

Extended Commentary: James Hedges and Prohibition's "Faithful Remnant"

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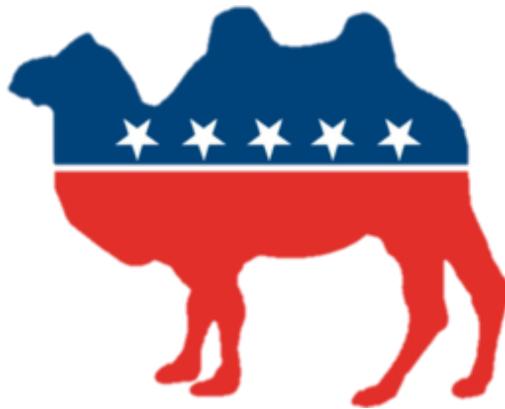
Cover Page Footnote

J. David Gillespie, Ph.D., is a former academic vice president and retired political science faculty member who has authored two published books and many articles and conference papers on U.S. "third" or minor political parties.

James Hedges and Prohibition's "Faithful Remnant"

James is the name his parents gave him; James as in Bond, the hero in Ian Fleming novels and movie spy thrillers. Unlike Bond—that famous but fictional character—Hedges has friends and fellow partisans who know him simply as Jim. He is currently at the helm, insofar as anyone is, of the nation's third oldest living electoral political party. The Democratic Party was just thirty-seven years old and the GOP fifteen, when the Prohibition Party was born in 1869.

Jim Hedges is the party's contemporary historian and the guiding force of the Partisan Prohibition Historical Society. He is the head of the party's website, prohibitionists.org, and editor of its printed newsletter, *National Prohibitionist*. Hedges wrote and recently saw published, *A Faithful Remnant*, the party's book-length official and authoritative account of its history since 1972.¹



Current incarnation of historic Prohibition Party symbol, the two-humped camel

More than recording the party's recent history, Hedges has lived and actively participated in it. Involved in a bitter intra-party conflict leading to schism over the domineering leadership of Earl F. Dodge, a man who for years was the party's public face and its perennial presidential

candidate, Hedges also was instrumental in assisting his party cohorts in reconstructing their party in the post-Dodge era.²

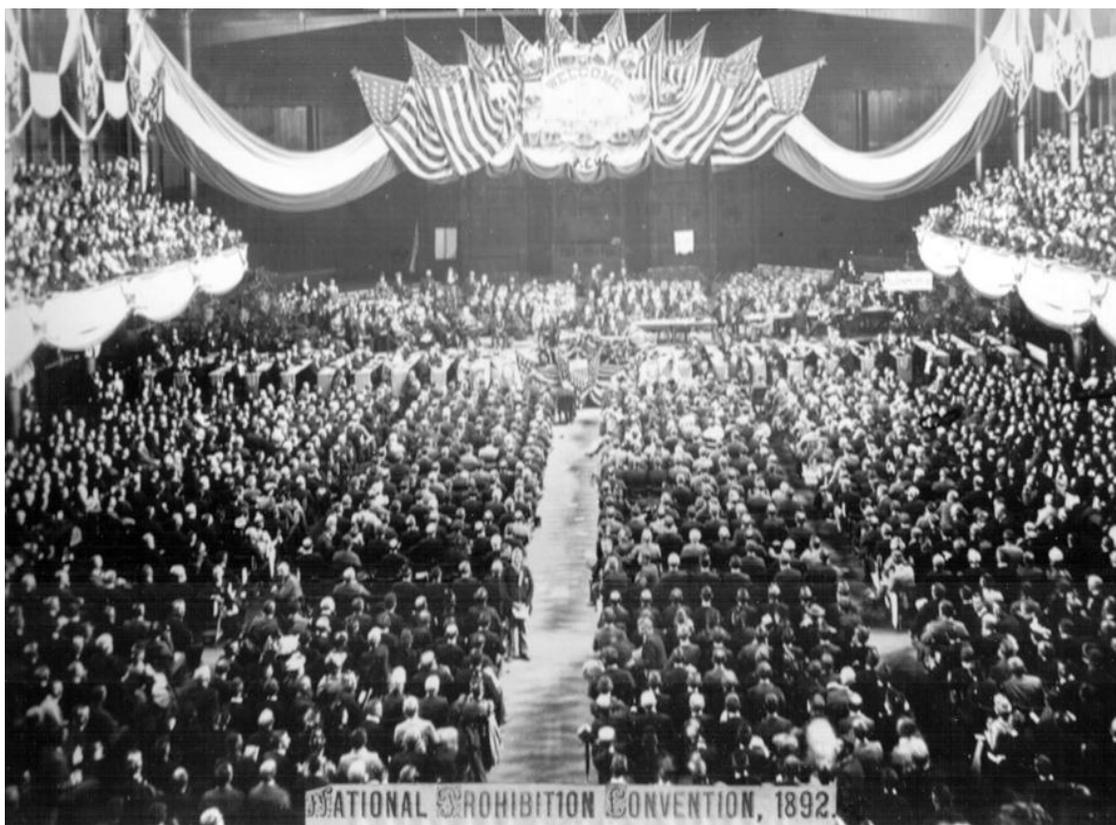
Maybe of greater interest to folks outside the party is that Jim Hedges was Prohibition's presidential nominee in 2016. He was seventy-eight at the time. That could be deemed either elderly or venerable depending upon one's point of view; but it put him in the same range as the current ages of the candidates who are carrying the Democratic and Republican presidential standards in 2020.

