

HUEY P. LONG, “EVERY MAN A KING,” NEW YORK, NY (23 FEBRUARY 1934)

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Abstract: As a poster boy for Southern demagoguery, Huey P. Long has been described as the “messiah of the rednecks,” a dangerous and unprincipled charlatan who manipulated poor and uneducated voters to promote his own political career, first as governor of Louisiana, then as a U.S. Senator and presidential aspirant. Challenging this conventional portrait of Long, we argue for a new understanding of the Kingfish that better accounts for both the fierce loyalty of his supporters and the intense hostility of his critics. Locating the rhetorical and symbolic power of Long’s Share Our Wealth crusade not in the economic “deal” he offered but in the rusticity and religiosity of his rhetorical style, we conclude with a close reading of his most famous radio address, “Every Man a King.”

Keywords: Huey P. Long, Share Our Wealth Society, the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Southern demagoguery

“When it comes to arousing prejudice and passion, when it comes to ranting and raving, when it comes to vituperation and vilification, when it comes to denunciation and demagoguery, there is one who stands out by himself alone. He has many imitators but no equals.” J.Y. Sanders.

In fewer than fifteen years, Huey P. Long went from an obscure, backwater politician in rural Louisiana to a major player in the national politics of the Depression era—a man whom Franklin D. Roosevelt called “one of the two most dangerous men in the United States.”¹ Elected to the Louisiana Railroad Commission in 1918, Long quickly built a reputation as a champion of the “little man” by taking on the most powerful corporation in Louisiana, the Standard Oil Company. In 1924, he ran for governor and lost the only election of his career. In 1928, he ran again, and at the age of 34 was elected governor of Louisiana on a platform of free textbooks for schoolchildren and better roads and bridges.

Not satisfied with the top job in Louisiana, Long ran for the U.S. Senate in 1930 and carried 53 of the 64 parishes in the state. In 1932 he campaigned on behalf of Roosevelt, but two years later he broke with FDR and began a series of national radio addresses promoting his Share Our Wealth Society. Within a month Long had attracted some 200,000 members, and by the spring of 1935 his Share Our Wealth Society boasted some 7,500,000 members.² After each of his radio addresses, “Long would receive up to 60,000 letters through the network and more than that through his own Senate office.”³ By the time of his assassination in September of 1935, Long had become a serious threat to Roosevelt, with a secret poll by the Democratic National

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Committee revealing that, were he to run for president in 1936, he could pull as many as 3 to 4 million votes away from FDR and perhaps throw the election to the Republicans.⁴

Scholars have attributed Long's "meteoric rise" in politics, in large measure, to his speaking abilities.⁵ As a political candidate in Louisiana, Long had an "electric quality" that captivated crowds and left political observers at a loss for words to describe "the power that radiated from Huey and drew the masses to him."⁶ When Long addressed a political rally, he held his audience "in rapt, almost mesmerized, attention."⁷ Afterwards, "many would head for Huey's next scheduled stop to hear him again; some who had automobiles followed him all day."⁸ Even those who hated Long confessed that witnessing him speak was a "dynamic experience." It was "certainly *the* event to hear Huey," the widow of long-time journalistic critic Hodding Carter conceded, "even though you hated every word he said. You had to admire his delivery—the way he manipulated the crowd."⁹

As a U.S. senator, Long continued to dazzle with his oratory. With his reputation preceding him, the Senate galleries filled whenever he spoke, and his fellow senators "listened in amazement, in anger," and "yet in fascination" to Long's rambling and vituperative speeches.¹⁰ Many of his colleagues, as FDR observed, were simply afraid to debate Long on the floor of the Senate.¹¹ In a series of national radio addresses, Long displayed a mastery of the new medium long before "the majority of politicians had awakened to the fact that radio was a powerful tool of persuasion."¹² By the time of his assassination, even his political opponents conceded that Long was the "best radio speaker" in America, "better even than President Roosevelt."¹³

Yet to say that Huey Long was an effective orator is to seriously understate his rhetorical significance. Huey Long was much more than an effective speaker; he was a larger-than-life symbol of alienation and discontent—a dangerous demagogue to some, but a hero and savior to millions of others. Forging a unique political *persona*, Long became the voice of the alienated and dispossessed "common man" during the Depression. Inspiring a *depth* of feeling rare in American politics, Long attracted a "fanatically loyal" following,¹⁴ but he also provoked deep, even murderous hostility in those who opposed him.

"Everybody loved him," recalled one elderly man interviewed for Ken Burns' documentary, *Huey Long*. "There's nobody hated him." A woman interviewed for the same documentary also talked about the deep devotion to the Kingfish among the people of the bayou: "All my people—the whole . . . family—voted for him. We went ten miles in a speedboat to vote for him on Bayou Cane. And I think most of the Bayou Cane people all voted for him. Everyone in this part of the country loved him." Long's enemies spoke with equal passion, not merely criticizing his politics but talking openly of killing him. According to one former Louisiana legislator, "every time there was a gathering of two or three people somebody would say: 'That son of a bitch ought to be shot!'" Mrs. Hodding Carter likewise recalled that, within her circle of friends, talk of assassinating Long was common: "I can't remember any Saturday night that I went anywhere that we didn't talk about killing Huey Long. Yes, it was normal conversation."¹⁵

How might we account for Huey Long's remarkable success as a politician and public speaker? How did Long assume dictatorial control of Louisiana, build a huge national following, and ultimately pose a serious threat to one of the most popular presidents in U.S. history? What was it *about* Huey Long's rhetoric that produced such fierce loyalty among his supporters and such murderous hostility among his critics? For most scholars, the answer has been simple: Long

was the consummate demagogue, a thoroughly unprincipled speaker who masterfully exploited the insecurities and prejudices of his ignorant, hillbilly following. Indeed, for nearly seven decades Long has been the poster child for an especially insidious brand of demagoguery: that reactionary, race-baiting brand of populist agitation known as Southern demagoguery.

The famed liberal historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., painted perhaps the most enduring portrait of Long as a Southern demagogue. Dubbing him the “messiah of the rednecks,” Schlesinger described Long as a shrewd, manipulative, and unprincipled charlatan whose formula for success was simple: “On the hustings, he played on his listeners with intimate knowledge, deriding them, insulting them, whipping up emotions of resentment and spite, contemptuously providing them with scapegoats. . . . Vilification was his particular weapon.” Long may have been a “clown” and a “buffoon”; he had the “manners, values, and idiom” of a “backcountry hillbilly,” Schlesinger observed. But he was a “hillbilly raised to the highest level, preternaturally swift and sharp in intelligence, ruthless in action, and grandiose in vision.”¹⁶

This conventional view of Huey Long reflects a cultural bias, even a sort of elitist stereotyping, in the scholarly literature. Uncomfortable with radical mass politics among poor, uneducated rural folk in the South, some have used “demagogue” as an epithet rather than a technical term, applying the label to Long and others who, for personal or cultural reasons, they find distasteful. Long’s reputation as a demagogue reflects a prejudice grounded not in ideology, but in an intellectual aversion to his indecorous, vituperative, and revivalistic brand of democratic populism. More than forty years ago, Long’s principal biographer, T. Harry Williams, urged us to “dispense with the word demagogue in dealing with men like Long and employ instead a term suggested by Eric Hoffer, mass leader.”¹⁷ Yet Long remains typecast as the archetypal Southern demagogue, and we have ignored Williams’ insight that he possessed something of that “quality that political scientists call charisma.”¹⁸

Scholars have struggled to make sense of Huey P. Long, labeling him a demagogue even as they concede that he did *not* exhibit many of the definitive characteristics of the classic Southern demagogue. They also have done little to account for how he simultaneously forged a community of fiercely loyal “common folk” and outraged, even terrorized, a “better” class of citizens. This essay aims to fill those gaps by, first, examining Long’s carefully crafted political *persona* as a backwater hick with extraordinary talents—a “common man,” even something of a buffoon, yet one with keen political instincts and remarkable oratorical skills. Next, we look at how Long built upon that political *persona* in his wildly successful Share Our Wealth campaign, using a series of national radio addresses in 1934 and 1935 to create a formidable challenge to Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal. Finally, we take a closer look at the most famous of those addresses, “Every Man a King,” further illustrating how Long used colloquial, even ungrammatical language, along with folksy anecdotes and analogies, to cast himself as the voice of the “common man.” Boldly attacking a popular president of the United States and claiming a divine mandate for his political crusade, Long did not just offer poor people a better deal than Roosevelt, as some have suggested. Rather, he presented himself as a rustic and religious alternative to the patrician FDR—a *symbolic* alternative attractive to many poor and politically alienated Americans but terrifying to mainstream politicians and more affluent and better educated voters.

