Veterans as Political Activists: The Kansas Grand Army of the Republic, 1880-1893

by Kyle S. Sinisi

The Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) has a strong political legacy in the history of Kansas. According to most historical accounts, this Civil War veterans' group dominated both the Republican party and the state government during the late nineteenth century. William Allen White subscribed to this assessment of the GAR, and he frequently addressed the GAR in his political essays and books. In his autobiography White concluded that Republican state conventions were merely “the private parade grounds” of the Kansas GAR.1 Significantly, other people shared White's opinion. In 1948, the Topeka State Journal described the Kansas GAR as an organization that dominated the state Republican party and “enforced rules in a manner that made party control tight as a tub.”2

This historical interpretation of the GAR, however, was nothing new. In the late nineteenth century many politicians feared the GAR. They consistently attributed great powers, both real and imagined, to the GAR and desired no direct confrontation with it. As measured by the amount of legislation sponsored by the GAR and subsequently enacted into law, the GAR had indeed acquired vast influence throughout the state’s government.

Although this political clout was a real factor in creating legislation, the political power of the GAR had its limits. On a statewide scale, whenever the GAR diverted its efforts from what was popularly perceived as strictly veterans' issues, such as pensions and patriotism, the organization usually lost influence. In its heyday during the decade of the 1880s, the GAR did not normally make this mistake. Between 1890 and 1893, however, the GAR wandered from veterans' issues to engage in partisan politics and attack agrarian reform.

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ers who then threatened Republican hegemony within the state. After a decade of incredible growth and acquisition of power, the GAR had made a mistake that reduced membership and diminished the organization's effectiveness as a legislative pressure group.

Prior to the GAR's entrance into partisan politics, the organization—originally founded in 1866—had accomplished a remarkable rise in numbers and influence. Beginning in 1880, veterans in the state flocked to the GAR. Membership exploded as the strength of the department went from 1,041 men in 1881 to 18,543 in 1890. A few factors contributed to this increase. First, economic stability had returned to Kansas after the depressions and panics of the 1870s. Second, post-war homesteaders, who made up a substantial majority of the GAR in Kansas, had settled down and found the time available to devote to the GAR and its weekly meetings and campfires. Finally, and most important, Civil War veterans had changed their attitudes concerning the GAR.

For years, the GAR had been shrouded in secret rituals, vague organizational purposes, and complicated membership regulations. Newly released soldiers had been quick to distrust the organization. They correctly suspected that the GAR was nothing but a secret society devoted entirely to the political interests of its affluent officers. However, fifteen years after the end of the war, the national leadership of the GAR remedied this perception by championing an issue that the working-class veteran could understand—pensions.

While the national GAR simultaneously lobbied Congress and enticed new members into the fold, the GAR in Kansas successfully executed a similar program at the state level. Beginning in 1885, the GAR successfully pressed numerous veterans' issues into the proceedings of the Kansas legislature. Besieged by petitions and resolutions, the predominantly Republican legislators passed many bills and appropriations pertaining to veterans' benefits. During the legislative session of 1886, the GAR renewed its pressure on the lawmakers. Department Commander Milton Stewart boasted at that time, "the Grand Army of the Republic is a power in this State, and, if so disposed, can make its influence felt." Stewart was correct. By the completion of the 1886 session, the state had accepted responsibility for the funerals of all honorably discharged veterans, financed the establishment of an orphans' home for children of deceased veterans, and made Memorial Day, May 30, a legal holiday. Furthermore, the legislature even legalized giving veterans preferential treatment when assigning political patronage. Although the men of the GAR eventually clamored for additional legislation to enforce this last law, they could be happy with their early successes as fledgling political lobbyists.

During the next few years and as membership began to peak, the GAR continued its assault upon the generosity of the state legislature. In 1888, the GAR created a formal committee to lobby the legislature. With the assistance of countless petitions from the state's veterans, the committee spurred lawmakers to pass almost all of the GAR's proposed legislation. This included: an act establishing homes for disabled veter-


ans and their families; an act giving suffrage to inmates of the national veterans' home in Leavenworth; a resolution to the U.S. Congress petitioning it to pass more liberal veterans' pension laws; and finally, another resolution requiring that Kansas State Senate doorkkeepers be disabled veterans.  

