career. Like other earlier populist leaders, Patman did not wait to become a success in order to enter politics. His lack of success, and willingness to represent a frustrated people provided all the momentum he needed. Patman was against big businesses, and elitism in government. Also true to a populist nature, Patman advocated the support of rural communities and the people who made up the community; this support was most needed in the form of monetary compensation. Many Northeast Texas voters loved the idea of having a representative like Wright Patman who was truly one of them. They were not appalled, but they appreciated Patman when he took on the Texarkana Chamber of Commerce over their use of alcohol, and supported farm relief bills that national economists dismissed as silly.[9]

In 1920 Patman sought election into the Texas State Legislature. Having enough votes from his impoverished constituency he won a seat in the House without much difficulty. In the summer of 1921, a special legislative session was held at the urging of Governor Pat Neff. It was during this session where Patman began his short-lived struggle

with the Ku Klux Klan. As with former Populists like Tom Watson who were willing to see African Americans as victims rather than as problems, Patman believed the Klan to be "'un-American' and 'opposed to the true principles and fundamentals of a democratic government.'" In fact, the Klan had little to do with the economic issues that Patman thought were important, and he saw no deliverance for the rural poor coming from their work. Klan members retaliated by targeting Patman and his family. Klansman called the Patmans at home at all hours of the night, sliced Patman's car tires, and threw bricks at the Patman home. But Patman would not be distracted from economic issues. At this point in his life, he believed too that African-Americans were racially inferior, and even supported a bill against intermarriage. But African-Americans were not the culprits who were causing children to go to bed hungry at night. They shared in the plight of the people he cared about. [10]

After Patman was elected as Congressman of Texas's 1st District in 1928, he concentrated immediately on populist issues. More specifically, Patman shocked Washington-D.C.-insiders by crusading for a bonus to be paid to World War I veterans for their services. Patman first presented the Veteran's Bonus Bill as early as 1929 as H.R. 3493. The goal of the bill was to fund the immediate payment of the World War I veterans' adjusted-service-compensation certificates. This immediate payment would place more currency into circulation and would greatly help many of the jobless veterans buy necessities. However, many fellow politicians felt wary. Even many liberal democrats opposed the scheme as they thought it would start an inflationary spiral. Although Patman's initiative seems today like a standard liberal idea to get the economy moving, at the time such a fight for "army veterans" had a peculiarly populist connotation. In the

spring of 1894, "General" Jacob Coxey, a populist, had led an "army" to Washington for a program of public works. Though his army had not necessarily been composed of actual "veterans," the idea of an "army" in Washington, an army of the poor, begging for help, began to take shape again in 1932, when veterans assembled to ask for the bonus Patman had fought for.[11]

**Figure 2-Representative Wright Patman (Tx) receiving petitions from World War I veterans on January 21, 1931**

Like Coxey's Army, the Bonus Army set up residence in the District of Colombia in order to make a statement (Figure 2). By physically going to Washington the marchers forced congressmen to see them and notice their lack of jobs and money. These marches intended to help push through legislation that would help alleviate the conditions the marchers were living in. Both armies met resistance. Policemen were ordered to remove the marchers, by force, if necessary. In the case of Coxey's army, the movement failed because no legislation was written to help the marchers. Their journey was in vain.[12] The story behind the Bonus march is slightly different than that of Coxey's Army. The Veterans Bonus Bill was written before the march took place. It was because the bill was not being supported that the marchers decided to make their own journey. Like Coxey's Army the

Bonus Army became desperate, and their detractors labeled them as a threat to the nation. Patman worried about these accusations, but never wavered in his support for the Bonus Bill.[13] "By contrast, even with 30,000 veterans at his porch," President Herbert Hoover persuaded Congress to vote down immediate payment of the bonus because of its $2.4 billion cost.[14]

Though the Veterans Bonus Bill was initially defeated, Patman refused to give up on the prospect of getting money out to a deserving people. At the time, one major opponent of the Bonus Bill was Treasury Secretary, Andrew Mellon who believed the extra spending "would cause a deficit in the national budget and thus precipitate economic instability." When the bill did pass in the House, and later in the Senate, it was promptly vetoed by President Hoover. Hoover, who was influenced by his Treasury Secretary, did not want to give away money to a special class of individuals, many of whom were healthy and middle-aged. Patman, however, continued his battle for the bonus by going after Mellon. Like his populist predecessor, Cyclone Davis who had denounced the great railroad leaders, and the former Texas governor, Jim Hogg, who once tried to extradite John D. Rockefeller, Patman went after the foremost symbol of the eastern money establishment, Andrew Mellon.[15]

Andrew Mellon was the embodiment of everything Patman fought against; everything a populist would fight against. Mellon was born in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, and had a father who was both a banker and a judge. Mellon was a figurehead of the Eastern moneyed interests who as Secretary of the Treasury had served with three U.S. Presidents. He was also one of the richest men in America.[16] However, for Patman, Mellon was nothing but the puppeteer of Congress. The idea of a financier controlling politics appalled Patman.