Southern Demagoguery and the Enigma of Huey P. Long

As Charles Lomas observed in *The Agitator in American Society*, “demagoguery is one of those words that is loosely thrown around in American politics and is “difficult to define.” To the Greeks who invented the word, a “demagogue was simply a leader of the people.”¹⁹ Yet even in ancient Greece demagoguery had connotations of deceit and manipulation, with Euripides describing the demagogue as “a man of loose tongue, intemperate, trusting to tumult, leading the populace to mischief with empty words.”²⁰ Today, of course, the term demagogue is thoroughly inflected with pejorative connotations, even in the scholarly literature. In a widely cited study, for example, historian Reinhard Luthin defined the demagogue as a “mob-master” who, with “considerable histrionic variety and always noisily,” seeks to “whip up and intensify the emotions, the prejudices and the passions, of the voting public.” By definition, according to Luthin, the demagogue is long on “gasconade and bluster” but short on “public service and constructive thinking.”²¹

Studies of alleged demagogues have been plentiful in the scholarly literature.²² Yet historians and sociologists have rarely offered precise definitions—much less theories—of demagoguery, and rhetorical scholars have failed to distinguish demagoguery from other types of radical or agitative speech. At one time, demagogue provided a handy label for speakers who failed to conform to prevailing standards of rationality, civility, and decorum. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, those standards themselves came under attack, blurring the distinction between demagoguery and other sorts of radical speech.²³ Even in the scholarly literature, we still have no precise, *rhetorical* definition of demagoguery. Over the years a wide variety of speakers have been labeled demagogues, and rhetorical scholars continue to develop lists of allegedly demagogic strategies and tactics.²⁴ Yet demagogue remains more of an epithet than an analytical term—a label used to discredit those who offend our rhetorical or ideological sensibilities.

So-called Southern demagogues have occupied a special place in the literature. Rising to power “on the ground swell of the farmers’ revolt” and muddying the “waters of public opinion . . . with invective,” the Southern demagogues “ranted against corporations, town merchants, Negroes, ‘damyankee’ Republicans, Wall Streeters, and courthouse rings.”²⁵ They won “hearts and votes—and often high office”—by pandering to the “pride and prejudices of poverty-pinched ‘wool hat and one gallus’ white farmers.”²⁶ Above all, of course, they exploited the hot-button issue of the rural South: “the Negro issue.”²⁷ As Luthin concluded, the Southern demagogues were the “hardy perennials of twentieth century Southern politics.”²⁸ They were “garish spellbinders who, on the stump, promised seemingly everything, preached from the Bible, assailed the ‘nigger,’ and used histrionics and hillbilly music.”²⁹

Rhetorical scholars have helped flesh out this portrait of the “garish,” Bible-thumping Southern demagogue. In his study of “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, for example, E. Culpepper Clark conceded that demagogue is “a slippery word” that has lost much of its “power of definition” through overly broad application. Yet embracing the term as “one of judgment,” Clark portrayed Tillman and other Southern demagogues as “outcasts in the new industrial order,” men “singularly without ideological moorings” for whom “reform was not a matter of devising programs but nursing grievances.” According to Clark, Tillman is rightly condemned as a demagogue because he betrayed the American Creed that all men are equal. Celebrating the

passing of the “old style” of Southern demagoguery, Clark bid good riddance to those “splendidly gargoylish, uproarious old razor-back demagogues of the South’s age of tribal politics”—a list that included not only Tillman but also James K. Vardaman, Ross Barnett, and of course, Huey P. Long.³⁰

The stereotype of the Southern demagogue has never provided much insight into Southern political culture. As Daniel M. Robison pointed out as early as 1937, most of the so-called Southern demagogues were, in fact, intelligent, well-educated men of the middle class, and they filled a genuine need for new leaders among “dirt farmers” and other rural folk in the increasingly industrialized New South.³¹ Moreover, the so-called Southern demagogues often had little in common beyond their “unruly conduct and an uninhibited tongue,” as V.O. Key observed in his classic study of Southern politics in 1949.³² Most importantly, the so-called Southern demagogues brought new ideas and an unprecedented measure of political competition to Southern politics. Some even left behind impressive records of constructive achievement “in line with the liberal thought of the times.”³³

Huey P. Long provides a case-in-point. As historian Allan Sindler has noted, the “popular view” of Huey Long dismisses him as little more than “a highly successful member of the family of post-bellum Southern poor-white leaders loosely termed demagogues.”³⁴ In many ways, however, Long did not at all fit the mold of the stereotypical Southern demagogue. In an era when many other Southern politicians quickly forgot their campaign pledges and “turned to the more satisfying pastime of criticizing ‘niggers’ and Yankees,”³⁵ Long delivered on his promises. He built hundreds of miles of roads and new bridges. He improved hospitals, mental health facilities, and public services in general. He delivered on his pledge to provide free textbooks for school children, and he helped build the Louisiana State University into a nationally recognized institution. Even Schlesinger conceded that Long gave the people of Louisiana “a state government which did more for them than any other government in Louisiana’s history.”³⁶

Nor was Long’s Share Our Wealth plan a typical demagogic diversion. As historian Alan Brinkley has argued, to “dismiss the Share Our Wealth Plan as demagoguery is to dismiss it too easily,” for while it may have been a “simplistic program,” it did *not* represent “an attempt to divert attention away from real problems.” Unlike the stereotypical Southern demagogue, Long did not concoct his plan for redistributing wealth merely to “focus resentment on irrelevant scapegoats or phony villains.” To the contrary, Long pointed to “an issue of genuine importance”: the “concentration of wealth.” “For all its faults,” as Brinkley concluded, Long’s “Share Our Wealth Plan was not without elements of economic truth.”³⁷

Finally, Long rarely employed the diversionary rhetorical tactics associated with the stereotypical Southern demagogue. In an era when many Southern politicians “entertained their audiences of rural poor with the magnificent irrelevancy of how their grandpappies had charged up the slopes at Gettysburg,” Long “never seriously employed the Confederate legend in his speeches.”³⁸ Nor did he voice the racial and religious bigotry so closely identified with the stereotype of the Southern demagogue. Even his most critical biographers concede that Long “came to power by appealing to class antagonism, not hatred of blacks.”³⁹ Long may have riled up the emotions of his audiences, but he did not appeal to nostalgia for the “Lost Cause,” nor did he engage in the race-baiting and scapegoating of the stereotypical Southern demagogue. As T. Harry Williams wrote:

Huey Long was the first Southern mass leader to leave aside race baiting and appeals to the gold-misted past and address himself to the social and economic ills of his people. . . . He created a new consciousness of politics on the part of the masses. . . . He asked the South to turn its gaze from ‘nigger’ devils and Yankee devils and take a long, hard look at itself. He asked his people to forget the past, the glorious past and the sad past, and address themselves to the present. . . . Bluntly, forcibly, even crudely, he injected an element of realism into Southern politics.⁴⁰

Surprisingly, even scholars of rhetoric have overlooked these differences between Long and the stereotypical Southern demagogue. Embracing the historians’ simplistic and unflattering portrait, they have perpetuated the stereotype of Long as a classic Southern demagogue, both in scholarly studies of his speeches and in textbook anthologies. In the 1950s, Ernest G. Bormann characterized Long as a “shameless demagogue” of “driving ambition”—a man whose “political code of ethics” justified “any tactics if they were effective,” who told his audiences “what he thought they wanted to hear,” and who “advocated a panacea in which he did not believe,” all to “further his own political career.”⁴¹ Later, Paul Gaske perpetuated that stereotype in a popular anthology of American public address, treating Long’s “Every Man a King” speech as a case study in “demagogic discourse.”⁴² In 1989, Robert Iltis offered a more sympathetic treatment of Long in his Ph.D. dissertation, placing him in a long tradition of Southern populism.⁴³ Yet in most of the published literature, Long remains the poster boy for Southern demagoguery, even though rhetorical scholars have failed to identify anything uniquely “demagogic” about his speeches.⁴⁴

After more than sixty years, Huey P. Long thus remains a rhetorical enigma. T. Harry Williams pointed us in the right direction when he called Long a “mass leader” and observed that he had the same “gift” as other charismatic leaders: the “capacity to arouse a sense of communion in his followers” and to “excite an audience with his words.”⁴⁵ Gaske, too, was on the right track when he eschewed a Neo-Aristotelian perspective on Long and noticed that he excited “powerful antithetical emotional responses.”⁴⁶ Yet Williams ultimately declared Long’s “skill with words” but a “minor” factor in his political success,⁴⁷ and Gaske failed to pursue his own insights about Long’s larger symbolic significance. In the remainder of this essay, we offer an interpretation of Long’s Share Our Wealth campaign that helps to account for how he built a fiercely loyal following of “common folk” at the same time that he outraged more “respectable” citizens. Focusing on his national radio addresses, we trace the symbolic power of Long’s Share Our Wealth campaign to the *rusticity* and *religiosity* of his discourse. Finally, we take a closer look at his “Every Man a King,” showing how these qualities were manifested in his most famous speech.

