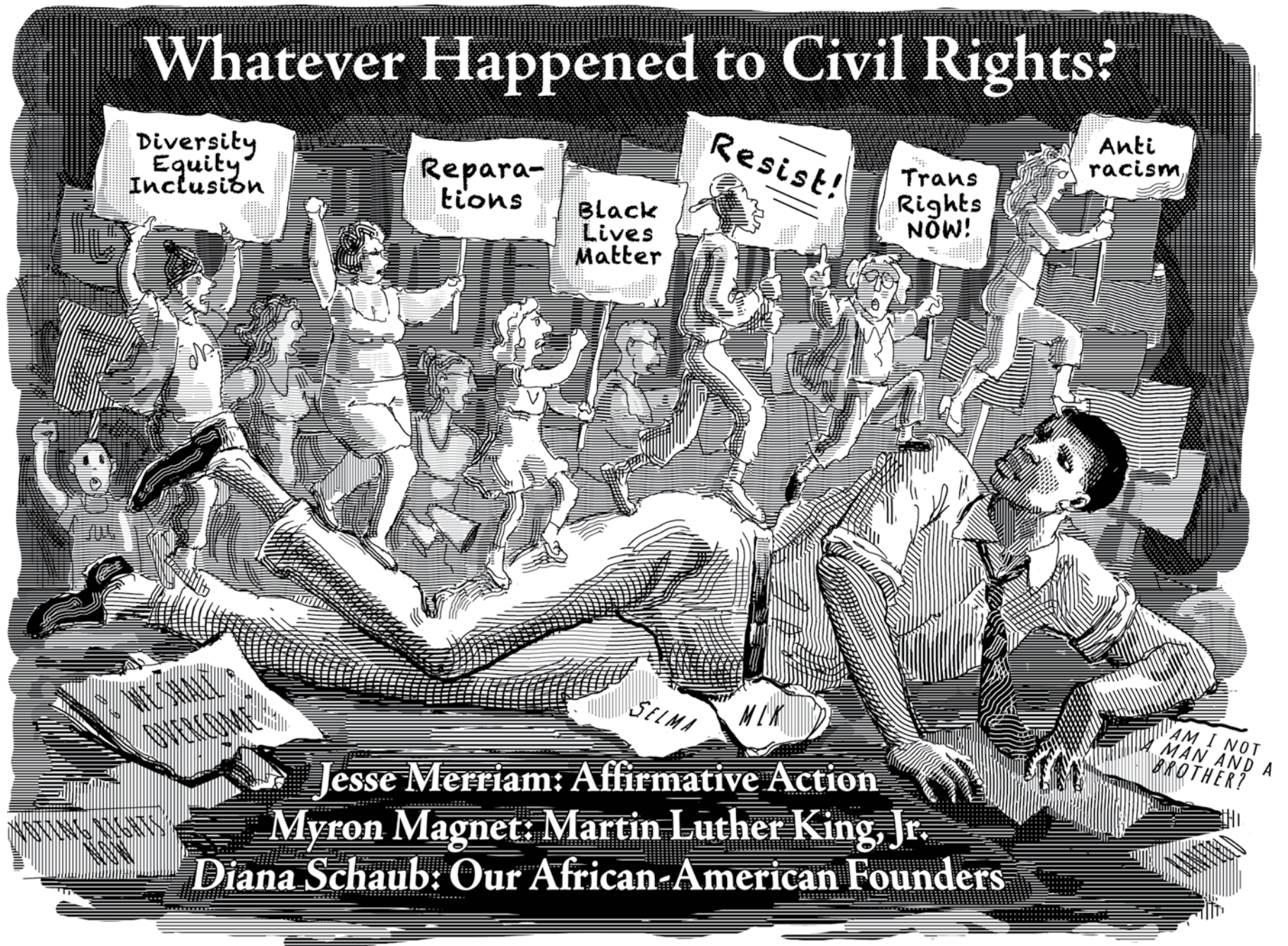


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Book Review by Karl Rove

## HIS OBSTINANCY

*A Man of Iron: The Turbulent Life and Improbable Presidency of Grover Cleveland,*  
by Troy Senik. Threshold Editions, 384 pages, \$32.99 (cloth), \$19.99 (paper)



