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The Coming Nation:  
Speech at the Grand Opera House, Terre Haute  
(May 31, 1898)

For the first time in the record of the ages the inalienable rights of man — life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness — have been usurped.

On July 4th, 1776, our forefathers signed the Declaration of Independence by which the ruler descended from his sceptered throne, the gem of liberty was planted in eternal truth, the workingman stood erect in his heaven-decreed prerogative, freed from his bonds.

It was decreed by the infinite that man should stand forth the coronated sovereign of the world. The song of liberty is the song of the stars. There is no more appropriate theme and to wave the banner of freedom. No matter how nature may be decked with beauty, no matter if she sends forth a succession of glorious melodies, if liberty is ostracized and expelled, the world wheels round the sun a gilded prison, a blot to the Siberian sphere of the heavens.

Strike down liberty, no matter by what subtle art, and the world becomes paralyzed by an indescribable power. Strike down the fetters of the plain, and it becomes a new world through the almighty genius of liberty. Its works redeem the poor man from animal suspense and make of him a new being. In our courts the product of our political liberty is being realized to a gratifying extent. I believe in a few years woman will be franchised and we will elect the officers of our country by direct vote. The political democracy will be complete.

The social problem today has grown to such an extent that it reaches all branches of life, it touches the vital parts of all society. Let us, friends, set aside all prejudice and think not of class, caste, or condition in consideration of this great question. We are all citizens of a common country and are all interested in the great problems engaging our people.

According to the Declaration of Independence, all men are created equal, and are entitled to certain rights among which are included life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. If a man has a right to live — and no one will attempt to contradict this proposition — he has the right to work,

and any system that deprives him of the right to work, deprives him of the right to live.

Carroll D. Wright, in speaking of the labor conditions in 1890, says that there were 3.2 million men who had no work at some time during the year, and 2.8 million who had no work at all. Something is wrong if this is true — something appears wrong to the true and patriotic citizen. Years ago there was not a single millionaire in this country and not a single tramp. Now there are 4,000 millionaires and 4 million tramps.

In the infancy of our country a workingman could earn honest wages and was able to support a family as was becoming for an American citizen, and the woman was queen of the little home. In the march of this system, the man has been reduced to vagrancy, the wife to rags and tears, and the child to machine oil.

The machine sprang from the brain of the laborer and instead of becoming a blessing, it was monopolized and made the means of enslaving the workingman. Formerly the workingman controlled his tool, and then he was master of the situation and had a certainty of an honest living. With the march began the formation of associations of labor. The employer and employee worked side by side at the same bench. There was no upper class, no lower class. If the workman had a grievance he brought it to the attention of the employer and the matter was speedily adjusted. If the workman made a pair of shoes worth \$5, his wages were perhaps \$4, the difference representing the running expense of the shop. By this plan consumption and supply were balanced and the workman could buy back the equivalent of what he produced. Since the introduction of the machine one man can produce ten times as much as half a century ago. Why does he not then enjoy ten times as much? Or why does he not do his work in one-tenth of the time?

The machines were at first crude in construction, but as the process became more and more perfect, man was pushed into the street. The tramp was at first a curious thing, but now the poor vagabonds wander from the Atlantic to the Pacific in countless numbers. Machines after a while became so perfect the men were not needed to operate them. Women tramped from their homes to the factories and there took their seats before the machines. Finally the touch of a child was sufficient to produce from another machine, and now we find the child brought into competition with woman, and woman with man.

Take the reports of the great Indiana Labor Commission, which show the average wage of the workman to be but 58 cents a day. Statistics show that the wage of workmen has steadily declined until now they receive one-fourth of what they produce. This brings the cause of overproduction. It is because we have too many shoes that we go half-shod, it is because we have too much wheat that we starve, it is because the store is overstocked that the merchant fails in trade.

The consumptive capacity of the working man is not considered. Competition springs up and competition is war. The aim of trade is to get, to underbid, to reduce wages. Under the present system the employer is as helpless as the employee. Some are generous, some are just, and some would be good in treatment of employees if they could, but they are helpless. A prominent coal operator told me not long ago that he wanted to give his miners better wages, but he could not do so and remain in the field against fierce competition.