Long’s Rustic Political *Persona*

As Sindler has argued, Long’s admirers and critics have both offered “essentially one-dimensional” portraits of the Kingfish, failing to acknowledge that, as a political leader, he was a complex “mixture of types,” displaying traits both revered and feared in political leaders.⁴⁸ To

some, Long was a savior and a hero. To others he was a dangerous demagogue. Those polarized reactions reflected the contradictory nature of Long's political *persona*—a *persona* that he carefully cultivated as a Louisiana politician and, later, in the autobiography he published to announce his national political ambitions.

Long reveled in his reputation for breaking all the rules of political decorum. His very appearance on the platform offended those of more refined tastes, as Long would pace back and forth, arms flailing and dripping with sweat, his “contortions” shocking some observers but mesmerizing his rural audiences, “even two hours at a stretch in the hot sun.”⁴⁹ Speaking from only “a few notes scribbled on the back of an envelope,”⁵⁰ he would “rumple his hair, take off his coat and his tie, and loosen his collar and shirt” as he pranced around in what one reporter called a “panther tread.”⁵¹ He did not just “speak” to a crowd, as Hair has observed; he “roared until his voice was hoarse.”⁵² Urban audiences were often “offended” by Long’s “platform habits,” but it was precisely those same habits that so “captivated his country hearers.”⁵³

Even more than his physical antics, Long’s penchant for name-calling and vituperation set him apart from mainstream politicians. Bringing “a new standard of invective” to Louisiana politics,⁵⁴ Long had a “special gift for thinking up vivid, hurtful nicknames to use on organizations or people who opposed him.”⁵⁵ Early in his career he ridiculed his older political opponents with nicknames like “Fossil,” “Old Buzzard Back,” or “Old Sack of Bones.” Later he would routinely accuse his political opponents of political corruption or even mock their physical appearance. During his run for the U.S. Senate in 1930, he stuck the balding, long-necked mayor of New Orleans with the nickname “Turkey Head,” while his mustached opponent became known as “Old Feather Duster.” Even after his election to the Senate, Long continued to ridicule and mock his political opponents, defying the Senate’s rules of decorum and assigning derisive nicknames even to members of FDR’s cabinet.⁵⁶

Long’s gift for emotional appeal was legendary. One rhetorical critic called him a “past master” of emotional appeal, capable of bringing “tears to a bronze statue.”⁵⁷ In his autobiography, Long did much to promote that reputation himself as he recalled a famous speech he gave in St. Martinsville, Louisiana during the 1928 gubernatorial campaign. Delivered beneath the Evangeline Oak immortalized by Longfellow, Long preserved but a fragment of the speech in his memoir: its tear-jerking peroration. Yet that fragment appeared in virtually every later account of Long’s life and career, and as V.O. Key later observed, his supporters quickly enshrined it “among the immortal sayings of the saints.”⁵⁸

And it is here, under this oak where Evangeline waited for her lover, Gabriel, who never came. This oak is an immortal spot, made so by Longfellow’s poem, but Evangeline is not the only one who has waited here in disappointment.

Where are the schools that you have waited for your children to have, that have never come? Where are the roads and the highways that you send your money to build, that are no nearer now than ever before? Where are the institutions to care for the sick and disabled? Evangeline wept bitter tears in her disappointment, but it lasted through only one lifetime. Your tears in this country, around this oak, have lasted for generations. Give me the chance to dry the eyes of those who still weep here!⁵⁹

To his supporters, of course, the St. Martinsville speech revealed a sensitive, even poetic champion of the poor, and the speech became the measure of Long's sincerity and success as governor. Long *did* build the schools, the highways, and the institutions for the sick and disabled, his supporters would point out. He *did* dry their tears. Unlike the stereotypical Southern demagogue, Long *delivered* on his promises. To his critics, on the other hand, the St. Martinsville speech epitomized Long's demagoguery; it represented an undisguised attempt to manipulate the emotions of his ignorant, hillbilly followers. However sincere its promises, the speech displayed what scholar Jeffrey K. Tulis would later describe as the "key characteristic" of demagogic speech: the attempt to "sway popular passions" with an "excess of passionate appeals."⁶⁰

Long added more brushstrokes to his self-portrait as a rube with remarkable rhetorical talents in his autobiographical account of the attempt to impeach him in 1929. In recalling his state-wide speaking tour in response to the crisis, Long described an emotional, two-hour speech in Baton Rouge in which he railed against "entrenched forces" and "powerful interests." Whipping his audience into a frenzy, Long concluded defiantly: "My head is bloody, but unbowed."⁶¹ Boasting that the speech transformed his supporters into "zealots,"⁶² Long, in effect, confessed to his demagogic excesses. Yet he offered no apologies for his emotional appeals or for the fanaticism of his followers. To the contrary, he celebrated the moment he realized his special calling as the voice of the common folk:

Thus were the farmers at the forks of the creek, the merchants at the cross roads, the laborers on the railroads and in the factories brought into perfect coordination. . . . The crowds which came to hear me were immense.

I had made any number of political campaigns in my lifetime. . . . But there was a new kind of reception in the meetings which I held in the impeachment days. . . . I was made to realize that we were at grips with the problem of the common people. . . .

The people were becoming aroused to a white heat. In crowds of ten to fifteen thousand a vote would be taken, never more than one or two failing to hold their hand up in my favor.⁶³

On the platform as well as in his autobiography, Long thus cultivated the image of a "common man" who was also an extraordinary leader—a leader who defied the rules of political decorum, fearlessly confronted the powerful, and intuitively grasped the problems of the "common people." Yet there was another, even more distinctive dimension to Long's political *persona*: a comic side that attracted national attention and often disarmed his critics. Dressed in outrageously flamboyant clothes, strutting in front of the LSU marching band, drinking to excess in public, and generally flouting the rules of "polite" society, Huey Long seemed thoroughly *unlike* other politicians: *unsophisticated*, *unrefined*, and apparently *unconcerned* with his public image. In reality, Long cultivated his comic image as carefully as other politicians strove to appear intelligent or refined. Yet he *seemed* genuinely rustic, and that rusticity served him well

as he developed national political ambitions.

As governor of Louisiana, Long first came to the attention of the nation as a result of what, to some, was an embarrassing incident: the so-called “green pajamas” incident. As reported in the newspapers and repeated in his own autobiography, Long was reading scriptures and listening to a radio sermon when a German naval commander paid a courtesy call, and Long simply could not understand why the officer and his entourage were insulted that he received them in bedclothes. “What’s the matter with ‘em?” the governor reportedly asked. “I had on a pair of green pajamas, took the time to put on a pair of bedroom slippers, a \$35 lounging robe given to me by the State Banking Department for Christmas—what more do they want?” Later informed about diplomatic protocol, Long made amends, borrowing some “formal morning attire” and journeying to the commander’s ship to apologize for his “indecorous raiment.” “You see,” the governor explained to the German consul, “I come from Winnfield up in the hills of Winn Parish, in this State. I know little of diplomacy and much less of the international courtesies and exchanges that are indulged in by nations.”⁶⁴ The governor’s display of diplomatic ignorance may have horrified some of his constituents, but it made him a “front-page figure” across the nation and encouraged him to even more vigorously cultivate his “public reputation as a buffoon.”⁶⁵

In 1931, Long again made headlines with another comic stunt: a mock national debate over cornpone and potlikker, a traditional Southern staple. Feigning a concern for etiquette, Long insisted that “refinement” necessitated that cornpone (a crusty cornmeal bread) be dunked rather than crumbled into potlikker (the liquid left after turnip greens are boiled with salt pork). Others joined in the debate, including Governor William H. (“Alfalfa Bill”) Murray of Oklahoma and Governor Doyle E. Carleton of Florida, who offered a scriptural defense of dunking. “Amos ‘n’ Andy” picked up on the controversy, and eventually even Franklin D. Roosevelt weighed in on the side of the crumblers.⁶⁶ Not surprisingly, some considered the debate an embarrassment, even demeaning to Southerners. Yet recalling the “debate” in his autobiography, Long boasted that he not only had helped “advertise” a cheap and healthy food, but introduced “a more elegant method of eating this delectable concoction.”⁶⁷

That was the Huey Long most Americans knew as he arrived in Washington to assume his Senate seat in 1932: the Huey Long who defied diplomatic protocol and ate cornpone and potlikker. In Louisiana, he had become known as a shrewd political operator, but outside of the state he remained a rustic, comic figure—an ignorant country bumpkin known mostly for cheap publicity stunts. All that changed in 1934 when Long began a series of eight national radio addresses attacking FDR and the New Deal.⁶⁸ Within three months Long’s Share Our Wealth Society would be signing up some 20,000 members a day,⁶⁹ and by the summer of 1935 he would be seen as a serious threat to Roosevelt’s reelection. Obviously, Long’s radio addresses struck a chord in Depression-era America. Yet we still have no satisfactory account of *why* Long’s speeches had such a remarkable impact.

