

The Spirit of Change

Greg Coleridge

Barack Obama was awakened during the night following his latest Democratic Party Presidential debate. Two ghosts stood before him. "We are the spirits of Samuel Adams and William Lamb."

"Who?" Obama asked in a daze, unsure if he was hallucinating from lack of sleep.

"We're the ghosts of *real* change."

"I am the spirit of Samuel Adams, a revolutionary for American liberty and promoter of the Declaration of Independence."

"And I am the spirit of William Lamb, a founder of the US Populist movement in the 1880's-1890's, supporter of the Omaha Platform, and organizer of the People's Party."

Obama was puzzled. "You're both dressed pretty funny, but more to the point, why are you here?"

"We've come to talk. You, Clinton, even McCain, speak constantly about 'change.' We've watched your debates, read news on your light screens, and ..."

"Light screens? Do you mean televisions and computers?"

"Ah yes, that's what you call them. Anyway, all you candidates talk about is who will bring change to this country: real change, fundamental change, policy changes to address unmet needs and give citizens more power."

"Sounds especially like me," Obama said assuredly.

"We're not so sure," the ghosts said in unison. "We believe political change in our times was more profound than anything being proposed now."

And so Sam, Lamb and "Bam," advocates from three turbulent periods in US history, huddled to discuss political change.

SAM: I agitated for the greatest change in the history of our nation, political independence from Great Britain. The Declaration of Independence, passed on July 4, 1776, presented a lengthy list of "repeated injuries and usurpations" by the British government and asserted that the 13 colonies were "Free and Independent States."

LAMB: Weren't you a signer?

SAM: Yes, one of 56 signers of the Second Continental Congress, a revolutionary, illegal body.

BAM: Did the British consider you and your ilk "terrorists"?

SAM: A renegade if not worse, in part for supporting the Declaration. I said in 1776,

"Is not America already independent? ...Why not then declare it."1 The power and inspiration of the Declaration was its unequivocal assertions that, "All men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights... That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from consent of the governed... [and] whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it and institute new government... [in fact] it is their duty to throw off such Government and to provide new Guards for their future security."

The essence of the document, revolutionary then and now, was the conviction that people can and should be governing-not kings, popes or generals.

British rule could not be "reformed." The King's army and crown corporations could not be made accountable to the public. They all had to be replaced, so I worked for revolutionary change, for a system of self-rule.

LAMB: The Declaration was an inspiration to us Populists. But be honest, Sam, sixty-nine percent of the Declaration's signers held colonial office under England. Many who supported both it and the revolution were colonial lawyers, landowners and merchants, including you, who only wanted independence from Great Britain to impose their own brand of political and economic control. Following the revolution, did you not say, "In monarchy the crime of treason may admit of being pardoned or lightly punished, but the man who dares rebel against the laws of a republic ought to suffer death"?2

SAM: I did?

LAMB: Yup.

SAM: Still, I opposed the British Stamp Act, helped organize the Boston Tea Party and the Committees of Correspondence, colonists who organized into small groups to share information and mobilize the public.

LAMB: You were a great communicator, organizer and agitator Sam, but it was selective. **Your instigation of mob protests was directed only at British rule and wealth, not the consolidation of power by colonial elites. This omission carried over to the Declaration, which ignored inequalities of property,** and I ask, "How could people have equal rights, with stark differences in wealth?"3 The Declaration was a form of manipulation to focus anger and attention only on British rule.

BAM: While the Declaration is as inspirational as many of my speeches, there are several glaring omissions, notably independence for black slaves, women and native people. The draft of the Declaration included a grievance against the King for transporting slaves but was removed before adoption. Native people were called "the merciless Indian Savages..." and there was no room for women in "All men are created equal."

LAMB: Change during your period, Sam, was not as dramatic as during my lifetime. I helped organize the largest and most elaborate democratic mass movement in US history: Populism. It was a mass *democratic insurgency* among "plain people"-farmers and urban workers-to respond to the impoverishment of millions of farmers and workers by banks, railroads, and the consequences of economic and political centralization.

BAM: I haven't heard much about the Populists.

LAMB: Most people of your day haven't. We've been largely erased from history books. Only our "spirits" remain.

The Populists sought to create a democratic movement to counter the hierarchical culture of the day. It was *"a new way of looking at society, a way of thought representing a shaking off of individual forms of deference... individual self-respect and collective self-confidence... class consciousness... growing political sensibility... the mass expression of a new political vision."*⁴

BAM: Now I see why there's not much known in our culture about you people.

