

# A political allegory of failed American populist movement

By PETER DREIER

Almost all Americans know the characters from "The Wizard of Oz." But few are aware that the story originally was written as a political allegory.

It may seem harder to believe than the Emerald City, but the Tin Woodsman represents the American industrial worker, the Scarecrow the struggling farmer and the Wizard the president, who is powerful only as long as he succeeds in deceiving the people.

"The Wonderful Wizard of Oz" was written by Lyman Frank Baum in 1900, during the collapse of the Populist movement. Through the Populist party, Midwestern farmers, in alliance with some urban workers, had challenged the banks, railroads and other economic interests that squeezed farmers through low prices, high freight rates and continued indebtedness.

The Populists advocated government ownership of railroads and the telephone and telegraph industries. They also wanted silver coinage. Their power grew during the 1893 depression, the worst in U.S. history until then, as farm prices sank to new lows and unemployment was widespread.

In 1894, Jacob S. Coxey, a Populist lumber dealer from Massillon, Ohio, led a mass march of unemployed workers to Washington to demand a federal works program. That same year, President Grover Cleveland called in federal troops to put down the nationwide Pullman strike — at that time, the largest strike in American history. As the Populists saw things, the monopolies were growing richer, the workers and farmers, ever poorer.

In the 1894 congressional elections, the Populist party got almost 40 percent of the vote. It looked forward to winning the presidency, and the silver standard, in 1896.

But in that election, which revolved around the issue of gold vs. silver, Populist Democrat William Jennings Bryan lost to Republican William McKinley by 95 electoral votes. Bryan, a congressman from Nebraska and a gifted orator, ran again in 1900, but the Populist strength was gone.

Baum viewed these events from both rural South Dakota, where he edited a local weekly, and urban Chicago, where he wrote Oz. He mourned the destruction of the fragile alliance between the Midwestern farmers (the Scarecrow) and the urban industrial workers (the Tin Woodsman).

## A CLASSIC RECONSIDERED

'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz'

Along with Bryan (the Cowardly Lion with a roar but little else), they had been taken down the yellow brick road (the gold standard) that led nowhere. Each journeyed to Emerald City seeking favors from the Wizard of Oz (the president). Dorothy, the symbol of Everyman, went along with them, innocent enough to see the truth before the others.

Along the way they meet the Wicked Witch of the East who, Baum tells us, had kept the little Munchkin people "in bondage for many years, making them slave for her night and day." She also had put a spell on the Tin Woodsman, once an independent and hardworking man, so that each time he swung his axe, it chopped off a different part of his body. Lacking another trade, he "worked harder than ever," becoming like a machine, incapable of love, yearning for a heart. Another witch, the Wicked Witch of the West, clearly symbolizes the large industrial corporations.

Like Coxey's Populist army en route to Washington, the small group heads toward Emerald City where the Wizard rules from behind a papier-mache facade. Oz, of course, is the abbreviation for ounce, the standard measure for gold.

Like all good politicians, the Wizard can be all things to all people. Dorothy sees him as an enormous head. The Scarecrow sees a gossamer fairy. The Woodsman sees an awful beast, the Cowardly Lion "a ball of fire, so fierce and glowing he could scarcely bear to gaze upon it."