Thus the Texas Congressman announced to the House on January 6, 1932: "I impeach Andrew Williams Mellon, Secretary of the Treasury of the United States for high crimes and misdemeanors." Not only did this accusation shock the entire House, but the public as well. Reporters flocked to cover the issue as Mellon's followers raised their voices to condemn Patman for bringing forth such charges.[17]

Patman's catalog of charges against the Secretary of the Treasury was a long and meandering list. Many of Mellon's violations from Patman's viewpoint were caused by conflicts of interest:

> While serving in the Cabinet, he together with members of his family retained ownership of substantial numbers of shares of voting stock in over 300 corporations engaged in worldwide trade and commerce. Such businesses . . . were under the auspices of the Treasury Department. The Coast Guard, too, was under the Secretary's direction. Yet he owned several steamships which were given preferential treatment, often to the detriment of competing companies.

The Treasury Secretary was supposed to be unbiased. Patman was incensed that the man who could not even own stock in a bank, because he was a member of the Federal Reserve Bank, did so without fear of any repercussions. Patman's intentions in impeaching Mellon were very logical from the standpoint of his populist campaign against elitism, but not so logical from the standpoint of the times. During the 1920s the prestige of American business had led many to conclude that the best government was run like a business. Here we see, however, that Patman would have none of this. Patman suspected political leaders with even *family* connections to big business. As a populist, he wanted the Eastern

moneyed interests as far away from power as possible. It was not a business government but an honest government that was the best government.

Patman was not only the government official to question Mellon and his questionable actions. During the years 1922 and 1923 many senators had questioned Mellon and the legality of his appointment. For Patman, Mellon represented a "philosophy of economic self-interest." However, Mellon's allies exonerated the Secretary, leaving the Senate to wait on the House to bring forth proper impeachment proceedings. Populist innuendo inspired conflict, and the battle was joined. A group of "Mellonites…began organizing themselves into . . . a 'defense machine'" for their beloved Treasurer.[18] But as the United States was in its third year of depression by 1932, the number of Patman's allies and sympathizers gradually increased. Patman, inspired by a lifetime of resentment, by convictions that someone must have made the system unfair, worked around the clock. By passing around stacks of evidence and support for each charge he made against Mellon to each member in the House, Patman was able to make a very convincing argument. Congressmen were shocked and silent as they digested reams of indictments that Patman levied at Mellon.[19]

Alexander Gregg, Mellon's defense attorney, argued on Mellon's behalf, but did not have to fight for very long. Very conveniently, Mellon resigned from the Treasury, and, escaping the American press, traveled to Britain.[20] Charles G. Dawes then resigned his position as Ambassador to Great Britain, and President Hoover immediately appointed Mellon as the new ambassador. By taking Mellon out of office, the President saved him from being impeached. Because of the reassignment, the impeachment proceedings were

terminated. Though Mellon was not officially impeached he was no longer the Secretary of the Treasury. With a great and powerful adversary out of office, Patman thus believed he could continue helping not only the veterans but also his farmers as well. In 1936, over President Roosevelt's veto, veterans finally celebrated the passage of a Bonus Act, thanks to Patman's tireless advocacy.[21]

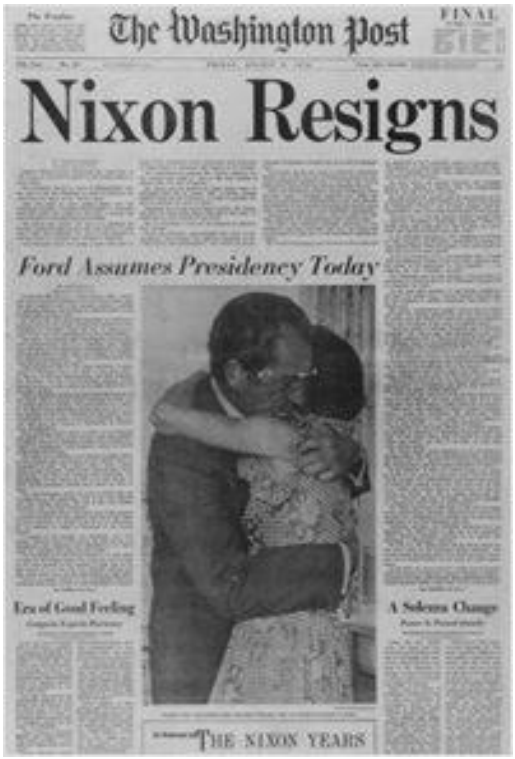
Populists made their disdain for large business very clear just as Wright Patman did. Another act of legislation presented by Patman was the Robinson-Patman Act of 1936, also called the Anti-Price Discrimination Act. This tried to inhibit companies from engaging in price discrimination. Price discrimination is a ploy whereby a company will charge two different customers different prices for the same purchase. At the time the Robinson-Patman Act was passed, price discrimination was seen as an anti-competitive practice. Patman, indeed, suspected the hands of monopolists. His Anti-Price Discrimination Act was very "populist" in nature. This piece of legislation prohibited chain stores from selling their products at prices that were too competitively low. Patman hoped to help small businesses stay afloat and minimize the chance of a monopoly. The act, like many others before it, was created to even the playing field for the mom- and pop-shops that were being run over by big businesses and chain stores. For Patman the idea of seeing one person, one business tycoon, becoming exceedingly wealthy from destroying the livelihood of others was intolerable. Because of the fastidious moral values instilled in Patman from not just his religious affiliation but also his mother, Patman had a keen sense of right and wrong. He could not allow crooked businesses, and devious humans, to take over the nation. For this very reason Patman began many internal investigations to seek out and remove government officials who involved themselves in corrupt proceedings.[22]