Long the Radio Preacher

According to biographer Glen Jeansonne, the explanation for the success of Long’s Share Our Wealth campaign is simple: at a time of great economic distress, he “attracted millions” to

his cause because he “promised more than the New Deal.”⁷⁰ Yet Long actually provided few details about his economic plan in his national radio addresses, and his attacks on FDR and the New Deal, while harsh, only partially focused on economic issues. In a sense, Long did not deliver “political” speeches at all when he took to the airwaves in 1934 and 1935. Combining colloquial, even ungrammatical language with folksy analogies and emotional appeals, he “chatted” informally about a wide range of topics, and he even read aloud from the newspapers of the day. Above all, Long “preached” to his radio audiences, quoting from the Bible and interpreting God’s will in a rustic, revivalistic style that contrasted sharply with the “warm, melodious” eloquence of FDR’s fireside chats.⁷¹

“I am one of those who didn’t have the opportunity to secure a college education or training,” Long declared in his national radio address of March 7, 1935. And as if to prove it, he ungrammatically complained about a system that allowed only the rich to send their children to college: “It don’t [sic] make any difference how brilliant a boy or girl may be, that don’t [sic] give them the right to a college education in America today.”⁷² Speaking a “vernacular common to many of his listeners,” Long invoked “folk and popular culture,” calling himself “Kingfish” after a character in *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, and urging listeners to “ring up” their neighbors and “tell ‘em Huey P. Long . . . is [sic] got something to tell them.”⁷³ He also used words and phrases rarely heard in formal political speech, including “ain’t,” “dadgummed,” and “way back yonder.” In the final speech of the series, he even put his own rustic vernacular into the mouth of FDR, imagining the patrician president dictating to Congress in uncharacteristically “common” terms: “Here, you boys; you ain’t fit to make any laws; let me do that for you.”⁷⁴

Long complemented the rusticity of his diction and grammar with simple analogies drawn from rural life. In elaborating on how FDR had usurped the law-making powers of Congress, he declared that members of Congress ought to be “ashamed” to draw their paychecks and explained: “If you hire me to cut a cord of wood and instead . . . some man comes along and says that I don’t know how to cut that wood, . . . and I hand him over the saw and the axe, then you ought to pay the man that cuts the wood”⁷⁵ In another of his addresses, Long likened the rich in America to a dog guarding a “wagonload of hay”; the “dog would not allow the cow to eat” the hay even though “he could not eat it himself.”⁷⁶ Throughout his radio addresses, Long invoked “down home” metaphors and analogies grounded in popular folklore. In a speech he titled “Our Blundering Government,” for example, Long compared Roosevelt to “old Davy Crockett,” who shot again and again at what he thought was “a possum in the top of a tree,” but which turned out to be “a louse in his own eyebrow.”⁷⁷ In his favorite folksy analogy, Long cast the rich in America as gluttonous guests at a country barbeque. He elaborated that comparison at greatest length in his radio address of January 14, 1935:

I wonder if any of you . . . were ever at a barbeque! We used to go there—sometimes a thousand people or more. If there were 1,000 people we would put enough meat and bread . . . on the table for 1,000 people. Then everybody would . . . eat all they wanted. But suppose at one of these barbeques for 1,000 people that one man took 90 percent of the food and ran off with it and ate until he got sick and let the balance rot. Then 999 people would have only enough for 100 to eat and there would be many to starve because of the greed of just one person for something he couldn’t eat himself.⁷⁸

Long's radio addresses showed why he was considered a "master" of emotional appeals, drawing vivid, disturbing portraits of a Depression-era America where "millions have starved and gone naked," where "babies have cried and died for milk," and where people "begged for meat and bread."⁷⁹ As if sitting in the living room with the kin-folk, Long would read to his audience from the newspapers, relating shocking and heart-wrenching stories about victims of the Depression. In his address on March 4, 1935, for example, he read from the *Kansas City Journal-Post* about a woman "kicked out, penniless" from her home, despite FDR's promise that nobody would lose their home to foreclosure. "Oh, God," the woman sobbed, "why do they have to do this to us. . . . [W]e have no place to go. We do not even know where we'll sleep."⁸⁰ In another of his radio addresses, he concluded by reading the entire newspaper account of a desperate mother in Chicago:

It was bitterly cold. Frail Mrs. Ella Martindale huddled with her four children close to an insufficient stove. The baby, 5 months old, wailed fitfully in fever under blankets on the floor.

All awaited return of Murrian Martindale, the father, who promised when he left for his shift as a cab driver that "I'll bring something to eat, some way." . . .

A strangling cough wrecked the infant girl. The mother acted in desperation. Whirling blankets around the baby and a ragged coat around her own shoulders, she ordered the oldest girl to watch the other children. She raced from the room, carrying the sick child. . . .

Mrs. Martindale had no car fare but she went. She walked— six blocks—with the thermometer at 16 above zero. She stumbled on the steps into the hospital.

"My baby," she sobbed to a nurse, "she's sick." The nurse peered into the blankets, then took the little bundle.

"She's dead," she said.⁸¹

Long harshly criticized FDR and the New Deal, and his criticisms grew more pointed and personal over the course of the campaign. In January 1935, Long observed that the nation was in the third year of the "Roosevelt depression, with the conditions growing worse,"⁸² and in July he accused the president of pursuing policies "exactly opposite" from those he had "promised the people."⁸³ In a speech he titled "Our Growing Calamity," he cited statistics on the national debt and unemployment to prove that "conditions today are much more deplorable than they were in Hoover's depression."⁸⁴ Yet going beyond substantive, policy-oriented criticisms, Long also took satirical, personal shots at President Roosevelt, mocking his name ("Franklin De-lah-no Rosy-felt"⁸⁵) and nicknaming him the "Knight of the Nourmahal" for his vacations onboard a \$5 million yacht owned by the Astor family.⁸⁶ In his final radio address, Long even compared the

president to cousin Theodore— “Roosevelt the Great”— and derisively dubbed him “Roosevelt the Little.”⁸⁷ According to Hair, Long “sank no lower than castigating the president as a Wall Street tool who compared unfavorably with Hoover.”⁸⁸ In the context of the Depression, however, labeling the president a friend of the rich constituted a harsh personal attack, and for one who had campaigned for FDR in 1932 to say such things suggested deceit and betrayal.

In the end, Long’s radio addresses were most distinguished not by the emotionalism or the attacks on FDR, but by the “preaching.” Quoting Scripture “as public men rarely are able to do,”⁸⁹ Long routinely invoked God’s word in his radio addresses, and he even claimed a divine mandate for his Share Our Wealth crusade. Assuming the *persona* of the preacher, Long not only read and interpreted Scripture, but proclaimed that his plan to share the wealth embodied “the laws handed down by God to man.”⁹⁰ In several of his addresses, Long simply read from the Bible, reciting verse after verse of Scripture from both the Old and the New Testaments. “Hear me, I read from the Bible,”⁹¹ he proclaimed in “Our Growing Calamity” before reading the first thirteen verses—all 418 words—of Nehemiah, chapter 5.

Long did not invoke God’s blessings ritualistically, as politicians commonly do in America.⁹² Rather, he boldly claimed that his Share-Our-Wealth plan was “approved by the law of our Divine Maker” and “prescribed by the Bible.”⁹³ “You will find it in the Book of Leviticus,” he proclaimed in one address; “You will find it in the writings of King Solomon. You will find it in the teachings of Christ.”⁹⁴ In his address on January 14, 1935, he declared that “unless we limit the size of the big man so as to give something to the little man we can never have a happy or free people.” He then exclaimed: “God said so! He ordered it.”⁹⁵ In “Our Growing Calamity,” Long not only quoted the first thirteen verses of Nehemiah, but also Ecclesiastes, chapter 5; Leviticus, chapter 25; and Deuteronomy, chapter 15—all to establish that there “was once a country in exactly . . . the same fix as America is today.” “Hear me, people of America, God’s laws live today,” Long preached. “Keep them and none suffer; disregard them and we go the way of the missing.”⁹⁶

Long delivered perhaps his most “sermonic” radio address on February 10, 1935 in an address he entitled “Our Plundering Government.” “This being a Sunday night,” he began, “it would be better that I perhaps stay within the confines of the Scriptures as much as I can.” True to his word, Long read from Proverbs, chapter 30; St. Matthew, chapter 19; and the Book of James, chapter 5—all to prove that God frowned upon both poverty and excessive wealth. While promising not “to preach you any sermon,” Long did just that, insisting upon a literal interpretation of the Bible (“what the Bible said it means”) and declaring it “practically impossible for a rich man to enter heaven.”⁹⁷ In the conclusion of the address, he used a letter from a 12-year-old girl to suggest what even Long himself dared not say: that he was more “Godly” than FDR. Suggesting that Long “buy Mr. Roosevelt a small Bible” and quoting from Deuteronomy, the little girl from Kansas concluded with her biblical interpretation of the 1930s dust bowl:

Dear Senator Long: I listened to your speech over the radio. And you quoted verses from the Bible. I also read the Bible.