Neither Hedges nor any of his party comrades bore any illusion that he might win the presidential contest of 2016.³ Many of the faithful remnant did not even have the privilege of giving him their vote. Hedges' name appeared on the ballots of just three states. They were Arkansas, Colorado, and Mississippi, states with some of the least fierce and impregnable statutory ballot access barriers. His cumulative vote was just 5,617. Although that was the best presidential tally since 1988, skeptics might be forgiven if they concluded that the party was barely showing a heartbeat.

Nevertheless, Jim Hedges has earned a place, and more than a footnote, in accounts of the nation's history. This is not because of the present condition, peripheral and essentially powerless, of his party and its faithful remnant. It is due to the role Hedges has assumed as chief custodian of a third-party tradition and of a legacy which once had some clout and influence upon politics and policy in the United States. Someone has already written him up in an article titled under his name in *Wikipedia*. May this article be a next step toward placing him firmly in the American historical record.

*The Party in Its Heyday*⁴

Although Prohibition platforms have carried planks involving many issues, the centerpiece has always been the call for prohibition of the commercial production, transport, and sale of beverage alcohol. The observation that the party has been a single-issue association is thus comprehensible, but it is also an oversimplification. The fact is that partisan Prohibitionists have been split between the purists—"Narrow Gauge Prohibitionists," for whom alcohol has been the single important issue, and the pragmatists—"Broad Gauge Prohibitionists," who wanted to participate in the multi-faceted policy making of a diverse society.



Prohibition National Convention, 1892. Photo courtesy of Frances Willard House Museum and WCTU Archives, Evanston, Illinois

Roger Storms, a long-deceased precursor of Hedges as party historian, wrote that the party has gone through three phases. During its prophetic phase (1869-1896), the party foresaw for itself the role of catalyst for an “evangelistic transformation” to a higher social order in America.

Party leaders during the pragmatic second period (1896-1932) held no such grandiose designs or illusions. Accepting that they were never going to supplant either major party, they joined in coalition with other temperance, women’s suffrage, and progressive associations. In the fundamentalist era (1932 and since), the party has departed from its traditional attachments to progressive causes and was born again as a conservative, small, and peripheral group.

Clearly the party’s heyday came in those thirty-six years of the pragmatic period. It was then that the party scored its most spectacular election victories. Running in 1916 as Prohibition nominee, Florida candidate Sidney J. Catts won a term as Governor of Florida. Two years before that Los Angeles voters elected Prohibitionist Charles H. Randall to the first of three consecutive terms in the U.S. House of Representatives.

It was also within that pragmatic period that Amendment 18, the constitutional provision prohibiting the commerce in liquor, beer, and wine, entered the Constitution.⁵ A coalition of temperance groups had pushed its passage. Prohibition Party activists certainly took part. So did the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). However, the leading agency pressure from outside the formal structures of government came from the Anti-Saloon League.⁶

Opinion surveys and exit polls were not even in their infancy during the Prohibition Party’s heyday. Nonetheless, there is extensive—if anecdotal—data that reveal much about the party’s demographic base. Members and supporters tended to be better educated than the rank and file in the electorate and more likely to live in cities.⁷ Most of the party’s members were evangelical Protestants, and there were many pastors in that number.