The amazing thing about Patman was that he never changed; his reputation as an anti-Wall-Street populist crusader remained intact. However, among Patman's faults was his failure to adjust, even when the nation was changing. Throughout his years in Congress, Patman lost many more battles than he won; yet he accepted the roles of crusader, and educator. Patman was able to remain popular with the voters of his district, the First Congressional District, for almost fifty years.[23] Patman's populist crusades also caused him to lose favor with his co-workers. This was illustrated by the removal of Patman as the Chairman of the Banking and Currency Committee in 1975. Even fellow Democratic liberals felt Patman was getting stale. But again, he cared ultimately for his voters, the people he represented. It was said: "all hell could be breaking loose on a bill, but if a constituent phoned, Patman took time for a long visit." This simple act proved just how much Patman cared for the people he represented and for the people with whom he grew up.[24]

Patman's final and greatest battle occurred in unison with one of the most famous political scandals in American history, Watergate. It was a classic battle, between a populist suspecting a conspiracy, and a President who was engaged in one, Richard Nixon. Fellow congressman William "Fishbait" Miller recalled "that Patman was one of the first to identify dangerous trends within the Nixon administration." On June 17 during the 1972 Presidential Campaign, burglars broke into the Democratic headquarters of the Watergate Hotel. George McGovern, the Democratic candidate, appeared behind in the polls against Nixon, but the President's men in any case used political espionage to secure a Nixon advantage. Five men were arrested. Several thousand dollars were found on the burglars, giving Patman and others incentives to investigate the crime. Patman believed that the

burglars had received help from his bête noire, the Federal Reserve. This situation provided Patman with the perfect opportunity to question the Fed's independence from congressional oversight and its "arbitrary and shifting decisions about what it wants to tell the Congress about its activities." For Patman, Watergate was another episode in a long series of attacks on the Federal Reserve.

Unlike with the Mellon investigations, Patman did have some support; one very important supporter was Speaker of the House Carl Albert who urged Patman to continue on with his investigation. The Republicans viewed Patman's investigation as a threat and therefore boycotted any meetings bringing the two parties together, causing Patman's investigations to be stonewalled. This momentary lapse in cooperation did not terminate Patman's accusations or his intrigue. In order to redeem himself to the public, and keep his good Presidential name intact, President Nixon released a statement charging Patman with using the scandal to rescue George McGovern's sinking campaign. However, Patman nonetheless continued to try to gain the public's interest in the scandal in order to make the investigation relevant. Keeping the scandal alive meant keeping the investigation going. Patman intended to resolve the case before the election, but the hearing was scheduled to occur afterword. Should the hearing have occurred before, the public would have been able to "elect or reject Nixon for a second term


The Washington Post

FINAL

Nixon Resigns

Ford Assumes Presidency Today

Era of Good Feeling

A Solemn Change

THE NIXON YEARS

**Figure 3- Nixon Resigns**

as President with full knowledge of his deeds." In the case of the election it was Nixon rather than his persecutors that emerged as the winner, that is, until his resignation from presidency August 8, 1974 (Figure 3). Patman was however very proud of the fact he was able to keep the issue alive through the use of media. The evidence now shows that Nixon used a variety of threats and blandishments to detach Patman from fellow Democrats whose support he needed to press charges.[25]

**Figure 4- Wright Patman**

Patman's death highlighted his lifelong populist quest. Soon after losing his chairmanship, Patman announced his retirement. He seemed despondent, and filled with the sense that life without his populist crusade was without meaning. Patman died March 6, 1976 in the Bethesda Medical Center from streptococcal pneumonia.[26] Many people attributed Patman's death to the loss of his position as chairman. When the chair was taken away from Patman so was the drive to continue in his efforts as the sole congressional populist. Those closest to Patman remembered him as a man who was obsessed with the people's battles. Patman's aide Jake Lewis later said "The last breath [Patman] drew out at Bethesda he must have been thinking what will I do tomorrow." During a congressional tribute to Patman George Mahon, a conservative monetarist, declared: "Wright Patman may not have always been right, but he never failed to do battle for what he thought was right." Patman was known for being consistent to his beliefs

throughout his life and throughout his career. Patman stood by the people who elected him, the people he knew best, the people who grew up in a similar way as he did. Patman identified so well with these people that voted for him he not only spent his entire career, but his entire life as well, working for these rural inhabitants. Because Patman, unofficially, worked the populist platform, Ralph Nader described him as "the youngest populist of them all." The populist movement may have come before Patman's time, but Patman still shared common ideas and goals with the former populists, and pursued their course to empower the rural poor (Figure 4).[27]

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