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Who is Barack Obama? Is he simply a speaker with elegant rhetoric or is he a Moses come to lead the country to the Promised Land? While these seem to be two widely used descriptions of our 44<sup>th</sup> president, it is most likely that he is an amalgamation of many traits typical to most politicians. While to some, President Obama can seem to do no wrong; in the minds of others he can do no right. Yet, the American people have charged him and our other political leaders in Washington with the task of saving America and delivering it into another golden age. Is it feasible?

While giving a speech at the New York City Grand Central Palace, Eugene V. Debs delivered the line: “Too long have the workers of the world waited for some Moses to lead them out of bondage. I would not lead you if I could; for if you could be led out, you could be led back again. I would have you make up your minds there is nothing that you cannot do for yourselves.” In the late nineteenth century, a populist movement swept through the country led by William Jennings Bryan, Henry George, Eugene V. Debs, and an assortment of AFL leaders. Later Debs headed the Socialist Party. Debs’ involvement in the Pullman Strike reflects his commitment to the working people. He was jailed for his beliefs, but he hung on and he only increased his legacy. Despite their differing views of governments, both the populists and the socialists fought against Grantism and the rule by the elite (Goldman 43).

Government of the mid to late nineteenth century was filled with nefarious activities like the notorious Credit Mobilier scandal and the New York crime circuit run by the infamous “Boss” Tweed (12). Episodes like these led to distrust of the “elite” and the growing idea that each person must take care of himself or herself. This view concurs with Debs’ quote. The individual must play a part in deciding his or her own fate because the leader cannot always be

trusted. At this time in history, each man fought for his own well-being, and Debs' words apply perfectly.

When Debs expressed his views at the New York City Grand Palace, America's president was Theodore Roosevelt and the country was in the midst of violent labor disputes. Today, Barack Obama struggles to lead the United State through a devastating economic crisis. Despite the differences in circumstances, the meaning of Debs' quote applies today. Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy in 2008 and government bailouts were required to save many other financial institutions. Many Americans called for the government to bail out these lending giants in one of the largest government spending periods in history. However, does the government or the financial services industry deserve all of the blame for this epic failure? While the government was not perfect in its response, and banks were too free-wheeling with loans, the root of the economic crisis is bad credit. In simple terms, ordinary people borrowed more money than they were able to repay and banks were stuck with the properties of debtors unable to repay their mortgages. The growing number of foreclosed houses led to a crash of the housing market and financial doom (Financial). Should the government bailout its people? Debs warned that the workers could just be "led back again" to their past mistakes. Looking at current challenges, Debs' quote must be revised. Today, people and government are too entangled to independently free themselves from this financial bondage. The government must lead the workers out of economic bondage. However, certain behaviors cannot be regulated; they must come from discipline self-imposed by the individual person.

In conclusion, Debs was a wise man who foresaw the consequences of faulty leadership. By analyzing Debs, we are understanding an influential figure in America's history who fought for the working people and led hundreds of thousands of people to better opportunity. While his

ideas may not always apply to today's circumstances, he is extremely insightful about today's challenges for someone who was born over 150 years ago.

## Works Cited

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