Caricature of Grover Cleveland by Homer Davenport, c. 1892

GROVER CLEVELAND IS A PRESIDENTIAL anomaly, the only occupant of the White House (so far) to serve two non-consecutive terms. He was elected in 1884, defeated in 1888, and re-elected in 1892, beating the man who'd bested him. During his career he rose like a rocket: only three years after becoming mayor of Buffalo, New York, and after only two years as the Empire State's governor, he was elected president of the United States.

You might expect that the only Democrat to win the presidency between James Buchanan and Woodrow Wilson would draw the rapt attention of historians and biographers, but you'd be wrong. Other than campaign tracts, packed with thinly-sourced anecdotes and a mish-mash of his life meant to appeal to Democratic true believers, it took until 1923 for the first real Cleveland biography to appear. Since then, eight more have appeared, ranging from the hagiographic to the dismissive.

Now comes *A Man of Iron* by Troy Senik, co-founder of the non-profit video production company Kite & Key Media and a former speechwriter to President George W. Bush. Senik finds in Cleveland a president who "possessed moral courage at almost superhuman levels" and whose integrity makes him

"one of our greatest presidents." This is not because of legislative achievements or victory in war or recovery from economic calamity, Senik writes. Instead, it is Cleveland's character that attracts the author's praise. Cleveland's "willingness to follow principle regardless of the political consequences" means "there's never been another figure quite like him" in the White House. This is a lively, well-written, and deeply researched examination of a consequential president.

SENIK DETAILS GROVER CLEVELAND'S early, inauspicious start in politics. As a 28-year-old assistant district attorney, he lost the race for D.A. of Erie County, New York, in 1865. Then, from 1870 to 1873, he served a single three-year term as the county's sheriff before returning to his law practice, never expecting to seek office again.

But in 1881 he was drafted to run for mayor of Buffalo, then New York's second-largest city. A year later, he was the Democratic nominee for governor. His three years as Buffalo's mayor and New York's governor established Cleveland as a reformer and fiscal conservative. He took on Buffalo's machine Democrats, denying them the opportunity to pillage taxpayers by awarding overpriced contracts to

cronies to maintain the city's streets and build a municipal sewer system.

As governor, he strengthened his reputation for what Senik calls "economy, integrity, and good-government reforms" with 44 vetoes in his first year in Albany. The most explosive was of a bill backed by New York's Tammany Hall Democratic machine, lowering fares on the city's train lines. Though popular with working-class voters, the bill would have voided contracts the city signed with the railroads. Cleveland declared that "any law impairing the obligation of contracts" was unconstitutional, no matter how popular.

The governor escalated his battle with machine Democrats by sending a letter to Tammany Hall's chief boss, ordering him not to renominate his agent in Albany to the legislature. Cleveland then made the letter public, cementing his reputation as not only anti-machine but as a man of fearless integrity.

Cleveland's fresh face and electoral success in the quintessential battleground state led national Democrats to turn to him in 1884. He secured the nomination by adept maneuvers. First, his forces put the entire New York delegation in Cleveland's column by imposing the unit rule at the Empire State convention. This bound Tammany Hall's national convention

delegates to Cleveland. Then, at the national convention, Cleveland's managers goaded Tammany into an open fight, knowing the contrast between Cleveland and the party's corrupt machine elements would seal his nomination.

**T**HIS ALSO HELPED TO CONTRAST Cleveland with the GOP candidate, James G. Blaine. The former House Speaker and secretary of state was tainted by numerous scandals, most notably one involving stock from the Little Rock and Fort Smith Railroad that he'd received under the table for his help as Speaker in securing a generous federal land grant. Blaine then sold his shares at a very profitable mark-up. Ironically, as a member of the GOP's "Half-Breed" faction, Blaine shared Cleveland's antipathy toward patronage politics, a principal source of Gilded Age corruption.