I do not believe Mr. Roosevelt has a Bible. And if he did have he could not read it. . . . I

believe in God and I think God must have closed up the heavens last summer as a warning to some of the selfish ones on this earth.⁹⁸

Long delivered another strikingly sermonic address on May 2, 1935, entitled “The St. Vitus’ Dance Government.” Again declaring that his Share Our Wealth plan was “prescribed by the Bible,” Long concluded the speech with a long series of biblical passages, each introduced with “I read you the words.” Invoking Acts, chapter 4; Micah, chapter 4; Proverbs, chapter 30; Leviticus, chapter 26; and Deuteronomy, chapter 15, Long concluded: “Nothing is more sensible or better understood than the redistribution of property. The laws of God command it.” He ended this particular “sermon” with a call to action stylistically embellished with the archaic language of the King James Bible: “So let us be about our work. It is simple. Why lie ye here idle? There is enough for all. Let there be peace in the land. Let our children be happy.”⁹⁹

Surprisingly, historians and rhetorical critics have said little about the sermonic character of Long’s radio addresses. Treating vituperation and emotional appeals as the hallmarks of his demagoguery,¹⁰⁰ most have either ignored Long’s rhetorical religiosity altogether or have simply dismissed his Bible-quoting as ritualistic and insincere. Long may have sounded like a “rural Baptist evangelist,” Hair observed, but he “almost never went to church” and he talked disparagingly about preachers.¹⁰¹ Another biographer likewise described Long as an “impious” man who “broke most of the commandments”—a man whose own brother called him “irreligious” and “profane.” According to Jeansonne, Long did not really believe all those biblical quotations; he just hired a minister to “spice up” his speeches.¹⁰²

Yet however sincere his convictions, Long’s “preaching” clearly struck a chord in Depression-era America. At a time of fear and uncertainty, Long cast himself as a charismatic leader in the “authentic,” spiritual sense—as one who reached “beyond the material world” and associated his cause with “the metaphysical, the transcendent, the spiritual, or some other form of perfection.”¹⁰³ That *persona*, along with all of the various other characteristics of his rhetorical style, were on full display in his most famous radio address, the address that signaled his arrival on the national political scene in 1934, “Every Man a King.” That address not only launched Long’s national Share Our Wealth crusade; almost overnight it transformed Huey Long into a force to be reckoned with on the national political scene.

Every Man A King

Long’s rusticity and religiosity were on full display in “Every Man a King.” As the first in the series of eight radio addresses delivered after he announced the creation of his Share Our Wealth Society in February 1934,¹⁰⁴ “Every Man a King” not only marked Long’s debut as a national political figure, but also signaled his break from Roosevelt and the New Deal. The speech took its title from William Jennings Bryan’s famous “Cross of Gold” speech—an address that, in its own day, catapulted Bryan into the national limelight, earning him the Democratic nomination for president in 1896. Hoping for the same sort of effect, Long used the title “Every Man a King” not only for this speech but also for his autobiography (published in 1933). Later, he even co-wrote a popular song version of “Every Man a King” with the director of the Louisiana State University band, Castro Carrazo.¹⁰⁵ By 1935, “Every Man a King” had become

the unofficial slogan for Long's entire Share Our Wealth campaign.

The speech began with a rhetorical question with the sort of made-up statistics Long routinely invoked. Was it right, he began, that young children were being reared in a country "more owned by 12 men than it is by 120 million people (1)? The answer was obvious, of course, as was the solution. We have "no difficult problem to solve in America," he assured his listeners; there was just "one little problem": the vast disparity of wealth between "the rich people of this country—and by rich people I mean the super-rich"—and the ordinary people. The only way to "cure all of our woes," Long said in announcing the central theme of the speech, was to "scale down the big fortunes, that we may scatter the wealth to be shared by all of the people" (3-4).

Long spent the remainder of the speech rambling across a wide range of topics, presumably "without manuscript or preparation" (2). He began with philosophical reflections on our "marvelous love for this government of ours"—this "splendid form of government" that we loved like a religion (5). In recent times, he argued, that love had been betrayed because the powers-that-be had "neglected the fundamentals upon which the American government was principally predicated" (5). Those "fundamentals" were enshrined in the Declaration of Independence, which not only promised life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but also held that "all men are created equal." Transforming the Declaration's assertion of political equality into an economic principle, Long then posed a rhetorical question: "Now, what did they mean by that? Did they mean, my friends, to say that . . . one man was born to inherit \$10 billion and that another child was to be born to inherit nothing" (7)? Did they mean that a man who never did "one lick of work" should be born with more money than his "children and children's children could ever dispose of," while another would be "born into a life of starvation" (8)? Surely that was not what the Founders intended, Long argued; they meant for every American to get a "fair shake of the dice." They certainly never imagined our current situation, where "thousands and hundreds of thousands and millions of children" were "on the verge of starvation in a land . . . overflowing with too much to eat and too much to wear" (12).

As he did in most of his speeches, Long supplemented his lesson on the Founders' intent with words from "the wise men of all ages and all times" (29). He began with Plato's dialog with Socrates, which taught us "that you must not let any one man be too poor, and you must not let any one man be too rich; that the same mill that grinds out the extra rich is the mill that will grind out the extra poor, because, in order that the extra rich can become so affluent, they must necessarily take more of what ordinarily would belong to the average man" (35). Turning next to the "wise men" of American history, Long invoked the names but not the actual words of "American statesmen like Daniel Webster, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, William Jennings Bryan, and Theodore Roosevelt, and even as late as Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt" (37). All, he suggested, supported the "principle" that there must be a "decentralization of wealth," although neither Hoover nor Roosevelt ever "did anything about it" (38). Indeed, if Hoover and FDR had practiced what they preached, we would have, "within a few months, . . . reached a solution of all of the problems that afflict this country today" (38).

Long deployed his usual folksy, down-home analogies in "Every Man a King," casting his whole crusade as an effort to "hit the root with an ax" (55). He did not tell his favorite story about the gluttonous guest at a barbeque, but he made the same point with a similar analogy: the

Island of 100 lunches. On this island, for some unexplained reason, 100 lunches had been deposited. And just as we would not stand for one guest eating all the food at a barbecue, we should not allow one man to “eat up the hundred lunches, or take the hundred lunches and not let anybody else eat any of them” (30). “If you did,” Long explained in belaboring the obvious, “there would not be anything else for the balance of the people to consume” (30).

As he often did, Long complemented his fable-like analogies with heart-wrenching images of the suffering caused by the Great Depression. Picturing starving children, “tired, half naked, lifting their tear-dimmed eyes into the sad faces of their fathers and mothers,” he talked of parents descending into “darkness and blackness,” knowing that their children would “arise in the morning without being fed, and probably go to bed at night without being fed” (40). In a land of plenty, where there was “too much to eat and too much to wear,” Long lamented that children had to starve while a “handful of men” had much more than they could “ever eat or . . . ever wear” (41). In Long’s polarized and oversimplified portrait of the world, you either sided with the starving children, or you sided with the greedy “big-fortune holders” (39), who had much more than they could ever consume.

“Every Man a King” set the sermonic tone for all of Long’s later radio addresses. He peppered the speech with religious references and allusions, but he did not exactly don the preacher’s hat. Instead, he cast himself as just an ordinary man trying to do God’s work. At the same time, he implied that he was something of a prophet, warning a fallen nation of God’s wrath. Throughout “Every Man a King,” Long walked a thin line between portraying himself as God’s messenger on earth and just another humble sinner.

The first religious reference in the speech came fairly early, as Long awkwardly transitioned from his reflections on the founders and the Declaration of Independence to the bold assertion that God’s will was obvious. There was no need to “quibble” or “quarrel” over the problems we faced, he declared, because “the Lord told us what the difficulty is, and Moses wrote it out so a blind man could see it, then Jesus told us all about it, and it was later written in the Book of James, where everyone could read it” (14). Having invoked religious authority, Long then paused to elaborate at some length on his own religiosity and his reasons for invoking Scriptures:

I refer to the Scriptures, now, my friends, . . . not for the purpose of convincing you of the wisdom of myself, not for the purpose, ladies and gentlemen, of convincing you of the fact that I am quoting the Scripture means that I am to be more believed than someone else; but I quote you the Scripture . . . because whatever you see there you may rely upon will never be disproved so long as you or your children or anyone may live; and you may further depend upon the fact that not one historical fact that the Bible has ever contained has ever yet been disproved by any scientific discovery or by reason of anything that has been disclosed to man through his own individual mind or through the wisdom of the Lord which the Lord has allowed him to have (15).

In short, the Bible was infallible and its message was clear: for “a country to survive it is necessary that we keep the wealth scattered among the people” (16).