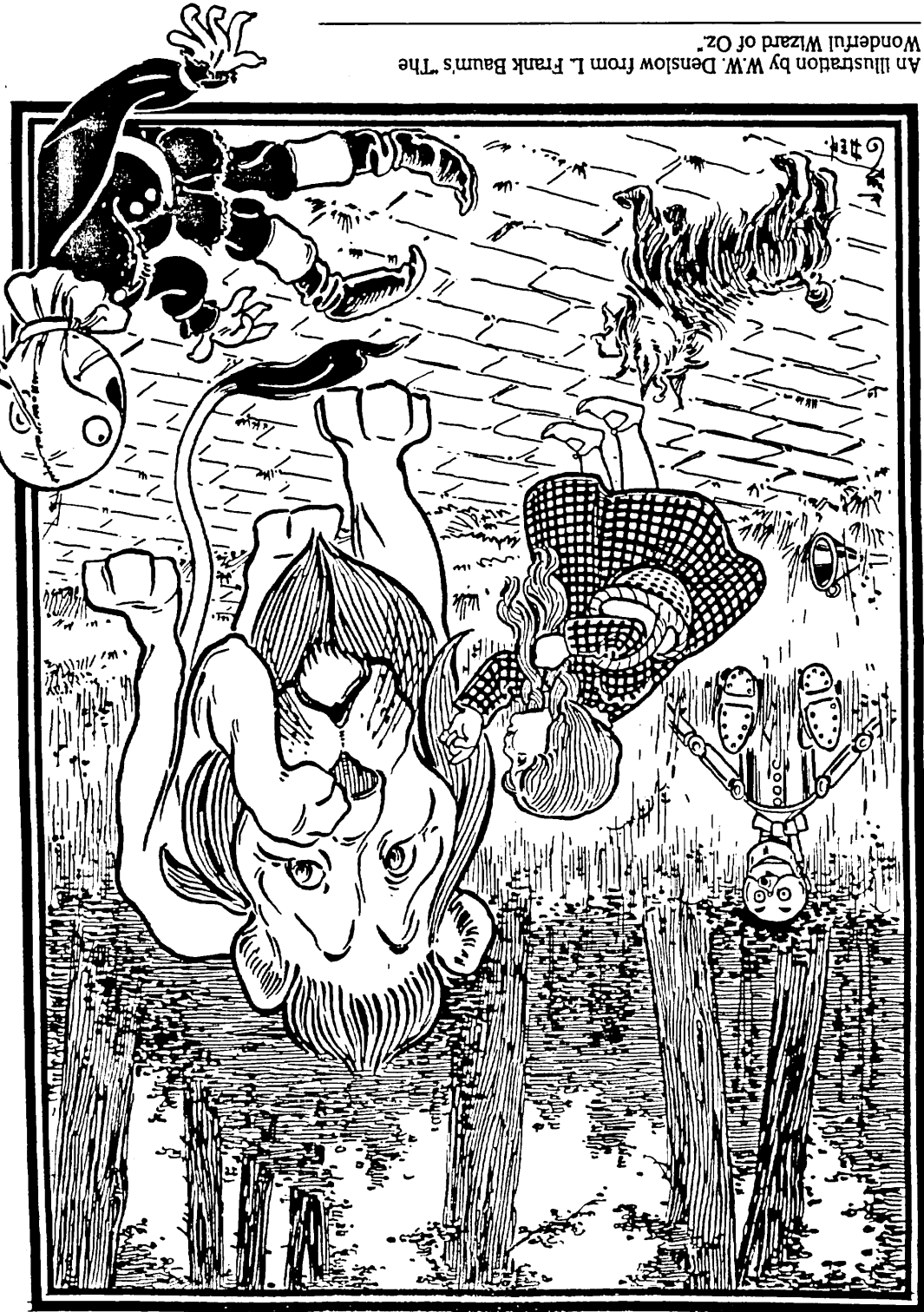
Later, however, when they confront the Wizard directly, they see he is nothing more than "a little man, with a bald head and a wrinkled face."

"I have been making believe," the Wizard confesses. "I'm just a common man." But the Scarecrow adds, "You're more than that . . . you're a humbug."

"It was a great mistake my ever letting you into the Throne Room," admits the Wizard, a former ventriloquist and circus balloonist from Omaha.

This was Baum's ultimate Populist message. The powers-that-be survive by deception. Only people's ignorance allows the powerful to manipulate and control them.

Dorothy returns to Kansas with the magical help of her Silver Shoes (the silver issue), but when



An illustration by W.W. Denslow from L. Frank Baum's "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz."

she gets to Kansas she realizes her shoes "had fallen off in her flight through the air, and were lost forever in the desert." Still, she is safe at home with Aunt Em and Uncle Henry, simple farmers. Baum realized perhaps that the silver issue had been lost, but that silver was not the crucial issue anyway. The Populists had been led astray — the real question was that of power. With the Wizard of Oz de-throned, the Scare-crow (farmers) rules Emerald American Indians of the plains, displayed an early sympathy for City, the Tin Woodsman (Indus-trial workers) rules in the East, and the Lion (Bryan) protects smaller beasts in "a small old for-est." In Baum's vision farm inter-ests gain political power, industry moves West, and Bryan, perhaps, returns to Congress. Baum's characters resonated with American popular culture at the turn of the century. He even goes.

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to rule over this land." . . . This was many years ago, long before Oz came out of the clouds living happily in the great forest, "Once . . . we were a tree people, whose leader tells Dorothy, Winged Monkeys in the West, symbolized in the story by the American Indians of the plains, displayed an early sympathy for