The election was famously stained by charges Cleveland had fathered a child out of wedlock. Senik rigorously examines Cleveland's relationship with the alcoholic widow Maria Halpin and the question of whether he was the father of her son, Oscar Folsom, named after Cleveland's best friend. Though he argues that "there is no version of the story in which Grover Cleveland is a hero"—you'll have to read the book to find out if the author believes Cleveland actually sired the boy—Senik concludes that Cleveland's honesty in dealing with the controversy contrasted with Blaine's "cozy relationship with moneyed interests."

Irish Catholic Democrats—the backbone of Tammany and critical to Democratic chances of carrying New York and with it, the election—were reluctant to support Cleveland. That changed in October when Blaine was lauded at a Manhattan meeting of Protestant clergy by a Presbyterian minister who attacked Democrats as the party of "rum, Romanism, and rebellion." That, and a pointed last-minute denial by the widow Halpin of a fraudulent affidavit claiming she'd been raped by Cleveland, helped produce a razor-thin Democratic win. A shift of 2,500 votes in New York and Connecticut would have resulted in Blaine's election.

Cleveland's narrow victory was made possible by Republican defections to him, especially by GOP reformers, or "Mugwumps," in Eastern battleground states, and by the presence of third parties. Among these were the Greenbackers, whose easy-money currency platform appealed to Midwest farmers struggling under mortgage payments to Eastern banks, and the Prohibitionists, who attracted Protestant abstainers. Both of these third parties drew more from the GOP's ranks than they did from the Democrats.

**N**OT ONLY DID CLEVELAND BECOME the first Democratic nominee to claim the White House since Buchanan in 1856, at just 47 he was the second-youngest president in the nation's history at the time. His platform called for Civil Service reform, tariff reform, and sound money, all based on a philosophy of limited government and restrained presidential power. This somewhat incongruous set of positions was almost all that was left after the Civil War of the once-dominant Democratic Party's platform: the Republicans had abolished slavery and secession, leaving a mitigated but still vehement form of states' rights and hostility to the tariff and national expenditures as the remaining components of the Democrats' creed. Senik is correct that Cleveland's record of legislative and administrative achievements is modest. His greatest success among his priority issues was with the civil service. The growth of government during the Civil War era had greatly expanded the power of incoming presidents to reward supporters with jobs in the federal government. Cleveland sought to replace this "spoils system" with a professional, merit-based one. Using the authority granted him by the 1883 Pendleton Act, he was able to move 40% of all federal employees into the protected civil service system by the end of his second term.

He was less successful on tariff reform. Cleveland opposed the continuation of the high tariffs enacted during the Civil War to protect U.S. industries. Nonetheless, the Morrison Tariff Bill of 1886, which proposed an average tariff reduction of 20%, was defeated by the defection of Democrats from sheep-growing regions, as well as from the industrial Mid-Atlantic and Great Lakes states. The 1888 Mills bill, with its more modest tariff reductions, made it through the House but was bottled up in the Senate. In Cleveland's second term, the Wilson Tariff Bill—more ambitious than the Mills but still modest—passed the House but was mangled badly in the Senate. Amended 600 times, the bill went to conference but the Democrats deadlocked. For all his emphasis on the issue, Cleveland was unable to achieve the reform he wanted.

It was on the issue of sound money and its companion question, government spending, that Cleveland was most active. He was also largely successful. From the start, he was a persistent foe of what he deemed unnecessary spending, starting with the abuse of Civil War pensions. By 1885, they were the second-largest item in the budget, eclipsed only by interest on the national debt.