Long went on to interpret biblical references to the Year of the Jubilee as a mandate that “all property . . . be scattered about and returned to the sources from which it originally came” every 50 years, with all debt being “remitted” every seventh year (16). Great wealth should never be “held permanently by any one person,” Long explained, nor should it be handed down to son after son, “until, like a snowball going downhill, all the snow was off the ground except what the snowball had” (17). Lest the analogy confuse his listeners, Long was quick to explain: “I believe that that was the judgment and the view and the law of the Lord that we would have to distribute wealth ever so often, in order that there could not be people starving to death in a land of plenty, as there is in America today” (18).

Midway through the speech, Long returned to the question of his own motivations for invoking God and the Bible. “I hope you will understand that I am not quoting Scripture to you to convince you of my goodness personally,” he again assured his listeners, “because that is a thing between me and my Maker, that is something as to how I stand with my Maker and as to how you stand with your Maker” (34). Although he cast himself as something of a prophet throughout the speech, he now professed to be just another humble servant. He even acknowledged his own need for forgiveness, asking his listeners if they could “be so good as pray for the souls of some of us” (34).

Long concluded the sermonic message of “Every Man a King” with an ominous warning: “But the Lord gave his law, and in the Book of James they said so, that the rich should weep and howl for the miseries that had come upon them” (34). According to Long, the time had come for the rich to repent, and presumably he had been sent to sound the warning: “[A]nd, therefore, it was written that when the rich hold goods they could not use and could not consume, you will inflict punishment on them, and nothing but days of woe ahead of them” (34). Long’s God was a punishing, vengeful God, and time was running out. “God told you want the trouble was” (51), he reminded his listeners toward the end of the speech. The time had come to act.

The sermonic tone of “Every Man a King” not only “imparted a cloak of religiosity” to Long and his message,¹⁰⁶ but also a sense of urgency. FDR’s New Deal was simply not doing enough to save the country from ruin. More radical actions were needed, and that meant Long’s “Share Our Wealth” program. In the last few minutes of “Every Man a King,” Long sketched out that program in a bit more detail, although never in the whole series of radio addresses did he provide detailed policy proposals or defend the feasibility or workability of his plan. That plan, like all of Long’s rhetoric, rested on an element of faith that the Kingfish would deliver on his promises to the poor.

Long’s plan was simple enough: “We propose to limit the wealth of big men in the country” (43). That did *not* mean dividing up the nation’s wealth equally, but only assuring that every man and woman had the “necessities of life” (43). According to Long, every family should have enough income for “a home, an automobile, a radio, and the ordinary conveniences, and the opportunity to educate their children,” and there should be “no such thing as a family living in poverty and distress” (44). By Long’s calculations, that meant a “guaranty of a family wealth of around \$5,000” (44), presumably paid for by a limit on fortunes of \$50 million. Over the course of his series of radio addresses, Long often fudged on the numbers, noting that he was still “working out” the details and conceding that it might be necessary to limit fortunes to \$15 million or even \$10 million in order to “prevent poverty among the masses” (45). Whatever the

actual numbers, the idea behind the figures was simple: that no “one man, or any one man and his children and their children,” should be allowed to acquire more money than they could possibly “spend in their lifetimes” (45).

Long provided even fewer details on the feasibility and cost of his other proposals, which included an old-age pension of \$30 a month for every American over sixty, free health care and a cash “bonus” for military veterans, and limits on the hours worked by all Americans. With all the “labor-saving devices” now available, Long insisted, we could probably cut the workday to four or five hours, just five days a week—maybe even less. And all workers could be given a month off every year—perhaps even two months. Not only would this solve the problem of overproduction, but the U.S. could also then do “what other countries have seen fit to do, and what I did in Louisiana,” which was to establish “schools by which adults could go back and learn the things that have been discovered since they went to school” (47).

In “Every Man a King,” Long refrained from directly criticizing Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Although personal attacks on Roosevelt became common in his later radio addresses, “Every Man a King” offered but vague criticisms of the “various and sundry alphabetical codes” that made up Roosevelt’s New Deal program. “You can have the NRA and PWA and CWA and the UUG and GIN 3 and any other kind of ‘dadgummed’ lettered code,” Long began. “You can wait until doomsday and see twenty-five more alphabets, but that is not going to solve this proposition” (50). A bit later he went after the National Recovery Administration (NRA) in particular, criticizing the New Deal agency tasked with stimulating business recovery for putting “the little man out of business” with a “code of 275 pages” that only a “Philadelphia lawyer” could comprehend. “If the NRA has done any good, I can put it all in my eye without having it hurt,” Long said sarcastically. “The NRA is not worth anything, and I said so when they put it through” (54).

In the final analysis, Long’s “Every Man a King” outlined an ambitious, progressive, and yet remarkably ill-defined plan for Depression-era America—a plan far more radical than FDR’s New Deal. Long did not spell out the details of that plan in this or any of his later radio addresses. But for his followers, as Brinkley has recognized, the “specifics” of his plan “simply did not seem to matter very much.”¹⁰⁷ Their attraction to Long was intensely personal and apparently grounded in what Weber described as the “emotional form of communal relationship” between a charismatic religious leader and his followers.¹⁰⁸ This understanding of Long’s appeal helps to explain why, after he was assassinated in September of 1935, the Share Our Wealth movement quickly faded, despite the best efforts of Long’s energetic and talented protege, Gerald Smith.¹⁰⁹ It also helps to account for the fact that, contrary to conventional wisdom, Long’s support did *not* come primarily from the ranks of the “destitute, the indigent, and the ignorant”—those who stood to gain most from a redistribution of wealth—but rather from the middle class.¹¹⁰ Finally, the spiritual, charismatic nature of Long’s appeal helps to explain why so many of Long’s followers were also attracted to the Catholic radio priest Charles E. Coughlin, even though the two leaders differed radically both in style and in their economic proposals.¹¹¹

Long did not win support for his Share Our Wealth crusade by offering poor people a “better deal” than Roosevelt. Rather, he won support by articulating the fears, the political disaffection, and the religious faith of millions of Americans caught in the grips of the worst economic depression in American history. As Christman has written, Long’s “Bible-brandishing,

country-drummer style” may have “appalled and repelled” more “cultured persons,”¹¹² but for many Americans that style communicated that Long was one of them. Long offered more than an economic and political alternative to Roosevelt and the New Deal. He gave voice to millions of Americans who had lost faith in their political and economic system yet still clung desperately to their religious faith.

Conclusion

Shortly before his death Huey Long published what some have called a “political fantasy”¹¹³: *My First Days in the White House*.¹¹⁴ Dismissed by scholars as a “curious book” that revealed little about the man,¹¹⁵ *My First Days* actually revealed much about Long’s view of himself. Imagining how he would convince former presidents Hoover and Roosevelt to join his cabinet and rich bankers and industrialists to back his economic reforms, Long depicted himself as possessing almost magical powers of persuasion. In just his first year in office, he would push through his controversial plan to redistribute wealth, then bask in the adulation of a grateful nation. As in his radio addresses, Long ultimately attributed his success to a higher power. Toward the end of *My First Days*, he imagined delivering a three-hour address to Congress, calling upon them to pass his Share the Wealth program and reminding them of his biblical mandate: “Wherever the Bible decrees a policy, undertaking to defy such a mandate of the Scriptures has never led to other than ruin for any nation.”¹¹⁶ He then envisioned responding to a senator’s question with recommendations for further Bible study:

A United States Senator arose and said: “It seems that many of us will have to exercise a great deal of faith and hope.”

“Yes, brother,” I answered, “and in that connection it would not hurt if some of you would read the 13th Chapter, I Corinthians.”¹¹⁷

In labeling Long a demagogue, scholars have questioned his empathy for the “common man,”¹¹⁸ the accuracy of his “outdated” statistics,¹¹⁹ and even the authenticity of his rustic, ungrammatical language.¹²⁰ Above all, however, they have doubted his religious convictions, and as a result they have been too quick to dismiss perhaps the best explanation for his remarkable appeal: the rustic, sermonic character of his national radio addresses. However sincere his own convictions, Long’s Bible-quoting cast his Share Our Wealth movement as a religious crusade. It also established Long himself as an authentically charismatic leader—a leader with spiritual insight and a divine mandate. As Long himself observed in “Every Man a King,” he did not quote from the Bible to convince his audiences of his “goodness personally.” That, he insisted, was “between me and my Maker.” (34) Yet he did claim to find in the Bible the explanation for why God had punished America. And he also discovered in the Bible what God demanded as repentance: a redistribution of America’s wealth.