Prohibition was among the nation's first parties to be accessible and open to women. Women were present as full voting delegates at the convention that brought the party to life in 1869. Women's suffrage was a plank embodied in the first Prohibition platform in 1872, and at a convention attended by 4,000 men and women twenty years after that, the party adopted a thoroughly modern platform plank demanding equal pay for equal work for women and men.⁸

The Woman's Christian Temperance Union first organized as the women's arm of the Prohibition Party. During the two decades in which Prohibitionist Frances Willard led it, the WCTU far surpassed in importance even the party itself. It became the largest women's organization of the nineteenth century and the heart of the concerted demand for prohibition and women's rights as well as for prison and labor reform, for public support for neglected children, and for peace—in short, for a transformed society dedicated to social justice.

In 1920, the year in which women in every state first freely exercised their right to vote, Prohibition nominated women for the U.S. Senate in New York and Pennsylvania.⁹ Four years later that party named Marie Caroline Brehm as its vice-presidential nominee, making her the first woman to run for Vice President of the United States.

This is the partisan historical tradition illuminated today by Jim Hedges. Hedges matters because his party has mattered, if not so much today, once upon a time.

Hedges and the Party in the Latter Day

Jim Hedges and I first met in 2009. It did not come through any meeting of our minds on matters of alcohol and the prohibition thereof. Hedges had heard that I am a political scientist who had written extensively and favorably about third parties and their legacy in contributing to the evolution of that "more perfect Union" envisaged in the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. Hedges called to invite me to attend and speak at a party conference which was being planned

and which took place in Memphis. I said yes. We became acquainted during those June days of that 2009 conference at Barton Southern Methodist, the conservative evangelical Memphis church which had offered itself as the conference host venue.



James and Carolyn Hedges (2015)

Meeting on the 140th anniversary year of their party's birth, the delegates were few in number but they came from Tennessee, Florida, Mississippi, and Alabama, from Virginia and Pennsylvania, from Michigan and as far away as the state of Washington. The conference was billed as a working session on the future and how to make the party relevant going forward into

the future. Jim Hedges had invited a mainstream-looking college student who in his speech took a stab at giving some useful advice. So did I, but I am not sure that my speech helped or even sounded a note of hopeful optimism. Referencing Kermit the Frog, I titled my remarks "It's Not Easy Being Green, But It Must be Even Harder Being a Prohibitionist."¹⁰

I vividly recall several of the delegates to whom I listened as they spoke and with whom I chatted and broke bread and (non-alcoholic) drink during those Memphis days. There were Gene Amondson and Leroy Pletten, men who had run together on the party's presidential and vice-presidential ticket in 2008. Amondson's first run, in 2004, had been as the nominee of the anti-Earl Dodge portion of the then temporarily divided party.

Amondson, the son of a Pacific Northwest lumberjack, turned sixty-five at the time of that fall 2008 run for the presidency. He was a Christian minister in Washington state but also an artist who spent time in Alaska painting scenic pictures which he then offered for sale. According to *Wikipedia*, Amondson toured "the nation reenacting Billy Sunday sermons and attending events dressed as the Grim Reaper to protest alcohol corporations."

Pletten, a bachelor and sixty-two years old at the time of the Memphis conference, was from the Upper Midwest. He struck me as very bright and well-educated, a scholar of history, but also quite opinionated. Faithful though he was to Prohibition's central motive and *raison d'être*, Pletten also carried a special animus toward tobacco. He was a soldier in the war on smoking.¹¹

There was also June Griffin, sixty-nine, who arrived with her husband in a vehicle adorned in Confederate paraphernalia and who laced her convention speech with ultra-conservative themes and right-wing conspiracy theories. Although a Prohibition Party member, she was

already priming to run as an independent (in that Prohibition has no ballot access in the Volunteer State) in the 2010 Tennessee gubernatorial contest.¹²

Dayton, Tennessee, June Griffin's home town, is known mainly as the location where the infamous Scopes "Monkey Trial" took place in 1925. Even in Dayton, Griffin has carried the well-earned reputation of a hard-right agitator. She is the woman who annually stages there a "Bill of Rights Banquet" and invites fringe right speakers to keynote it.

When her time to speak came at the Memphis conference, she passed out song sheets for a World War 1 era anti-immigrant piece and then began to sing it: "Don't Bite the Hand that's Feeding you—If you don't like your Uncle Sammy, if you don't like the red, white, and blue, then go back from where you came, whatever was its name...." As for the song itself, there is irony in the fact that this paean to xenophobic America First thinking had been recorded by a Dutchman named Walter van Brunt who later transformed himself into an Irish tenor suitably renamed Walter Scanlan.