This system is now in the throes of dissolution. A new order is evolving from the social chaos. Bear in mind, production should be limited by consumption, and consumption by wages. When one man quits canvassing, one quits producing.

Edison has said that in a few years machinery will do the work of the world and men hope for better times. Better times will not come with this. Private profit has become of more consequence than personal life, and the great institution of labor ceases to be profitable and is thrown out.

Labor is the foundation of the social fabric, the root of the social tree, but labor is thrown out and wages reduced. Twenty-five years ago the miner received \$5 a day. Now the average wage is 75 cents a day. Still he can spend \$5 a day more easily than he could before. As labor has been impoverished, the middle class has been in a process of extinction. In 1897 there were 13,197 commercial collapses, aggregating \$215 million — 12% greater than those of the preceding year. Of 1.15 million firms, according to Bradstreet, 224,534, or one-fifth, withdrew from business. In 1897, 6,520 firms succumbed against 2,040 in 1890 — an increase of 300%.

In the constant turmoil of this commercial war, man is not in his normal condition. He is not in his natural mind. The laboring man, the small businessman, all are in competition. Thoughts of strife and gain throng through their busy heads, while expense increases and frantic efforts are made to drum up business. The busy toiler works 24 hours a day. Visions

of failure and poverty haunt his sleep, and his footsteps are dragged by the black phantom, poverty.

This drives to suicide and insanity. In 1890 there were 4,290 suicides. In seven years this number increased 250%, to 10,562. Now there are in the United States 180,000 insane persons, 184,000 in poor houses, 83,000 in jails. Every year 800,000 persons die and of this number 500,000 are children under five years of age. Children who perish for lack of food and fresh air. Think of it! Perish in multiplied thousands.

How does this speak for our private charity and Christian commissions? As I said, personal gain has become of more consequence than private life.

When Thomas Jefferson helped found this government, his ideal was a country where there would be no excessively rich men and no excessively poor, where there would be an equal division of property. Man was of more consequence than property in those days. Man was before the dollar — and this is true today, but it is on bended knee.

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Take the power of wealth in our national capital and in our state capitals, where money power has organized lobbies to defeat the will of the people. While developing a free political institution, we have allowed it to become a despotism. As Horace Mann says, “I may as well depend on another for my head, as for my bread.”<sup>1</sup> Today the industrial master owns both. He owns the industrial slave.

Under the present system labor has been reduced to the level of a commodity and that commodity has no market value. In some respects the American citizen is in a worse condition than was the chattel slave of 40 years ago. The slave was placed on the auction block and sold to the highest bidder. The modern wage-slave is placed in the labor market and sold to the lowest bidder. In the march of this system, the wage of the workingman has been reduced so that, in thousands of instances, it no longer suffices to keep a protesting soul in a half-clad body. The slave was sure of steady employment, he was not afraid of losing his situation; he was well fed and comfortably clothed. He was cared for as well as his master's house for he had a certain economic value. Upon the auction block he was sold to the highest bidder. The workman today is sold to the lowest bidder. By the system of contracts and underbidding, his wages are reduced and he is made helpless in factory, mine, and shop.

When a man buys any commodity he pays what is asked for it. This rule is true for all but one commodity — labor. The workman does not get what he asks for his toil, he cannot sell it, it is not capital in his hand. He must stay in the grasp of suffering until he gives his work for what he can get. He is forced to sell.

A short time ago I spent 30 days in West Virginia investigating the conditions of the miners. It is impossible to describe the conditions. Words fail. Men are there who have worked a year and never had the sight of any money. When payday came they ever found themselves in the debt of the company, when they should have had something coming. From this slavery there was no escape but the backdoor of suicide. Their lives were a constant curse from the cradle to the grave.

Like these poor wretches there are in our country thousands of victims of man's inhumanity to man. One man's success is only possible by failure of others. There was a time when success was possible without failure. When a failure did occur it was not to bury forever the unfortunate man in ruin and poverty. His failure assisted him to rise again and carry on his trade.