Now at the height of its influence within the legislature, the GAR also managed to engage the state government as protectors of the GAR. First, the legislature appropriated $36,000 for the creation of a permanent GAR reunion and campment facility in Ellsworth. Second, a law was passed making it a misdemeanor for unauthorized wearing of the miniature bronze GAR button. In February of 1889, this infamous crime became punishable by a prison term of thirty days and a fine of twenty-five dollars.7

As the members of the GAR became a force in the state legislature, these self-proclaimed "old soldiers" were remarkable for their obvious lack of interest in anything but veterans' benefits. Writing of the Kansas GAR's political activism forty years later in 1928, William Allen White correctly observed that, besides pensions, "all other issues were minor issues."8 Significantly, the Kansas GAR's attitude toward partisan politics contrasted distinctly with the beliefs and actions of its national organization, which had become increasingly pro-Republican after 1880. The case of former Union army general Fitz-John Porter highlighted this difference.

A Democrat, Porter had been cashiered after the federal debacle at Second Manassas. Porter never accepted this verdict, and he mounted a prolonged campaign to prove that he had been made a scapegoat by influential Radical Republicans. In the national elections of 1880 and 1884, Porter's plight became a volatile issue. In particular, Republican Senator John A. Logan used Porter's case as a method to galvanize GAR support for his presidential aspirations. While much of the GAR nationwide fell in behind Logan, Kansas veterans made few pronouncements. By early 1884, and after considerable debate, these Kansans resolved to stay out of the controversy. According to the official resolution, to do otherwise would be blatantly political and therefore contrary to the avowed neutrality of the GAR.9

Not anxious to court controversy, the Kansas GAR frequently avoided political entanglements. For most of the decade of the eighties, prominent GAR members did not want to be perceived as using the organization for political profit. For example, in January 1885, Timothy McCarthy withdrew from a contest that could have elected him to the prestigious and powerful post of department commander. As he informed a fellow member of the GAR, McCarthy was bidding to become the state auditor, and he did not want to leave himself open to the charge that he had used the GAR for personal aggrandizement.10

McCarthy was not alone in the separation of GAR and party politics. Despite the fact that many veterans were seeking office, few reports surfaced of Kansas GAR members using the GAR to promote either personal or Republican interests. Prior to the state and national elections of 1888, even the official newspaper of the GAR shied away from any discussion of politics. With the exception of printing biographies of veterans in the state legislature, the Kansas Knight and Soldier was devoid of any mention of the Republican party. The paper was content to publish regimental histories and reminders of local reunions. In an age when GAR newspapers, such as the Washington National Tribune, did not hedge on their political sympathies, this neutrality was unusual. Unfortunately, the neutral political stance of the Kansas GAR would not last much longer.11

As much as the old soldiers feared a political conflict during most of the 1880s, a change of attitude slowly manifested itself toward the end of the decade, and the Kansas GAR eventually matched the national organization in its partisan involvement. At first, political interest was sparked by the presidential election of 1888 which pitted the incumbent Democrat, Grover Cleveland, against Republican, Benjamin Harrison. In this election the GAR had an enhanced interest in Harrison's candidacy. Grover Cleveland's administration had proven a disaster for the GAR. Cleveland had completely alienated the GAR by vetoing numerous pension bills and appointing southern Democrats to key positions within his administration.

GAR members throughout the United States vehemently condemned Cleveland, and the Kansas veterans joined this attack. A major difference for the Kansas GAR, however, was its hesitancy to inject politics into the formal activities of the department. The first example occurred during the department's annual campment in February at Winfield.


9. For an account of the national GAR during this episode see Mary R. Deering, Veterans in Politics ( Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1952), 255-55. For the response of the GAR in Kansas see GAR Proceedings, 1884, 87-98.

