

The Gentleman from Louisiana: Demagogue or Democrat

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The Presidential Address¹

WAS IT TRUE, THE REPORTER ASKED, PROBING DEEPER WITH HIS questions, that the state officials and the legislature of Louisiana were corrupt? Governor Henry Clay Warmoth exploded. His answer reflected what one suspects was a common complaint of the carpetbagger caught up in the swashbuckling politics of Louisiana but at the same time demonstrated that he himself was rapidly adjusting to the realities of the Louisiana scene. "I don't pretend to be honest . . . I only pretend to be as honest as anybody in politics, and more so than those fellows who are opposing me now. Here are these New Orleans bankers making a great outcry against the dishonesty of the Louisiana legislature . . . I tell you . . . these much-abused members are at all events as good as the people they represent. Why, damn it, everybody is demoralized down here. Corruption is the fashion."

One may admit a certain exaggeration in the Governor's remarks, and also in the statement of a later critic that Louisianians are not interested in ideologies or principles but in the fundamentals—the whir of slot machines, the pounding of horses' hoofs at the Fair Grounds, and the clink of ice in a Sazerac cocktail.

¹Delivered at the annual meeting of the Southern Historical Association at Atlanta, Georgia, on November 12, 1959. Much of the information in this paper was obtained from interviews, many of them tape-recorded, with dozens of Huey P. Long and anti-Long leaders. Some of these men have no objection to being quoted by name, while others do object. Because of the difficulty of segregating such sources, no documentation of the interviews has been attempted. The writer is firmly convinced that the scientifically conducted interview is a valid source for the history of the recent past. Indeed, it may be the only source in a technological age when few people write letters or diaries.

Nor is it necessary to adopt the judgments of those commentators who say that Louisiana is not an American state but a banana republic, a Latin enclave of immorality set down in a matrix of Anglo-Saxon righteousness, a proposition whose basic assumption is highly dubious both in the light of history and present observation. And yet without question Louisianians have a concept of corruption not found in other states. They seem to accept it as a necessary concomitant of political life, and, on occasion, even to delight in it. It is an outlook peculiar to the state, perhaps an expression of Latin realism, and it has made Louisiana politics undeniably different. Corruption, which as defined by purists often means only the compromises that are required to keep the machinery of democracy running, has appeared in all states where it has been worth-while and at all levels of government and has been practiced by all classes. In the Louisiana attitude toward corruption there is little of the sanctimoniousness often found in Anglo-Saxon communities; indeed, there is even a tendency to admire a "deal" if it is executed with skill and a flourish and, above all, with a jest. Louisianians, more than any other people in America, realize, with a kind of paradoxical honesty, the hard fact that politics is not always an exercise in civics book morality. In 1939 Gallup pollsters asked a sample group in the state, "Do you think elections in Louisiana in recent years have been honestly conducted?" Twenty-five per cent answered "Yes," sixty per cent answered "No," and fifteen per cent sagely ventured no opinion. The frankness of the response would not have surprised Governor Warmoth.²

But we would be committing a common scholarly error if, in picturing the political anatomy of Louisiana, we emphasized unduly either the color or the proportions of the corruption. Academic people, as well as the general public, expect too much of politics; they are too prone to be horrified by departures from

²It may be contended that there is some exaggeration in the above statements. Of course, any generalizations concerning the whole people of a state are subject to qualification. What I have described as the Louisiana attitude toward corruption is especially prevalent in south Louisiana, which contains, however, a substantial majority of the state's population. Some observers would argue that tolerance of corruption has been replaced in the last decade or so by a stricter view, and this may be true. Certainly today most people would say that elections have been conducted honestly—and point to voting machines as the reason.

an ideal standard of morality that is largely imaginary. As Pendleton Herring has pointed out, a double code of ethics holds for politics. We judge politicians by a higher standard than we apply to men in spheres of private action. This is wrong and can even be dangerous, Herring tells us, because the politician, whose function is to compromise the conflicting desires of frail mankind, has to treat government as a problem of mechanics rather than as a question of morals. "The politician is concerned not with what should be but with what can be."³ If strong men are forced out of politics by too puristic standards, lesser men will take their place. We may recall Emerson's warning in this connection: "Better, certainly, if we could secure the strength and fire which rude, passionate men bring into society, quite clear of their vices. But who dares draw out the linchpin from the wagon-wheel?"⁴ But Americans have always had a curious bifocal view of corruption. Throughout our history we have tolerated corruption to an extraordinary degree, have even encouraged it for certain ends, and in some of the relations between government and business have put it to broad social and economic ends. Perhaps more research is required in this area of behavior, concentrating on the psychology of the corruptible rather than on the arts of the corruptor. It may be that one of our greatest scholarly needs is an honest history of corruption.