Perhaps scholars have downplayed Long’s rhetorical religiosity because, as Craig R. Smith has suggested, talk of spiritual matters “runs afoul of academic sensibilities.”¹²¹ Since Kenneth Burke discovered in Adolf Hitler’s rhetoric “a bastardized or caricatured version of

religious thought,”¹²² we also have had reason to suspect the motives of politicians who deploy religious language and imagery. Of course, American politicians have always talked about God and religion. We are a nation, as sociologist Robert Bellah famously observed, with a long tradition of “civil religion.”¹²³ Yet Long’s Bible-quoting clearly departed from the mainstream of American civic piety. Long did not invoke the “expediently complex” God of American presidential rhetoric—the God that, according to Hart, historically has provided support for whatever America has chosen to do, the God that has rarely punished the nation or dictated a particular course of action. He did not invoke the optimistic, upbeat God who assures the nation that “the crisis at hand” is but a “momentary tribulation.”¹²⁴ To the contrary, Long invoked an angry and demanding God—a God who punished America with the Great Depression and “commanded” that the nation’s wealth be redistributed. More than his religiosity *per se*, perhaps this explains why some have reacted so negatively to Long’s religious rhetoric. Long invoked a God largely absent from America’s tradition of civil religion: the vengeful and punishing God of the Old Testament.

Whatever the religious biases of the scholarship, a broader *cultural* bias also seems to infect the literature on Long—a bias not so much against Long himself as against the people who some imagine responding to his rustic, revivalistic style. As early as 1933, *Baltimore Sun* columnist Frank R. Kent described Long’s supporters as a “moronic underworld” of “emotional and prejudiced” voters.¹²⁵ That same year H.L. Mencken called Long’s supporters “anthropoid patriots” who confirmed the theory that “the imbecility of the plain people” was “usually greatly underestimated.”¹²⁶ In his classic study of the Kingfish, Schlesinger disparaged Long’s followers as “rednecks” and “hillbillies” too timid to articulate their own “surging envy” toward their social superiors,¹²⁷ and even rhetorical scholars—scholars who typically denounce name-calling—have referred to Long’s followers as, among other things, “peasants” and “peanut-fed people.”¹²⁸ Apparently unable to imagine how reasonable, middle-class people might respond to Long’s rustic, revivalistic style, some have not only condemned Long as a demagogue but his supporters as ignorant, Bible-thumping “hillbillies.”

By some definitions, Long was a demagogue. Indeed, Long himself pled guilty to the charge, at least in what he termed the “Old Greek” meaning of the word: as one who used “language . . . acceptable to the majority.” On other occasions, however, Long defined demagogue differently and pled not guilty to the charge. “There are all kinds of demagogues,” he once commented. “Some of them deceive the people in their own interest. I would describe a demagogue as a politician who don’t [sic] keep his promises.”¹²⁹ By that definition, Long made a pretty good case that he was among the *least* demagogic politicians of his day.

However we define demagogue, it is important to remember that millions hailed Long as a “hero” for precisely the same behaviors that led others to indict him as a demagogue. Whether Long seemed heroic or demagogic, as Gaske concluded, “depended on one’s social standing.”¹³⁰ To some, Long was a hero. To others, he was a demagogue. To embrace one label over the other is to oversimplify Long’s complex political *persona*. More than that, it is to take sides in the perennial class struggle between the “haves” and the “have nots.”

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Southeast Missouri State University. An earlier version of this essay appeared in *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 7 (Summer 2004): 149-171.

Notes

- ¹ Morton J. Frisch, "Roosevelt the Conservator: A Rejoinder to Hofstadter," *The Journal of American Politics* 25 (1963): 367. The other "dangerous man," according to Roosevelt, was General Douglas MacArthur.
- ² Glen Jeansonne, "Introduction," in *Huey at 100: Centennial Essays on Huey P. Long*, ed. Glen Jeansonne (Ruston, Louisiana: McGinty Publications, 1995), 10.
- ³ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 169.
- ⁴ See Edwin Amenta, Kathleen Dunleavy, and Mary Bernstein, "Stolen Thunder? Huey Long's 'Share Our Wealth,' Political Mediation, and the Second New Deal," *American Sociological Review* 59 (1994): 687-89.
- ⁵ Elton Abernathy, "Huey Long: Oratorical 'Wealth Sharing,'" *Southern Speech Journal* 21 (1955): 87-88.
- ⁶ William Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 200.
- ⁷ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 417.
- ⁸ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 158.
- ⁹ Quoted in *Huey Long*, directed by Ken Burns (Walpole, NH: Florentine Films; PBS Home Video, 1985), DVD.
- ¹⁰ Abernathy, "Huey Long," 99.
- ¹¹ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 268.
- ¹² Ernest G. Bormann, "This is Huey P. Long Talking," *Journal of Broadcasting* 2 (1958): 111.
- ¹³ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 169.
- ¹⁴ V.O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 157.
- ¹⁵ Burns, *Huey Long*.
- ¹⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., "The Messiah of the Rednecks," in *Huey Long*, ed. Hugh Davis Graham (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), 146-48.
- ¹⁷ T. Harry Williams, "The Gentleman from Louisiana: Demagogue or Democrat," *Journal of Southern History* 26 (1960): 18-19.
- ¹⁸ Williams, *Huey Long*, 4.
- ¹⁹ Charles W. Lomas, *The Agitator in American Society* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), 18.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Williams, *Huey Long*, 411.
- ²¹ Reinhard H. Luthin, "Some Demagogues in American History," *American Historical Review* 57 (1951): 22, 45.
- ²² In addition to the critiques of Long and the studies by Luthin, Clark, and Robison cited elsewhere in this essay, see, for example, Barnet Baskerville, "Joe McCarthy, Briefcase Demagogue," *Today's Speech* 2 (1954): 8-15; Ernest C. Thompson, Jr., "A Case Study in Demagoguery: Henry Harmon Spalding," *Western Speech* 30 (1966): 225-32; Charles W. Lomas, "Dennis Kearney: Case Study in Demagoguery," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 41 (1955): 234-42; Alan Herman, "Dust, Depression, and Demagogues: Political Radicals of the Great Plains, 1930-1936," *Journal of the West* 16 (1977): 57-62; James Darsey, "Joe McCarthy's Fantastic Moment," *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 65-86; Glenn Feldman, *From Demagogue to Dixiecrat: Horace Wilkinson and the Politics of Race* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1995); Francis P. Simkins, *Pitchfork Ben Tillman, South Carolinian* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1944); and Allan A. Michie and Frank Rhylick, *Dixie Demagogues* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1939).
- ²³ See Steven R. Goldzwig, "A Social Movement Perspective on Demagoguery: Achieving Symbolic Realignment," *Communication Studies* 40 (1989): 202-28.
- ²⁴ See, for example, J. Justin Gustainis, "Demagoguery and Political Rhetoric: A Review of the Literature," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 20 (1990): 155-61. Gustainis's list of allegedly demagogic "techniques" included personalized appeal, oversimplification, emotional appeals, specious argument, "ad hominem" attacks, anti-intellectualism, and political pageantry. All of these characteristics, of course, can be found to varying degrees in mainstream political and campaign rhetoric.
- ²⁵ Luthin, "Some Demagogues in American History," 45.

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- ²⁶ Reinhard H. Luthin, *American Demagogues: Twentieth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1954; repr., Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), 11.
- ²⁷ Luthin, "Some Demagogues in American History," 44.
- ²⁸ Luthin, *American Demagogues*, 11.
- ²⁹ Luthin, "Some Demagogues in American History," 45.
- ³⁰ E. Culpepper Clark, "Pitchfork Ben Tillman and the Emergence of Southern Demagoguery," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1983) 423-33.
- ³¹ Daniel M. Robison, "From Tillman to Long: Some Striking Leaders of the Rural South," *Journal of Southern History* (1937): 289-310.
- ³² Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 117.
- ³³ Robison, "From Tillman to Long," 305.
- ³⁴ Allan P. Sindler, *Huey Long's Louisiana: State Politics, 1920-1952* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 110.
- ³⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 412-13.
- ³⁶ Schlesinger, "Messiah of the Rednecks," 154.
- ³⁷ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 73-74.
- ³⁸ Williams, "The Gentleman from Louisiana," 7.
- ³⁹ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 170.
- ⁴⁰ Williams, "The Gentleman from Louisiana," 13-14, 21.
- ⁴¹ Ernest G. Bormann, "Huey Long: Analysis of a Demagogue," *Today's Speech* 2 (1954): 16, 19.
- ⁴² Paul C. Gaske, "The Analysis of Demagogic Discourse: Huey Long's 'Every Man a King' Address," in *Contemporary American Public Discourse*, 3rd ed., ed. Halford Ross Ryan (Prospect Heights, Illinois: 1992), 47-65.
- ⁴³ Robert Stephen Iltis, "Beyond Devil Tokens: The Style of Huey P. Long" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1989).
- ⁴⁴ Bormann, for example, set out to identify the "elements" of Long's speeches that might be "isolated as unique" and declared "characteristic of demagoguery," but in the end he could find no such elements. In terms of organization, language, materials, and proofs, Bormann conceded, Long "used techniques that have been traditional in rhetorical theory," and his speeches differed little from those of Roosevelt, Truman, or Eisenhower. See Bormann, "Huey Long," 16.
- ⁴⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 416-17.
- ⁴⁶ Gaske, "The Analysis of Demagogic Discourse," 56.
- ⁴⁷ Williams, "The Gentleman from Louisiana," 18.
- ⁴⁸ Sindler, *Huey Long's Louisiana*, 98.
- ⁴⁹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 266.
- ⁵⁰ Henry M. Christman, ed., *Kingfish to America: Share Our Wealth: Selected Senatorial Papers of Huey P. Long* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), xiv.
- ⁵¹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 213.
- ⁵² Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 124.
- ⁵³ Williams, *Huey Long*, 213.
- ⁵⁴ Abernathy, "Huey Long," 100.
- ⁵⁵ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 190.
- ⁵⁶ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 288
- ⁵⁷ Abernathy, "Huey Long," 100.
- ⁵⁸ Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 158.
- ⁵⁹ Huey P. Long, *Every Man a King: The Autobiography of Huey P. Long* (1933; New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 99.
- ⁶⁰ Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 28.
- ⁶¹ Long, *Every Man a King*, 150.
- ⁶² Long, *Every Man a King*, 150.
- ⁶³ Long, *Every Man a King*, 151, 156, 162.
- ⁶⁴ Long, *Every Man a King*, 192-99.
- ⁶⁵ Schlesinger, "Messiah of the Rednecks," 147.
- ⁶⁶ Glen Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses: Huey P. Long and the Great Depression* (New York: Longman, 1993),

100-101.