LAMB: The creation of this democratic movement for revolutionary change was achieved in sequential steps: forming organizations, recruitment, education, and political action. State farmers Alliances were the original organizing base. I organized over 100 sub-alliances in Texas alone and eventually the National Farmers Alliance. We recruited through large-scale Populist-sponsored farmers cooperatives and I was the Texas' Alliance's first purchasing and traveling agent. Hundreds of newsletters and 40,000 "lecturers" were disseminated throughout Texas. We educated members continually, our version of the Committees of Correspondence, Sam. Collective political action bridging farmers and laborers was achieved through the Populist Party, which I helped launch.

SAM: This still doesn't sound very revolutionary, pal. You weren't talking about overthrowing the government.

BAM: Promoting major change through a political party is my goal, too.

LAMB: It was revolutionary, Sam, and there is a difference, Bam, between Populist goals and yours.

Populists constantly talked about "the coming revolution" through ballots not bullets. Revolution meant creating a "third party of the industrial millions" and overthrowing the two party system. We saw many elections as rigged and the electoral college as undemocratic. We tried to bring the corporate state under popular control through democratic politics.⁵

As fellow Populist Tom Watson said, "It's useless to ask Congress to help us, just as it was folly for our forefathers to ask for relief from the tea tax; they revolted and so should we."⁶

The unifying platform for Populist revolution, the "Second Declaration of Independence," was the Omaha Platform. The 4000 delegates to the first People's Party Convention in Omaha, Nebraska, adopted it on July 4, 1892-116 years after the first Declaration.⁷

SAM: Where's Nebraska?

LAMB: Later Sam. The Omaha Platform, like the Declaration, spoke to the grievances and demands for major change within the context of its time.

BAM: What did it say? Perhaps I should include elements of it in the Democratic Party platform if I'm the Presidential candidate.

LAMB: The Omaha Platform's Preamble states:

"The conditions which surround us best justify our cooperation; we meet in the midst of a nation brought to the verge of moral, political, and material ruin. Corruption dominates the ballot box, the Legislatures, the Congress, and touches even the

*ermine of the bench. The people are demoralized; most of the States have been compelled to isolate the voters at the polling places to prevent universal intimidation and bribery. The newspapers are largely subsidized or muzzled, public opinion silenced, business prostrated, homes covered with mortgages, labor impoverished, and the land concentrating in the hands of capitalists."*⁸

BAM: Sounds like something Dennis Kucinich would say!

LAMB: The Omaha Platform was a culmination of ideas and strategies from farmers and workers over a six-year period. Like the Declaration, it listed both grievances and fundamental prescriptions.

The platform called for abolishing the national banking system giving private banks control over money and credit; public ownership or control of the railroads, telegraph and telephone in the interests of the people; a federal graduated income tax; prohibition of alien land ownership; direct election of US Senators; the citizen initiative, referendum and recall; the secret ballot; and maybe most creatively, adoption of a "sub-treasury" system to expand currency based not on gold or silver but on agricultural products.

SAM: Still, many of these changes were "reformist." What's so radical about direct election of Senators if the Senate is part of a political system favoring a small number of elites?

LAMB: Some of our planks were less radical than others. The Progressives, those who followed the Populists, pushed for the more modest measures. Some eventually became law. Other proposals were more substantial, such as public control of banks, railroads and telephones. The goal of its financial sections, the key portions of the Platform, were radical - to transfer control of the monetary system from the nation's corporate banks and return it "in the name of the whole people," to the US Treasury.⁹

All our demands, however, sought to shift the balance of power, economic and political, toward "plain people." These changes were as revolutionary in our time as forcing the British out of the colonies in yours.

Changes advocated by the Populists, however, transcended its political platform and cooperative buying and selling programs. The crux of Populism was creating a democratic culture. Populists attempted to build a type of cooperative community or commonwealth within the framework of American capitalism, one that put people at the center of the political and economic decisions affecting their lives. It added up to a movement culture that was understood, accepted and lived by millions of citizens.¹⁰

Progressives didn't go that far. After the Populists were defeated in 1896, those who sought change accepted the corporate state and tried merely to temper its worst abuses through the creation of "regulatory" laws and agencies. This is the political and economic model you, Bam, and others working for "change" are stuck with today.

SAM: The Populists failed in the end. It was hardly revolutionary if it didn't yield much change.