The problem facing Cleveland arose from President Rutherford B. Hayes signing a bill in 1879 that had allowed Northern Civil War

veterans to receive a pension retroactive to the date when they claimed they were injured, rather than to the date of their application. This produced a flood of private pension bills, sponsored by members of Congress eager to reward constituents and create goodwill with the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR), the powerful group of Civil War veterans who fought for the Union. Cleveland personally reviewed the private pension bills that made it to his desk, often interrogating the beneficiaries. He vetoed 228 such bills in his first term.

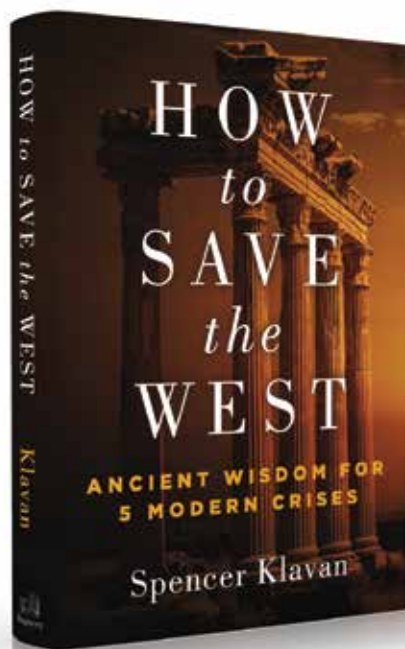
Senik likens the personal attention Cleveland devoted to this issue to President Jimmy Carter's insistence on approving all applications to use the White House tennis court. Many of Cleveland's other 186 vetoes in his first term were of western land grants to railroad companies, which the president considered thinly disguised fraud. Senik also makes the case that Cleveland and his cabinet cracked down on unwarranted expenditures, reducing the size of their staffs and axing needless programs and activities.

**S**TILL, BY 1888, CLEVELAND'S FAILURE to pass tariff reform had weakened the Democratic Party's standing with voters. It made the GOP's calls for additional protection for American industries and workers more attractive, while the president's attacks on Union pensions, along with an ill-considered attempt to return captured Confederate battle flags to the Southern states, riled up the GAR and its members. In 1888 Republicans also successfully minimized defections by the Mugwumps and third parties, especially the Prohibitionists, and forced Democrats to defend the solid South. This combination gave Republican Benjamin Harrison a narrow Electoral College victory when he flipped both New York and his home state of Indiana. Cleveland won the popular vote, but only because of Democratic efforts to keep the ballots of black Republicans in the South from being counted.

Just 52 years old, the defeated president left Washington, splitting his time between a mansion on Manhattan's upper East Side and a summer house on Cape Cod. It would be a brief respite. The GOP's big-spending ways and a high tariff that raised the price of consumer goods resulted in the acerbic Harrison's defeat in 1892. Cleveland had little difficulty winning renomination and then won back the White House, carrying not only New York and Indiana, but flipping three other states—Illinois, Wisconsin, and California. He won only 46% of the popular vote, however, the lowest share of his three presidential races.

The reason for his smaller popular vote is that a third party had emerged that grabbed