10. Timothy McCarthy to Patrick Coney, January 15, 1885, Patrick H. Coney Collection, Manuscripts Dept., KSHS.

11. GAR Proceedings, 1885, 9; Kansas Knight and Soldier, Topeka, July through December 1884, September through December 1886, August 31, 1887.
Although Mayor W. P. Harkey of Winfield stereotyped Cleveland and the Democrats as men who “cowardly and meanly hired substitutes” during the war, other speeches at the encampment carefully avoided mention of the upcoming election. In the next few months, the situation changed little; there appeared only sporadic interest in the campaign. In fact, one attempt to inject politics at a local post meeting failed miserably. John Brown, Jr., a hero to all old Radical Republicans and son of the hero of Harper’s Ferry, was stopped midway through his speech at Topeka’s Lincoln Post #1 because of his political denunciations of Cleveland.

By August 16, however, the GAR had warmed up to Harrison’s candidacy when it invited him to speak at a fall reunion. In the invitation, Harrison was dutifully reminded that the Grand Army was not political in nature, but “as these meetings go, there is always more or less politics injected into them.” Harrison was unable to attend, but the Kansas GAR had taken its first big step into election politics.

Another change struck the state’s GAR when the Kansas Knight and Veteran altered its editorial policy. On October 10, it joined the list of publications that endorsed Harrison. Significantly, the GAR’s endorsement was tied exclusively to Cleveland’s non-existent war record and his parsimonious handling of the pension bureau. “Waving the bloody shirt” of the Civil War, the GAR castigated Cleveland as “anti-soldier” and ignored other Republican issues such as the use of tariffs and the retention of the gold standard.

Following Harrison’s narrow defeat of Cleveland, the GAR in Kansas took steps to increase its effectiveness as a supporter of the Republican party. Faithful to its military origin, the GAR had always been structured like an army. Commanders issued orders; assistant adjutant generals tabulated personnel returns; and quartermasters ruled over all supply and money matters. Strangely, though, all 438 individual posts throughout the state reported directly to Department headquarters in Topeka. There was no distinct chain-of-command. In March 1889, however, a chain was established, but it also had an eye to election politics. “Corps were given autonomy over congressional districts, and “divisions” were assigned the responsibility of looking over townships.

In subsequent elections, the GAR used this system to support local candidates of its choosing. A good example of the grass roots approach happened during a special election in the spring of 1889. Fourth District Congressman Thomas Ryan, a Democrat, had been named envoy to Mexico, and Republican Harrison Kelley challenged for his seat. A member of the GAR, Kelley won the election with considerable support and endorsement from his fellow veterans who included future governor Lyman Humphrey. Ecstatic with the results of the contest, many members of the GAR knew “that the interests of the true Republicans and the Old Soldiers [would] be in safe hands.”

12. GAR Proceedings, 1888, 4-5.
13. Grand Army Journal, March 29, 1890. After the GAR became deeply involved in partisan politics, the organization tended to deny such involvement by referring to its earlier nonpartisan history. The affair with John Brown, Jr., which occurred in 1888, is but one example.

15. Kansas Knight and Soldier, October 10, 1888.
17. Allen Buckner to Harrison Kelley, March 18, 1889; Leland Webb to Kelley, May 3, 1889; Headquarters State Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States to Kelley, May 4, 1889; Daniel Boyden to Kelley, May 4, 1889; Harrison Kelley Collection, Manuscripts Dept., KSHS.
The GAR had helped to elect a congressman, and it could have exerted pressure on him in any fashion. True to their brief history as political activists, however, veterans turned to Kelley only in matters of their perceived veterans’ rights. An example of this concerned political patronage. Believing that any civil service position connected with the pension system belonged to a Republican veteran, the GAR pressured Kelley about this “right” in numerous cases. During Kelley’s term in office, one such case stood out.

In particular, the GAR campaigned against a local federal pension agent who was a lifelong Democrat, former Governor George W. Glick. Glick had served in the Kansas militia during the war and had been wounded. The GAR, however, attached more importance to Glick’s current ties to the “soldier hating” Democrats and Grover Cleveland. Accordingly, prominent state Republicans enlisted Kelley’s aid in smearing Glick as a “treason apologist and Copperhead Democrat.” By invoking this, and other old Republican Civil War rallying cries, Kelley and his GAR cohorts easily persuaded President Harrison to remove Glick and replace him with a “fearless soldier and a faithful Republican.” Harrison’s decision thrilled “the loyal people of Kansas, and especially the soldier element.”