LAMB: True, we didn't win. Elements of the Omaha Platform are now law, but there is no cooperative, democratic culture. Isn't the same true of the Declaration and those who worked for true self-governance in 1776? Its essence of a government

operating with the "consent of the governed" has not been realized. **Today, those claiming that We the People have not only a right but a duty to revolt if inalienable rights are not secured would be called "extremists," even "terrorists" and treated accordingly.**

BAM: A fundamental shortcoming of the Populists was their excluding blacks. Populist structures and members were often racist. In fact, many who call themselves "Populists" in recent times hold racist beliefs.

LAMB: That's a sad truth. The radical dream of early Alliance founders in Texas was to create a farmer-labor coalition that was interracial. Alliance lecturers organized many black Alliances which led to the Colored Farmers' National Alliance. Nevertheless, internal and external racism impeded social unity, economic cooperation, and electoral victory.

BAM: The change I speak of today is tied to offering real hope. I believe we can make government better, more responsive to people. We can control special interests and restore faith and trust in public officials. Hillary Clinton believes much the same. Even McCain supported campaign finance reform.

I believe we can make health care universal, increase labor and environmental provisions of NAFTA and other trade agreements, temporarily suspend home foreclosures, begin immediately to bring some troops home from Iraq, and strengthen ethics in government. This is a small part of my progressive change agenda that I can create with the support of voters. Clinton supports many of the same programs.

Other former Democratic Party candidates were even more radical. John Edwards spoke out against corporate power. Dennis Kucinich promoted a single-payer health care system, eliminating the role of insurance corporations all together, and called for undoing NAFTA.

My vision of change will be fueled if economic conditions worsen for Americans.

LAMB: Nothing you or any other Presidential candidate suggests will reduce corporate constitutional rights and powers or promote people's self-governance.

With due respect, Bam, **deep change was never brought about by those in positions of power. It occurs when people act together in insurgent movements. And insurgent movements are not a function of hard times, but of insurgent cultures. Difficult times crush people. Insurgent cultures provide real hope and make possible those processes of organizing, recruiting, educating and politicizing that create and sustain change.**¹¹

BAM: How can you say this? My messages of change and hope are drawing record numbers to my campaign. People are inspired, energized, empowered.

LAMB: True. But don't mistake attraction to your campaign with behaviors necessary for a healthy democracy. As Populism declined, little stood in the way of growing political and economic concentration. Democratic aspirations were replaced by mass resignation and plenty of escape into consumerism, entertainment and drugs.

You and your message fill a void only because people of your time do not know and have never experienced an authentic insurgency movement for self-governance. Not just to end a war, expand civil rights or create environmental protections, but a

movement affirming individual and collective self-confidence in seeking real political and economic democracy.

SAM: Bam, missing in your and other presidential candidates' analysis is the larger issue of how the power and authority of "We the People," as promoted in the Declaration and Preamble of the US Constitution, has been usurped.

LAMB: By the wealthy class and business corporations, I might add. We need changed rules not only changed faces.

SAM: That's what I thought the Declaration tried to do in 1776.

LAMB: And the Omaha Platform 116 years later, in 1892.

BAM: Do you two realize that 116 years after 1892 is this year, 2008?

LAMB: Rather than working for the adoption of a single national declaration or platform at this time, The Program on Corporation, Law and Democracy (POCLAD) urges decentralized, participatory gatherings to study the Declaration of Independence and Omaha Platform, along with democracy campaigns and cooperative programs from current grassroots organizations. They've collected it all in a *Democracy Insurgency Movement* packet. This will add another seed to those already sown across the country, one that may lead to a "Third Declaration of Independence" and genuine governance by the "consent of the governed."

BAM: It sounds like a dream, like my experience tonight.

LAMB: A dream? It all depends on the people and their determination to create *real* change.

Greg Coleridge is a POCLAD principal and works for the Northeast Ohio American Friends Service Committee.

To order a *Democracy Insurgency Movement* packet, contact POCLAD at people@poclad.org or call 508-398-1145.

Endnotes

1. Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *History of the United States*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1949, p. 140.
2. Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1980, p. 94.
3. Zinn, p. 73.
4. Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment, A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 33.
5. Ibid, p. 124.
6. Ibid, p. 88.
7. Ibid, p. 277.
8. The Omaha Platform.
9. Goodwyn, op. cit., p. 93.
10. Ibid., p. 164-5.
11. Ibid., p. 61.