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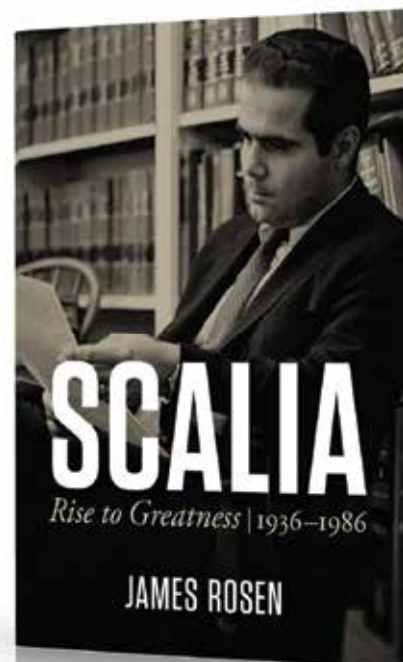
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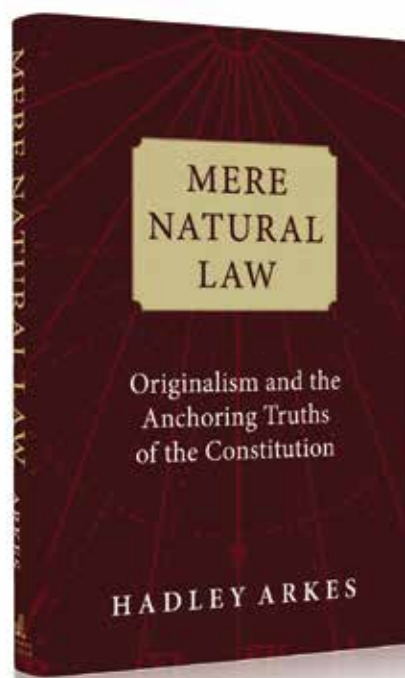
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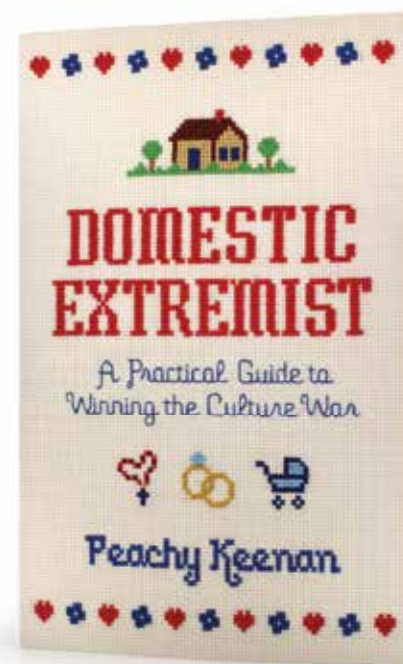
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not only Republican votes in farm states and the West but also Democratic votes in the South. The People's Party—informally called the Populists—nominated James Weaver, a former Iowa Greenback Party congressman. The Populists declared the country was dominated by the money power, a combination of bankers and industrialists who oppressed the working man and the family farmer. The People's Party called for an inflated currency and far-reaching economic reforms to rebalance the relationship between ordinary Americans and their government and economy. It was a portent of a political upheaval that would lead in a few short years to Grover Cleveland being denounced and repudiated by his own party over the issue of the nation's currency.

IT IS HARD FOR THE MODERN MIND TO UNDERSTAND how a mania for silver coinage could sweep the country, energize millions, create a new political party, and lead to a hostile takeover of a party that had historically stood for hard money, that is, a currency based on gold. Senik is at his strongest on this issue of sound money, arguing Cleveland displayed an uncommon commitment to principle. Since President Ulysses Grant's veto of the Inflation Bill of 1874, the United States had been on an informal gold standard, as most of the world's economic powers were formally. Only a soft-money Democratic president and Congress would be able to alter that.

Cleveland opposed such an alteration. He believed a gold-backed currency gave the working man a full day's wage for his work and made the country attractive for the foreign investment needed to build its cities and railroads, open its mines and farmland, and make America the economic equal of the world's great powers. Senik ably details how Cleveland acted on those beliefs, in the process keeping the country from adopting an inflationary dollar and thereby splitting the Democratic Party—and realigning American politics for the next three decades.

Under President Benjamin Harrison, the Republicans had given hard-pressed Midwestern farmers with mortgages and Western silver-producing states a bimetallic bone, as it were, in 1890 with the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. It required the monthly purchase of 4.5 million ounces of silver—essentially the nation's entire silver production—and its minting into coins. When the economy was growing, this expansion of the money supply had a minor effect on commerce. But when the economy went south, the monthly addition of silver coinage added to fears that the United States would abandon the gold standard; the result was a dramatic slowdown of foreign investment and trade.

That fear grew when the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad declared bankruptcy ten days before Cleveland's second inaugural in March 1893. This was the beginning of a deep depression that would last for over three years. The sharp economic decline put pressure on the government's gold reserves in the final moments of the Harrison Administration. The reserves dropped almost to \$100 million, a symbolic floor that many business and political leaders believed must never be breached.