Today it is different — he fails to rise any more and competitors rush on over his prostrate body. The strife goes on and the victim does not last long. They invade commerce. They destroy each other. In modern competitive systems there is no industrial harmony, no social peace. The outgrowth is the castes and unnatural artificial classes of society. At the Astor House, in New York, I saw, lately some representatives of the extremely rich. I said, they are hothouse plants, they are not reared in nature's garden. They were artificial, pale, and bloodless beings.

I read in a paper a column article about a lapdog for which a wealthy woman paid \$30,000. I read how three of her dogs were quartered in a fine hotel, how they wore collars worth \$10,000, how they were bathed three times a day in perfume water, how they were attended by two footmen and two maids. I do not object to property, but I do object to the lapdogs of the rich being treated as superior to the children of the poor. The excessively rich have no real warm blood, they have no sympathy for the common people. With overwrought stomachs and exhausted natural desires and exhausted unnatural desires, they are not live enough to live and not dead enough to bury.

Life is a mystery,

Life is a doubt,  
Where men be dead  
Who walk about. <sup>2</sup>

There is a small class of people who have tons of food but no appetite, and another class who have tons of appetite but no food. The trouble is in the proper distribution.

The man who works the hardest and longest receives the least pay, while he who works the least is overpaid. The cheaper bread becomes, the harder it is to get. The men who build houses live in hovels. the men who support the government are suppressed by it. As a general rule only the poor go to jail.

This system will kill itself. A short time ago there occurred 245 failures in one week — 40 failures a day, or one every 15 minutes. All represented the businessmen of smaller means who could not compete successfully with the great combines. Centralization and combination have been made the master spirit of the age. Competition goes forward to a certain point. In the process the smaller men are crushed, the trust is formed, expenses are decreased, and enormous profits made possible. John D. Rockefeller is not in favor of competition. It is because he has destroyed it by the power of wealth and bribes. He fixes the price of his product and the world has to accept it.

What is true of the oil product will be true of every other product in a few years. Other gigantic monopolies will be formed, a few economic masters made and the weaker crushed. The goal of this system will never be reached. In itself it contains the germ of decay. The excessive property ownership is slowly failing and is being supplanted by the cooperative system.

The forces of nature move under the cooperative system. Think, in the majestic [cosmic] system, what a crash of worlds there would be should each circle about independent of all others. Think of the cooperative action in the stomach. When I take food into the stomach it is not for the stomach alone. If it is not transformed for the use of all, it is soon in decay. But in the system in which we live it is each one for himself and his satanic majesty take the hindmost — and also the foremost.

We need a little something to uplift every day and help in the inevitable dissolution of the system by which the workman is deprived of the product of his own industry. What right has any man to gain out of the

industry of another man? It is but a question of time till the oppressive system will melt and flow away and in its place will be the cooperative commonwealth. And, like Columbus the great explorer, as pictured in the poem of Joaquin Miller, it will “sail on.”<sup>3</sup>

Behind him lay the gray Azores,  
    Behind the Gates of Hercules;  
Before him not the ghost of shores,  
    Before him only shoreless seas.  
The good mate said: “Now we must pray,  
    For lo! the very stars are gone.  
Brave Admiral, speak, what shall I say?”  
    “Why, say, ‘Sail on! sail on! and on!’”

“My men grow mutinous day by day;  
    My men grow ghastly wan and weak.”  
The stout mate thought of home; a spray  
    Of salt wave washed his swarthy cheek.  
“What shall I say, brave Admiral, say,  
    If we sight naught but seas at dawn?”  
“Why, you shall say at break of day,  
    ‘Sail on! sail on! and on!’”

They sailed and sailed, as winds might blow,  
    Until at last the blanched mate said:  
“Why, now not even God would know  
    Should I and all my men fall dead.  
These very winds forget their way,  
    For God from these dead seas is gone.  
Now speak, brave Admiral, speak and say” —  
    He said, “Sail on! sail on! and on!”

They sailed. They sailed. Then spake the mate:  
    “This mad sea shows his teeth tonight.  
He curls his lip, he lies in wait,  
    With lifted teeth, as if to bite!  
Brave Admiral, say but one good word:  
    What shall we do when hope is gone?”  
The words leapt like a leaping sword:  
    “Sail on! sail on! sail on! and on!”