One local GAR member, William Marindale, was so moved that he wrote Kelley that he was taking the liberty to tell the Boys that Harrison Kelley... started for Washington with blood in his eyes and... [he] went for Glick’s scalp.” An interesting postscript to Glick’s removal was that his successor immediately dismissed the clerks in his office and filled “their places with Union soldiers and their widows.”

With such grass roots success and a decade of experience as legislative lobbyists, the GAR was now inspired to tempt political activism outside of simple veterans’ benefits. Additionally, the GAR somehow believed itself obligated to assist the Republican party in an entirely new struggle against agrarian reformers who campaigned for free silver and wheat sub-treasuries. Unfortunately for the GAR, agrarian reformers did not easily lend themselves to the Republican tactic of waving the bloody shirt.

Theoretically, the GAR should have had little problem dealing with the Populists (People’s party) or their precursor—the Farmers’ Alliance. Since the end of the Civil War, Kansans had overwhelmingly chosen Republican old soldiers to be their leaders. Nine of ten governors and five of eight senators had been Republican members of the GAR. The Kansas electorate also contained a sizeable number of veterans in proportion to its eligible male voters. According to numbers released in 1897 by the U.S. census, 50,627 veterans resided in Kansas, representing 13 percent of an electorate of 383,251. These figures made the veterans a substantial political force, but it was a number not yet available to the GAR. Importantly, the GAR had estimated its strength at twice that number.

For years, the GAR had believed the veteran population in Kansas to be well over one hundred thousand men. Constantly publicized, the figure intimidated many politicians who did not want to alienate what was believed to be almost one-third of the electorate. Furthermore, despite the fact that the GAR never had more than 18,543 dues paying members, office seekers generally held the GAR to be the sole veterans’ spokesman. By 1890, GAR members had become highly valued as leaders of a sizeable block of voters.

Undoubtedly, the mythical figure of one hundred thousand veterans played havoc with the imaginations of some politicians, but it also served to create some apprehension within the GAR. Having only a small percentage of the state’s veterans as members, the GAR was forced to admit to itself that it did not actually speak for all veterans in the state. When the Farmers’ Alliance began attracting veterans in 1890, the GAR’s fear of losing control of the veterans’ vote intensified. In order technically not to violate Kansas GAR regulations that prohibited the use of the GAR for political purposes, the Kansas GAR undertook two moves that the national GAR had already employed for much of the previous decade. First, department commanders continued to pressure against political activity in the GAR’s sparsely attended formal post meetings. Their action, however, did not preclude the mention of politics in the GAR’s informal social gatherings or campfires. As the department commanders generally looked the other way, the campfires invariably attracted, according to one observer, “political wire-pullers and office seekers of every kind and creed.”

Another method that the GAR used to get across its political agenda was the newspaper. After the relatively sedate Kansas Knight and Soldier stopped business in 1889, the GAR sanctioned the growth of a more controversial organ, the Grand Army Journal which was edited by the

18. George T. Anthony to President Harrison, June 26, 1889, Harrison Kelley Collection.
19. Anthony to Kelley, June 26, 1889, Harrison Kelley Collection.
20. Kelley to President Harrison, July 12, 1889, Harrison Kelley Collection.
21. William Marindale to Kelley, July 14, 1889, Harrison Kelley Collection.
25. Grand Army Journal, August 9, 1890.
GAR members from Troy, Dominphne County.

Washington Post #12, Lawrence.
his seat in the U.S. Senate. Ingalls’ term expired in March 1891, and he easily became the focal point of the entire election as the Farmers’ Alliance deemed him a tool of eastern banking interests. Although Webb and the GAR had already thrown down the Republican gauntlet in front of the Farmers’ Alliance in the first Grand Army Journal editorial, they did attempt to accommodate some of the agrarian concerns in order to prevent old soldier disaffection to the Alliance.27

Chief among their aims was to portray the Republican party in Kansas as the true friend of the farmer. Previously silent on all issues but veterans’ pensions, the GAR began calling for congressional action on issues ranging from federal control of commercial fertilizer to bi-metallic currency. The campaign also advertised Senator Ingalls as a hero of the farmer and an enemy of the eastern banking interests.28