By May Cleveland had endorsed repeal of the Sherman Silver Act. The president used all the powers of his office to push through repeal, including giving Democratic members control over patronage in their states. By the end of August the House had voted to repeal the Act, albeit with Democrats badly split. It took until the end of October for the Senate to follow. Cleveland withheld all patronage until the pressure of would-be postmasters and customs officials on their home-state senators gave the president his legislative victory.

BUT THE ECONOMY CONTINUED TO FALTER and unemployment and labor unrest grew, culminating in the Pullman Strike in May 1894, which Senik identifies as "the largest coordinated work stoppage in the country's history." Chicago was the focal point of the strikers since much of the country's transcontinental traffic moved through the city.

President Cleveland issued a warning to workers to disperse or "be regarded...as public enemies." In a sense, he was right; the stoppage cost the railroads an estimated \$138 million in 2019 dollars and further weakened an already depressed economy. Acting at the president's direction, Attorney General Richard Olney sought and received an injunction, ordering the strikers not to interfere with the operation of the rail lines. But this step further divided the Democratic Party when the Illinois governor, John Peter Altgeld, attacked Cleveland as a despot and tyrant.

The economy continued to weaken, and the government's gold reserves dropped to \$61 million after the 1894 election. By January they had fallen to \$45 million, raising doubts as to whether the government would be solvent. Only the issuance of gold bonds backed by J.P. Morgan and August Belmont, Jr., kept the government afloat. By the time Cleveland left office, his Treasury Department had issued \$262 million in gold bonds.

Senik does an admirable job of explaining all this and the resulting fallout, as a growing number of silver Democrats angrily broke with the president on the issue. Here, however, is where Cleveland's staunch commitment to principle was undermined by his stubbornness.

IN 1895, SILVER DEMOCRATS BEGAN TO ORGANIZE an effort to influence their party's 1896 convention. Democrats required a two-thirds vote to nominate a candidate, but only a majority vote to adopt a platform. The silver Democrats assumed it would be nearly impossible to win a two-thirds majority and nominate a silver candidate, so they focused on gaining a simple majority to adopt their platform. They'd settle for a bimetallic, a temporizing, or even a sound money candidate so long as he was running on a silver platform.

To achieve this, they attacked Cleveland. The anger of ordinary Democratic activists was such that the silver forces won more state conventions and more national delegates than they had imagined possible. Cleveland aided their cause by refusing to rule out a bid for a third term. This kept other sound money candidates from emerging and made the now very unpopular Cleveland the central issue of the Democratic nomination battle.

Not only did the president refuse to leave the political field, he wouldn't use patronage and the power of his office to rally his party's sound money men. Rather than push back against the silver Democrats, Cleveland belittled them in private. In Minnesota and Michigan, friends of the president organized counterattacks, which resulted in surprise victories for the gold Democrats. But these were not enough. The Democratic convention not only passed a Free Silver platform, it also nominated a silver candidate in the person of 36-year-old populist orator William Jennings Bryan. Only William McKinley's election that fall saved the country from a soft money president.

If Cleveland had been more politically adept, he might have sustained his party's sound money commitment by robbing the silver Democrats of their most powerful target—him—and allowing another Democrat favorable to gold or bimetalism to emerge who could win the 1896 nomination.

Of all the recent Cleveland biographies, Troy Senik's is the liveliest. It is a vivid reminder, too, that sometimes wisdom requires leaving it to friends and allies to take the convictions you cherish to the next stage. *A Man of Iron* is a good, crisp read on Gilded Age politics and one of America's unappreciated presidents.

Karl Rove, a former White House senior advisor and deputy chief of staff, is a Wall Street Journal columnist and Fox News contributor, and the author of *The Triumph of William McKinley: Why the Election of 1896 Still Matters* (Simon and Schuster).



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