Rather than corruption being the hallmark of Louisiana politics, a zest for politics as a game and an appreciation of politics as a power lever have been the distinguishing qualities. Describing the political scene in the 1850's, one historian writes that to a greater degree than in most states "the active electorate revealed a peculiar enthusiasm for the dramatic clash of personalities, the stratagems of politics, and the winning of public offices."⁵ Or, put in less academic terms, the state took its politics raw, like corn whiskey, and loved the diet. This fact was not lost on Governor Warmoth, who was an extremely resourceful and audacious operator, possessing in high degree that quality of ignoring exist-

³Pendleton Herring, *The Politics of Democracy* (New York, 1940), 146-47.

⁴Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Complete Works*, Concord Edition (12 vols., Cambridge, Mass., 1903-1904), VI, 258.

⁵Roger W. Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana* (University, La., 1939), 150-51.

ing rules and making up his own that in a politician we call genius. Coming into office with an insecure power basis and confronted by a constant, cunning, and sometimes unscrupulous opposition, he erected an imposing facade of laws that invested him with imperial authority. He could appoint and remove local registrars of voters, tax collectors, and assessors. He could appoint the board of police commissioners in New Orleans, which controlled the selection of all personnel; constables for all parishes except Orleans, Jefferson, and St. Bernard (which were subject to the Metropolitan Police, a state force accountable to the governor); and all members of the militia. He could fill all vacancies in local offices, including those in the potent parish police juries. He could order the arrest of persons anywhere in the state and direct local enforcement officers to execute the warrant, and authorize officers in one parish to aid those in another. On the noninstitutional level Warmoth invaded the floors of the legislature to lobby for his bills and to berate his own followers, and he required undated resignations from some of his appointees. All in all, it was an extraordinary performance in power, and the example most probably impressed a later leader of greater stature than Warmoth.

In 1893 in the north-central parish of Winn there was born a son, the seventh in what would be a family of nine, to Huey P. Long, Sr. The boy was named Huey P. Long, Jr. He grew up in an environment that physically was no different from other areas in rural Louisiana but that possessed a unique historical heritage. Winn was undeniably poor, a parish of small farms, cutover timber lands, and lumber mills. The people had a wry saying that they made a living by taking in each other's washing. The Longs were as well off as the average, perhaps slightly above, the father in 1900 owning 340 acres of land and other property assessed at \$780. Historically Winn had a tradition of dissent not equalled by any other parish. In 1861 the delegate from Winn to the secession convention was one of seventeen members who voted against final passage of the secession ordinance and one of seven who refused to sign it. Although the parish furnished three companies to the Confederate service, most of the inhabitants seem to have

sat the war out, many refusing to fight to save the rich man's slaves and some openly supporting the Union. John M. Long, Huey's grandfather, was not in the Confederate army, and Huey's father professed strong Union sympathies. The old man told a reporter, "Didn't Abraham Lincoln free the niggers and not give the planters a dime? Why shouldn't Huey take the money away from the rich and still leave 'em plenty? . . . Maybe you're surprised to hear talk like that. Well, it was just such talk that my boy was raised under and that I was raised under. My father and my mother favored the Union. Why not? They didn't have slaves. They didn't even have decent land." It is not surprising—but of great significance—that in his political career Huey P. Long never seriously employed the Confederate legend in his speeches. He stuck to economics in an era when most Southern politicians entertained their audiences of rural poor with the magnificent irrelevancy of how their grandpappies had charged up the slopes at Gettysburg.