The GAR increased its efforts in the summer of 1890 when fear of a Populist and Democratic fusion surfaced. Having established Ingalls as a working man’s senator, the GAR sought to cleave Alliance voters from the Democrats. To do so, the GAR equated all anti-Ingalls men with Democrats who were “national haters” and “shylocks of the east.”29 Democrats were the traditional “enemy” of the Union soldier, and the Grand Army Journal sought to reinforce this concept among its readers. According to Leland Webb, all Democrats were anti-pension men and all anti-pension men were “immasculated idiot[s] who spawn[ed] from the abominable wretchedness of squalid ‘cussedness’.”30

The Grand Army Journal’s vehemence rhetoric spurred many GAR posts to endorse publicly either Ingalls or the Republican party. By mid-June, however, many within the GAR clearly believed that a number of “old soldiers” had gone over to the Populists. As a last minute attempt to keep its wavering members within the fold, the GAR secured President Harrison and Senator Ingalls to speak at the Department’s annual reunion that took place one month prior to the election in Topeka. Planned by a committee that included three Republican former governors, the reunion encouraged veterans to exercise their Republican franchise in the upcoming election. In its final edition before the election, the Journal exhorted “every man in Kansas who ever wore the blue...[to] fly to the rescue, and work manfully from now until the polls are closed the 4th of November to send men [to the legislature], who are pledged to support John J. Ingalls.”31

26. Ibid., March 29, 1890.

27. Ibid., June 14, 1890.
28. Ibid., May 3, July 15, November 1, 1890.
29. Ibid., June 21, 1890.
30. Ibid., April 16, 19, 1890.
31. Ibid., June 14, October 4, 18, November 1, 1890.
Despite the pleas of Leland Webb and the pro-
Republican resolutions of several GAR posts, the
Populists made tremendous gains in the election of
1890. Republican Lyman Humphrey was elected go-
vember by a narrow margin, but in the state House of
Representatives the Populists took 82 of a possible 125
seats. The election results were a shock to the GAR,
and it illustrated for the first time that the GAR and
the Republican party did not exclusively represent the
Union Civil War veteran. Despite the fact that the
Populists generally ran candidates who were too young
to have served in the war, approximately 30 percent of
the party’s elected officials were veterans.32

Examined in another way, 33 percent of all repre-
sentatives elected in 1890 were Civil War veterans.
Compared with the 55 percent who were elected to the
House of Representatives in 1888, this new figure
detailed a steep decline in the importance of being a
Civil War veteran. The overwhelming triumph of the
Populists had proved that Civil War experience in
office seekers was not essential to success.33

Once the Republicans had been thrown out of the
majority in 1891, the GAR’s lobbying influence in the
legislature declined. Legislation proposed by the GAR
usually failed. The most obvious example of this was a
GAR attempt to get state funding in order to hold a
national encampment in Topeka. Even with Governor
Humphrey’s support, the proposal failed. In another

case the GAR started its lobbying effort to “teach cor-
correct History” in Kansas schools. Upset that many of
the school textbooks in Kansas contained favorable
references to the Confederacy, the GAR worked to get
a standard text that ensured the proper perspective
on “Loyalty.”34 Petitions flooded into Topeka, but
the effort failed to gain support in the Populist

dominated legislature.

As the GAR suffered defeats in pushing veterans’
interests and legislation, it also continued to receive
bad news in many of its other partisan activities.
Friend of the veteran and member of the GAR, John J.
Ingalls was turned out of the U.S. Senate almost imme-
diately by the new legislature. This anticipated event
occurred despite a last minute rush of petitions and a
rally of “old soldiers from 35 counties . . . demanding
Ingalls’ re-election.”35 In Ingalls’ place, the legislature
installed agrarian reformer William A. Peffer.
Ironically, Peffer was a veteran with a distinguished
record, but he had never joined the GAR. After an
election that saw the GAR call him “unfriendly to the
interests of the soldiers” and “disloyal to their inter-
est,” Peffer vowed never to join any veterans organiza-
tion until “all that ugly feeling” died out.36

For the GAR and its Republican members, “that
ugly feeling” never did die out. Ostracized from power
in the state capitol, the GAR also had to witness the
increased popularity of the People’s party. By the state
and national elections of 1892, the GAR had decided
to wage a vigorous political campaign that far
exceeded its efforts in either 1888 or 1890.