As I was a guest who had not previously known either June Griffin or her Prohibition comrades, I asked a delegate with whom I had been in conversation what he thought about her and her presentation that day. "Amused tolerance" was the term he used to explain his response and also what he thought was the reaction of most of his fellow delegates. "Most of us have known her," he reminded me, "and we know what to expect. She's sincere in what she believes, and she showed respect for us and for our conference agenda. When she finished her speech, we applauded politely and everyone had a good time, but we thought of her as being beyond the pale."

There were others who will remain nameless (although I remember their names) because I did not ask permission to name them and they certainly were not seeking fame. One, a funeral

home director who later taught in a community college, was an important behind the scenes party-builder. He had worked hard and faithfully for strengthening the party through organizing, surmounting state ballot access barriers, and administration. More significantly, he also had worked to sustain and rebuild the party during the bitter schism which had threatened to destroy it permanently.

A prominent Alabama Baptist minister attended the Memphis conference, as did the pastor of host Barton Southern Methodist. There was also a tough but cordial seventy-nine-year-old Semper Fi Marine veteran who represented, and probably was nearly all that remained of, the contemporary party in Florida where, most of a century past, a Prohibition candidate had won a term as state governor.

It was clear to me from the start that it was Jim Hedges who was in charge at that Memphis meeting. He had planned it and he saw to it that the events rolled out as intended. That might have come as a surprise to some there. Those who know him know that his style is anything but authoritarian and domineering. Hedges carries himself as a rather shy introvert, though one with empathy for others. Many who had known Earl Dodge may have found this a relief.

Hedges has had a lifelong problem with stuttering. What I saw of him speaking and chatting at Memphis, he told me, was Hedges at his best. That was because his Prohibition cohorts there were also his friends. I wish I had been quick-witted enough to respond that I knew of several (other) historic persons who also were burdened like him by the stutter; Joe Biden, for instance, and King George VI.

As beneficiaries of Facebook and other social media, Hedges and I have kept up with each other over the years since Memphis. However, it was in a series of email exchanges in the spring of

2020 that he, complying with my request, revealed most of what I know about Jim Hedges and the course of his life.

Born in Iowa City on May 10, 1938, he grew up poor in an Iowa farm family. His family's home church as he grew up was affiliated with an evangelical denomination, the Disciples of Christ. His paternal grandfather had died from scalding in an industrial accident. Hedges' mother was an infant when her father died in the Spanish flu pandemic.

Jim Hedges' family and relatives were religious but non-judgmental teetotalers who also never gambled or smoked.¹³ His childhood friends were pretty much that way too. As a youth he became involved in temperance activities through the Methodist church. As for his own record of lifelong temperance, he told me that "I've never taken a drink, of anything (i.e., alcohol)—if I'm with friends who have cocktails, I may dip a spoon in their glass and lick it to get the taste. Champagne tastes good, and so does peach schnapps, but I'm not tempted."

Hedges avers, almost as a confession, that he has never achieved fame at anything. This, he says, is because he has always been unfocused and self-effacing. If any of that is existential fact, it may relate in some way to that stutter, that shyness, and to his upbringing as a child.

Yet he has accomplished so much. His musical interest, talent, and participation as a youth in local bands would lead to a B.A. in Musical Performance from the University of Iowa and, from there, to a twenty-year career of military service playing tuba in the brass section of the U.S. Marine Corps Band.¹⁴

A Master's degree in Geography earned at the University of Maryland opened him to an enviable record of scholarship and publication in book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Hedges was particularly interested in cave research and geological history, publishing his work in such journals as *National Speleological Society Bulletin*, *Zeitschrift fur*

Geomorphologie, and *Biuletyn Peryglacjalny*. He has also been involved in recycling, handcraft printing, feeding the poor, and progressive organizations, some episodically, others over the long term.

Hedges' first contacts with the Prohibition Party date from his teen years in the early 1950s, but he became much more active, and as a party leader, after his retirement from the military in 1980. In 2001, he became the first Prohibitionist elected on a partisan ballot to public office since 1959. It was a minor post, to be sure, Tax Assessor of Thompson Township in Pennsylvania. Although his election came on a fusion ballot in which both the Democratic and Republican parties also endorsed him, 53 percent of his votes came on the Prohibition line.¹⁵

The revealed life and world view of Jim Hedges are in some respects iconoclastic, shattering stereotypes about what all Prohibitionists must surely be like. Although he has been married, and happily so, for thirty years, Carolyn is his third wife. As Hedges himself has said in his communication with me, "being divorced twice is not being a typical Prohibitionist."