Then pale and worn, he kept his deck,  
And peered through darkness. Ah, that night  
Of all dark nights! And then a speck —  
A light! a light! at last a light!  
It grew, a starlit flag unfurled!  
It grew to be Time's burst of dawn.  
He gained a world; he gave that world  
Its grandest lesson: "On! sail on!"

In every age there have been men and women of conviction and courage who have dared to express their views as to the right; who also have defied all the storms of detraction. But for such people the world would never have emerged from savagery or barbarism. And the great crusade is now being led against other forms of wrong. The question is: "Is it right?" If it is, then, in the spirit of Andrew Jackson, let them take the consequences of their acts.

At times, I will admit, the outlook appears gloomy, but let us remember that our work is an inspiration and that this is a great movement in the industrial world. It will give us a new nation in which there will be not one master and not one slave. I know it is said this is impossible, that it is but a dream. The dreams of one age are the realized facts of the next age. This change is coming whether we will it or not. It is coming as certainly as that the rivers find their ways to the seas. I have great hopes that right will be enthroned; that the competitive system will be dissolved and that the co-operative system will supplant it. I want a social democracy as well as a political democracy.

There are multiplied thousands who cannot get work. I know it is denied, but I can prove it. In Chicago today there are 50,000 men who cannot get employment. In Indiana, during the coal strike, to use the language of Gov. Mount, "Six thousand miners and their families are literally starving to death." This is to increase as long as the system endures.

Workingmen are not always true to themselves. They do not always take advantage of the opportunities presented. What is their duty? It is to read, to think, and to study. Shakespeare says there is no darkness but ignorance.<sup>4</sup> There is no better picture than a workingman, after he gets home from work and has his supper, going to his library and taking down a book on some economic subject. This is an economic battle.

Workingmen should organize. They should move on the ballot box and vote in the cooperative system and vote out the competitive system. (*Applause.*) Even the rich men fear the present system. What assurance has he under it that he will not be penniless within a month? Do you not see cases around us of rich men who, through reverses in some unfortunate speculation lose all they possess? Have we not had such cases in our midst? Why does the rich man insure his life? Is it not because he wants to provide for reverses that come under the present system? It is not a rational system. Work must be for the equal good of all.

George M. Pullman had solved the problem of how to accumulate wealth. He accumulated millions. What good did it do him after all? He came into the world without a dollar and he went out without a dollar. Yet Pullman was an economic monarch. Death is a social democrat. He went up into that mansion on Prairie Avenue and, pointing his body finger at that palpitating heart, said: "Stop!" — and it stopped.

It does not pay to be selfish and sordid. It is better to help than to hinder. Some people who do not agree with us tell us we are entitled to what we can get. Suppose we carry out that argument to its logical conclusion. If I possess abnormal physical strength have I the right to go out into the street and because of this strength overpower my weaker brother and take away from him such as I wish? Or suppose I possess abnormal mental ability. Have I the right to play the part of an intellectual highwayman any more than a physical highwayman?

I believe all the children of the earth have equal rights. Rockefeller with his \$200 million is not a free man. He is a spiritual vagrant. He is afraid of the danger of the assassin and his position is not to be envied. Under our system we would say to Rockefeller, "You have great organizing ability and we will have you use that ability in the interest of the people at large. (*Applause.*)"

No great action was ever done purely for money. The Declaration of Independence was not written for pay. No great painting was painted solely for money. The approbation of the public was the thing most desired.

Life will be lengthened under our plan. It will be a world for good men and good women to live in. There will be social peace, perfect harmony, economic equality — a march to the highest type of civilization ever known. (*Loud applause.*)

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<sup>1</sup> From “Superfluous Riches,” by Horace Mann (1796-1859).

<sup>2</sup> The source of this snippet of doggerel could not be traced.

<sup>3</sup> There follows “Columbus” (1892), by Joaquin Miller (1837-1913).

<sup>4</sup> From *Twelfth Night* (c. 1601), Act 4, Scene 2.