⁶⁷ Long, *Every Man a King*, 265.

⁶⁸ There is some confusion in the literature over the exact number of Long's national radio addresses. Long inserted ten radio addresses into the *Congressional Record* between 1933 and 1935, but only eight of those came after he announced the creation of the Share Our Wealth Society in "an appeal to the people of America," published in the *Congressional Record* on February 5, 1934 (See "Carry Out the Command of the Lord," in Christman, ed., *Kingfish to America*, 28-34). "Every Man a King" was the only one delivered that same year, 1934. The remaining seven were delivered in the first seven months of 1935.

⁶⁹ Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses*, 115.

⁷⁰ Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses*, 117.

⁷¹ Halford Ryan, "Franklin Delano Roosevelt," in *U.S. Presidents as Orators: A Bio-Critical Sourcebook* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1995), 157.

⁷² Congress, Senate, "Our Blundering Government—Speech by Senator Long," 74th Congress, 1st sess., *Congressional Record* (12 March 1935), vol. 79, pt. 3, 3438.

⁷³ Lawrence W. Levine, "The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences," *American Historical Review* 97 (1992): 1393-94.

⁷⁴ Congress, Senate, "Administration of President Roosevelt—Radio Address by Senator Long," 74th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* (22 July 1935), vol. 79, pt. 11, 11517.

⁷⁵ Congress, Senate, "Administration of President Roosevelt," 11517.

⁷⁶ Congress, Senate, "Our Blundering Government," 3438.

⁷⁷ Congress, Senate, "Our Blundering Government," 3436.

⁷⁸ Congress, Senate, "Redistribution of Wealth," 74th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* (14 January 1935), vol. 79, pt. 1, 412.

⁷⁹ Congress, Senate, "Our Blundering Government," 3437.

⁸⁰ Congress, Senate, "Our Plundering Government—Speech by Senator Long," 74th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* (4 March 1935), vol. 79, pt. 3, 2834.

⁸¹ Congress, Senate, "Our Growing Calamity," 74th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* (23 January 1935), vol. 79, pt. 1, 792.

⁸² Congress, Senate, "Redistribution of Wealth," 411.

⁸³ Congress, Senate, "Administration of President Roosevelt," 11517.

⁸⁴ Congress, Senate, "Our Growing Calamity," 791.

⁸⁵ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 288.

⁸⁶ Congress, Senate, "The St. Vitus' Dance Government—Address by Senator Long," 74th Cong., 1st sess., *Congressional Record* (7 May 1935), vol. 79, pt. 7, 7048.

⁸⁷ Congress, Senate, "Administration of President Roosevelt," 11518.

⁸⁸ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 288.

⁸⁹ Abernathy, "Huey Long," 100.

⁹⁰ Congress, Senate, "Our Blundering Government," 3438.

⁹¹ Congress, Senate, "Our Growing Calamity," 792.

⁹² See Roderick P. Hart, *The Political Pulpit* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1977), 87-98.

⁹³ Congress, Senate, "Our Blundering Government," 3439; Congress, Senate, "The St. Vitus' Dance Government," 7050.

⁹⁴ Congress, Senate, "Our Blundering Government," 3439.

⁹⁵ Congress, Senate, "Redistribution of Wealth," 412.

⁹⁶ Congress, Senate, "Our Growing Calamity," 792.

⁹⁷ Congress, Senate, "Our Plundering Government," 2832.

⁹⁸ Congress, Senate, "Our Plundering Government," 2834.

⁹⁹ Congress, Senate, "The St. Vitus' Dance Government," 7050.

¹⁰⁰ In his study of Long's radio addresses in Louisiana, for example, Bormann noted that Long "quoted from the Bible in ministerial tones," but he said nothing else about his Bible-quoting and instead emphasized how he "whipped himself into a frenzy of name-calling and ridicule as he poured it on his enemies." Bormann, "This is Huey Long Talking," 114.

¹⁰¹ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 34, 170, 248.

¹⁰² Jeansonne, "Introduction," in *Huey at 100*, 3.

¹⁰³ Craig R. Smith, *The Quest for Charisma: Christianity and Persuasion* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000), 2.

¹⁰⁴ See note 68 above.

¹⁰⁵ See "Find of the Week: Huey P. Long's 'Every Man a King' was a Slogan, an Autobiography — and a Song," *WGNO*, July 12, 2018, <https://wgno.com/news/find-of-the-week-huey-p-long-s-every-man-a-king-was-a-slogan-an-autobiography-and-a-song/>.

¹⁰⁶ Iltis, "Beyond Devil Tokens," 96, 106.

¹⁰⁷ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 213.

¹⁰⁸ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A.M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 360.

¹⁰⁹ As Jeansonne has observed, Smith tried to influence the 1936 election with the "elusive anti-Roosevelt coalition that Long had envisioned," but he managed to create only a "pale ghost" of the "vast coalition Long had dreamed of in 1935" and the effort caused "barely a ripple in the election." His stand-in for the assassinated Long, William Lemke, polled only 892,000 votes, or about 1.8 percent, while FDR carried every state except Maine and Vermont. Subsequently, Smith "drifted into the netherworld of anti-Semitism," publishing a "hate-sheet," *The Cross and the Flag*, and touring the country "exposing conspiracies that existed only in his demented imagination." Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses*, 188.

¹¹⁰ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 198.

¹¹¹ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 209-15.

¹¹² Christman, *Kingfish to America*, ix.

¹¹³ See the headnote to "Huey P. Long: My First Days in the White House," in *Huey P. Long: Southern Demagogue or American Democrat?*, ed. Henry C. Dethloff (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1967), 34.

¹¹⁴ Huey Pierce Long, *My First Days in the White House* (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Telegraph Press, 1935; rpt., New York: Da Capo Press, 1972).

¹¹⁵ See Williams, *Huey Long*, 845-47; and Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 314-15.

¹¹⁶ Long, *My First Days*, 112.

¹¹⁷ Long, *My First Days*, 114.

¹¹⁸ The hypocrisy of Long's extravagant lifestyle has been a common theme in the literature. One of his earliest critical biographers, John Kingston Fineran, marveled at how Long could pass himself off as the "poor man's Governor" while building a "great new gaudy" Governor's mansion and treating those who served him with insolence. Later biographers have echoed the theme, emphasizing the wealth of Long's associates and making much of his expensive tastes in clothes, jewelry, and cars. Jeansonne, for example, observed that Long's inner circle consisted mostly of wealthy contributors with "scant sympathy for the masses" and that Long himself enjoyed "material comfort and surrounded himself with luxury"—all while cultivating an "image as a reformer directing a class revolution." See the excerpt from Fineran's biography, "The Tinpot Dictator," in *Huey P. Long: Southern Demagogue or American Democrat?*, 37-38; and Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses*, 53.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses*, 119.

¹²⁰ Noting that Long's grammar was "frequently bad" and "probably deliberately so," rhetorical critic Elton Abernathy observed that Long could, when he wished, speak like a "scholar." In the Senate, Abernathy observed, Long spoke "perfectly normal language" in the conduct of everyday business, only to "resort to a far more colorful style" when the galleries filled to hear him speak. Abernathy, "Huey Long," 101.

¹²¹ Smith, *The Quest for Charisma*, 5.

¹²² Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 199.

¹²³ Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1-21.

¹²⁴ Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 67-75; 102.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Luthin, *American Demagogues*, 318.

¹²⁶ H.L. Mencken, "The Glory of Louisiana," *The Nation* 3 May 1933, 507.

¹²⁷ Schlesinger, "Messiah of the Rednecks," 148.

¹²⁸ Abernathy, "Huey Long," 102.

¹²⁹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 413

¹³⁰ Gaske, "The Analysis of Demagogic Discourse," 54.