Secondly, though even as he carries the torch for a party which has always been made up mainly of evangelical Christians, Hedges chooses other words to convey his own views of God and humankind. He is a rationalist, a non-theist; yes, an atheist.¹⁶

Perhaps most significantly, he identifies himself politically as a "progressive." In comments he made on social media about politics and current issues, I had come to think his views are progressive. That would put him in good company with many Prohibitionists in the party's heyday, but not with most contemporary Prohibition partisans, whose views on those issues are preponderantly conservative or "right wing." When I asked him, he responded saying "I hope I am not the last progressive Prohibitionist; but, yes, I'm the left wing of the party."

There are a handful of others, none of them conspicuous.” For clarity, he raised the image of the “British Liberal: traditional personally but receptive to new approaches for new problems.”¹⁷

Prohibition and the Third-Party Tradition

Although it may just be a whispered secret, third parties in general have mattered. They do matter. They matter despite some things in the original constitutional framework, notably the single-member district plurality election system and the Electoral College, which in effect skew election results toward a system of just two major parties. They have continued to matter even over the last century, when as a result of innumerable self-protecting decisions by Republican and Democratic policy-makers, the two-party system has become hardened and calcified into an enforced duopoly.¹⁸

One thing which differentiates Prohibition from many other third, or minor, parties, is its longevity. Over U.S. history there have been other third parties which arose to a zenith, seriously challenging the protected positions of the two major parties. Then they quickly expired, often because in desperation one or both major parties coopted them by adopting their best ideas. As the celebrated historian Richard Hofstadter described them, these third parties “are like bees: once they sting, they die.”¹⁹

Third or minor parties have almost always “gotten there first,” incubating practices and policy ideas which may later be taken up by one or both major parties and then injected into the mainstream and policy when they become popular or it is deemed safe to do so. Even before the GOP, two earlier minor parties had arisen as agents of the anti-slavery movement. Victoria Woodhull, the first woman to seek the presidency, ran on the Equal Rights Party ticket in 1872.

Not Prohibition alone, there were also at least five other third parties which joined in the movement for women’s suffrage before Republican and Democratic platforms first embraced

votes for women in 1916. The first female to cast electoral votes for president and vice president was Helen Scott, a Washington state Bull Moose Progressive in 1912.

In so many other things minor parties, one or another and sometimes more than one, were the first parties to run up the flag to see if it would fly. A merit-based federal civil service. Health care for all. Child labor legislation. Direct election of U.S. Senators. Infrastructure development through public works. Social Security. Term limits. Balanced budgets. The (so far unratified) Equal Rights Amendment. Policies for environmental sustainability.

Prohibition would celebrate its 150th birthday as a party in 2019 as a new presidential round approached. Its choices are Phil Collins (not the singer) from Wisconsin for the presidency and Billy Joe Parker, a Georgian, as his vice-presidential running mate.²⁰ The selections were not made at convention but by telephone conference calls. That in itself would not have hinted at a weak or irregular party heartbeat if the conference calls had all taken place in 2020, the year of the Covid 19 pandemic. Even the major parties felt compelled during this election year to develop Plan B contingencies in case it became infeasible or unsafe to gather groups of people in assembly halls. However, the first of Prohibition's conference calls in the quest for a 2020 presidential ticket had taken place much earlier, on November 13, 2018.

The year 2020 posed special problems for all political parties, but one in particular for all minor electoral parties, so for Prohibition and even for the stronger Libertarians and Greens. This was because it was impossible for third parties to set up tables in empty malls and other temporarily-closed public spaces to accomplish the state-by-state task of collecting ballot access petition signatures.²¹

It is impossible to predict the future of the Prohibition Party or with certainty any other political party. Of the past some things are really and truly fact. It is not essential that one

concur with the central premise, the *raison d'être*, of partisan Prohibition or accept as truth Prohibitionists' explanation for the failure of the fourteen-year national "prohibition experiment." What is certainly true is that that party, through its own long history and as a component of the broader third-party narrative and legacy, has played a substantial part in the political history of the nation. Those like James Hedges who have led and loved it through its century and a half have earned their own place in the historical record.

ENDNOTES

¹ James Hedges, *A Faithful Remnant: Prohibition Party, Supplement, 1972-2016 to Roger Storms (1972), Partisan Prophets, a History of the Prohibition Party, with an Index to Both Volumes* (Partisan Prohibition Historical Society; copyright Prohibition National Committee, 2019).