In the fall of 1892, many members of the GAR
joined the state Republican party in “an aggressive
campaign in every part of the state.”37 Unlike the
previous contest when the GAR tried to accommodate the
Farmers’ Alliance, this election witnessed the GAR’s
espousal of a hard line Republican stance. High pro-
ective tariffs and the rejection of free silver easily
became the cornerstones of a program that, of course,
still embraced the concept of getting substantial pen-
sions for all honorably discharged Union veterans.
The authorized GAR leadership, which was repre-
sented by the department commander and his staff,
made few official statements. The veterans’ news-
per, however, more than made up for this lack of any
official pronouncement.38

With the death of Leland Webb in early 1892, the
GAR had turned to another paper to print the gospel
of the Republican party, the Western Veteran. Edited by
a recent department assistant adjutant general, O. H.
Coulter, and endorsed by previous department com-
manders, the Western Veteran led the GAR charge
against both the Populists and—to a lesser extent—
the Democrats. Stated simply by Coulter, “To vote for
any other than the [R]epublican party would seem . . .
a wanton, if not wicked, waste of suffrage.”39

Coulter advertised his paper as “Aggressive!
Unrammed! Uncompromising!” and devoted to the
“Rights and Interests” of soldiers.40 Published weekly,
Coulter’s editorials and comments were filled with
anti-Populist material. Moreover, Coulter had not

difficultly defending his paper against charges that the
Western Veteran violated GAR regulations prohibiting
partisan politics. Coulter quite simply fell back to the
reasoning used by GAR members in the previous elec-
tion: anything said, or done, outside of a post meeting
room was not governed by the regulations to remain

32. Information on the veterans’ status of legislators was gained
from biographical sketches contained in W. W. Admire, Political and
Legislative Hand-book for Kansas, 1891 (Topeka: Geo. W. Crane and
Co., 1891), 361-64.
33. Ibid.
34. GAR Proceedings, 1891, 60.
35. Ibid., 9-10; Grand Army Journal, January 31, 1891.
36. William Peffer to F. H. Hattaway (recorder), March 7, 1892.
Correspondence, Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United
States, Manuscripts Dept., KSHS.
37. J. M. Simpson to Coney, August 11, 1892, Patrick H. Coney
Collection.
38. Western Veteran, Topeka, September 14, 19, 26, 1892.
39. Ibid., September 14, 1892.
40. Ibid., October 12, 1892.
strictly non-partisan. Thus cloaked by precedent, Coulter was able to claim—all in the same issue—that the GAR knew "no politics" and that Populists "were noted for their treasonable activities."41

While Coulter printed a great deal that was purely propaganda, he also attempted to organize a grass roots mobilization of veterans in support of the Republican party. He tried this by having sympathetic old soldier postmasters throughout the state give the Western Veteran names of all known veterans within their postal districts. Coulter, in turn, was to contact these veterans and lobby their vote for the Republican party. Unfortunately for the ambitious Coulter, the entire operation never proved an overwhelming success. Only seven known postmasters cooperated with him in this scheme.

Populists reacted to this type of blatant political GAR interference in a predictable fashion. They fought back in their own press, particularly the Topeka Advocate. The GAR was described, generally, as being filled with nothing more than "political hysteres." And more specifically, Coulter was characterized as "an ass with very long ears."42 Other Populist leaders also took aim at the GAR and labelled it as an "imperialistic and political organization whose existence was an infamous outrage."43

The Populists, however, did not confine themselves strictly to hurling insults at Coulter and the GAR. Instead, they started their own campaign of wooing the veterans' vote. As in earlier elections, the myth of one hundred thousand voting veterans had pushed them into such action. Consequently, the Populists emphasized the veteran status of their candidates for lieutenant governor and secretary of state; they also charged that GAR led Republicans had fiscally misused the state's various soldiers' homes. Turning to national politics, the Populists informed the veterans that President Harrison was in league with eastern bankers who were trying to swindle the "old soldier."44

When the election finally was held, the Populists appeared to have won decisively. Initial returns clearly gave the Populists majorities in both houses of the legislature. Furthermore, a Populist, Lorenzo Lewelling, had been elected governor. But because the Republican party contested much of the election results, the political campaigning continued unabated as both parties sought to entrench their popular support—especially in Topeka where the election results would be debated in the new legislature. Both parties believed that the possibility of violence would exist when it came time to recount the votes. Consequently, each party desired the veterans' support should such a situation arise. However, in the political scramble that followed, the Populists quickly seized the initiative.45

Stating that veterans did not "have to be republican dogs in order to get pensions," the Populists made a concerted effort to gain the veterans' vote. Furthermore, the Populists decided to create their own veterans' organization. Led by former Brig. Gen. Edward G. Moore, the Populists formed a new society called The Boys in Blue. By mid-December these veterans had held their first meeting in Topeka and had attracted 127 members, 13 of whom had been former

41. Ibid., October 19, 1892.
42. Advocate and Topeka Tribune, Topeka, September 28, October 26, 1892.
43. Western Veteran, November 2, 1892.
44. Advocate and Topeka Tribune, October 26, November 2, 1892.
45. Daily Populist, Topeka, January 10, 1893.
GAR men. In order to rally veterans to this society, General Moore waved a modified version of the bloody shirt when he enthusiastically claimed to have "received more wounds in battle during the late war than the editor of the Veteran [Coulter] served months." 46

O. H. Coulter did not go on record with a reply, and Moore's and the Populists' efforts provided quick dividends. The Boys in Blue continued to recruit throughout the legislative session, and one of the city's two GAR posts tilted in favor of the Populists. By mid-January 1893, the Populists even conducted caucus meetings in the GAR Lincoln Post Hall. When violence finally did break out one month later, an undetermined number of GAR men banded together to help guard Populist legislators. Although the Populists would eventually lose many of the legislative seats that they had legally won when the election was thrown into a Republican dominated state supreme court, they had succeeded in galvanizing the old soldier in their favor. 47

Following a trend that had been started two years earlier, the Populists in 1892 had been able to steal veterans from the Republican party and the GAR. While old soldiers began to enlist in the army of the agrarian reformers, the GAR did not stand by idly; the organization committed itself to a role in partisan politics that it would have otherwise ignored. Between 1865 and 1890, the GAR simply had no overwhelming need to participate in partisan politics in a state dominated by the Republican party. However, the rise of Populism clearly changed this political balance of power, and the GAR felt compelled to respond to the challenge. Unfortunately, the GAR's subsequent hard line Republican actions heightened the disaffection of its working-class members. Moreover, the GAR's ardent Republicanism alienated many Kansans who had been born after the Civil War and who had previously supported the organization. The Bloody Shirt had little appeal to both veterans and non-veterans preoccupied with the agrarian issues of the early 1890s.

The GAR's unsuccessful forays into partisan politics caused major problems; its popularity suffered, and it was crippled by a decline in membership. Between 1890 and 1893, the GAR lost 1,177 members to causes other than death. Highlighting this problem was the fact that the sharp decline had come after a decade of phenomenal growth. Only following the resurgence of the Republican party in the late 1890s, and excluding those members who began to die in greater numbers, did the GAR begin to staunch the desertion of its old soldiers. Prior to this, however, the GAR had lost valuable time to assert itself as political lobbyists. As with the failed attempts to push legislation concerning veterans' interests in 1891 and 1892, the GAR experienced a similar difficulty during the remainder of the decade. Failed legislation dealing with patriotism in Kansas schools and the construction of the GAR memorial building in Topeka were but two examples. Ultimately, both these issues would have to wait a few more years before a revitalized and less politically oriented GAR could effectively lobby the Kansas legislature. For a group that was battling the inevitable rush of time, these were years they could ill afford to lose.

46. Western Veteran, December 7, 1892; Advocate and Topeka Tribune, December 14, 1892.
47. Daily Populist, January 24, 1893.