² About the Dodge era and the conflict and schism, see *Ibid.*, Chapter 5 (It's Dodge! Again and Again and Again and Again), pp. 83-96. Though known and respected in third-party circles generally, Dodge came to be seen by his intra-party critics as autocratic, inattentive to the needs of the party, and corrupt. Dodge's first presidential run was in 1984; but by 2004, the party had literally split into two independent partisan associations, each offering its own presidential nominee. Dodge died in 2007, and after some disputes resolved by lawsuit, the party was ready to begin its rebuilding.

³ It is unlikely that any Prohibition presidential nominee has ever seriously thought that the presidency might be within his grasp. The party's best result in that contest came in 1892, when John Bidwell took 2.24 percent.

⁴ Roger C. Storms, *Partisan Prophets: A History of the Prohibition Party* (Denver: Prohibition National Foundation, Inc., 1972). Also see C.L. Gammon, *America's Other Party: A Brief History of the Prohibition Party* (Self-published, copyright C.L. Gammon, 2007).

⁵ The proposal came through the bipartisan votes of Senate Republicans and Democrats and the votes of House Democrats, Republicans, and independents in December of 1917, and it received the ratification of Nebraska, the necessary 36th state, in January of 1919.

⁶ The 18th Amendment was repealed by the 21st in 1933. This was the only instance of one constitutional amendment repealing and replacing another amendment. As Prohibitionists interpreted the failure of the "prohibition experiment," the onus belonged to feckless major-party policy makers and recalcitrant and sometimes hostile or corrupt law enforcement agencies and personnel.

⁷ Jack S. Blocker, *Retreat from Reform: The Prohibition Movement in the United States, 1890-1913* (Westwood, CT: Greenwood, 1976).

⁸ Elizabeth Purdy, "Prohibition Party, 1869- ," in *The Encyclopedia of Third Parties in America*, 3 vols., ed. Immanuel Ness and James Ciment (Armonk, NY: Sharpe Reference, 2000), 2: 475-481.

⁹ They received 6 percent and 7.5 percent of the total vote respectively. "Statistics of the Congressional and Presidential Election of November 2, 1920, available online at http://clerk.house.gov/member_info/electioninfo/1920election.pdf (accessed April 13, 2020).

¹⁰ The title did get a few laughs from the assembled delegates, bless them!

¹¹ Both Amondson and Pletten are deceased, Amondson passing away only a month after the 2009 Memphis conference and Pletten in 2015.

¹² She would receive 2,587 votes. That was 0.2 percent or one in 500 votes cast.

¹³ He does recall that his maternal grandmother kept a bottle of brandy, which, when she felt a cold was impending, was used for "disinfection" purposes.

¹⁴ He does allude vaguely to some "eccentric rebel-rousing" he did while in the Marine Band, including a brief connection with the U.S. Labor Party, a radical group led by Lyndon LaRouche, and some reported "impeach with honor" utterances about President Nixon. As a result, he was "black-listed" by the Secret Service and interdicted from participating in any performance "at which the president might be present." Hedges figures that that may be why the Marine Corps severed its active connection with him after the requisite twenty years of his career service.

¹⁵ "James Hedges," *Wikipedia*, p. 2. In 2005, Hedges was reelected unanimously on the Prohibition Party line.

¹⁶ That is an extraordinary perspective within the party, Hedges concurs, but it is not unique. He makes reference to a partisan forebear named Lowell Coate, who was Chair of the party in 1955. Coate had grown up in the Anabaptist (Quaker/Mennonite/Brethren) tradition, holding to its perspective on war and peace (he was a pacifist) but also proclaiming himself to be a rationalist on the matter of religious faith vs. reason.

¹⁷ For confirmation of the validity of that perspective within his party, Hedges references this "famous" statement in the Prohibition Party platform of 1896: "In order to accomplish (national Prohibition), we deem it but right to leave every Prohibitionist the freedom of his own convictions upon all other questions...."

¹⁸ See J. David Gillespie, *Challengers to Duopoly: Why Third Parties Matter in American Two-Party Politics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, New York: Vintage Books, 1955, 97.

²⁰ <https://www.prohibitionparty.org/presidential-candidate> (Accessed April 25, 2020).

²¹ See "Virus Versus Voters: Fear of Infection Hampers Petitioning," *National Prohibitionist*, X: No. 1 (January-February-March 2020), p. 1.