The parish added to its record of dissent in the farmers' revolt of the 1890's, emerging as the leading center of Populist strength in the state. In the election of 1892 the Populist gubernatorial candidate, a resident of Winnfield, the principal town, swept the parish by a margin of almost five to one, and the Populists won every election in Winn until 1900. The spirit of social protest represented by Populism carried over into a surprising support for Socialism. A strong Socialist party appeared that elected half of the parish officials in 1908 and its slate of municipal officials in Winnfield in 1912. And in the presidential election of the latter year Eugene Debs received almost thirty-six per cent of Winn's popular vote. This was rural Socialism, of course, hardly distinguishable from Populism, but it is significant that so many Winn residents were not afraid to wear a label that was not popular in the rural South. No Long apparently was a member of either the Populist or Socialist movement. In fact, Huey Long, while still a schoolboy, once debated two touring Populist lecturers, upholding the merits of the Democratic party. But obviously Long's whole political philosophy was shaped and conditioned by the tradition of his environment. If his program has to be labeled, it was neo-Populism.

It is not so clear, however, where Long derived his later formula of Share Our Wealth. Most commentators have ascribed its origins to the Populism and Socialism that Long heard discussed in his youth, and the plan does have overtones of both these creeds. Long himself said that he got the idea from the Bible, but the appeal to Holy Writ seems to have been window dressing. Indeed, Huey may have come to the Bible late, although the evidence on this point is contradictory. According to one story, in the state campaign of 1920 a friend quoted to him a verse that could be used to damage an opponent. Huey, much impressed, peeled off a bill and said, "Go over to Hirsch and Lehmen's store and buy me the best damn Bible they've got." Reliable evidence indicates that Long, a keen student of history and thoroughly familiar with the Reconstruction period, drew the inspiration for Share Our Wealth from the experiment of the Freedmen's Bureau and its forty acres and a mule. And it may be that he took another leaf from the lesson of Reconstruction, for when he finally unseated the old political hierarchy in 1928, in erecting his own power structure he would employ, consciously or unconsciously, many of the techniques and devices of Governor Warmoth.

After the overthrow of Reconstruction, the sources of power in the South fell to, or were taken by, the upper income groups, represented roughly by the planters and the new industrial and commercial interests. In every state such an oligarchy dominated the political scene, exercising its power in the Democratic party through the medium of a machine or a combination of factions. Occasionally rebels rose here and there to challenge the existing hierarchies. These are the men we know by the much abused term of demagogue. As W. J. Cash explains them: although in their rise to power they exploited the aspirations of the masses, they did little for the masses when they got power—partly because they were more interested in place than in programs, partly because, although they built their own machines to perpetuate themselves, they were unable, or unwilling, to destroy the old machine, and hence their tenure was never secure.⁶ No dema-

⁶W. J. Cash, *The Mind of the South* (Garden City, N. Y., 1954), 252-53, 255-56.

gogue of this type appeared to defy the existing order in Louisiana. For almost fifty years after Reconstruction the oligarchy ruled serenely, made confident and smug by the knowledge that its network of influence and interest enveloped the entire state.

The Louisiana hierarchy contained the usual elements found in other Southern states and some peculiarly its own. In addition to the familiar planting groups, there were important business interests: lumber, railroads, and sugar. Above all, there was oil; in the 1920's the Standard Oil Company became a major economic and political force in the life of the state. In New Orleans there were shipping interests and gas and electrical utilities. And in the great urban center there was a genuine big city machine, the Old Regulars or the Choctaw Club, closely allied with the business and financial powers. The Old Regular organization was largely the creation of Martin Behrman, long-time mayor and author of the classic statement, "You can make corruption illegal in Louisiana but you can't make it unpopular." The machine performed some of the desirable functions expected of such associations and many of the undesirable ones. In the words of one friendly observer, "The Old Regulars were used to buying out and trading out and swapping out." By means of padded registration rolls, paid up poll tax receipts, and police pressure, the machine could swing the city to any side or candidate. In a gubernatorial election the machine would endorse a candidate with a strong country following in return for a pledge of control over state patronage in the city. The relationship was not, however, as tight or tidy as it sounds; it was almost wholly informal, and no rigid, state-wide machine existed.

Such was the ruling hierarchy, satisfied with things as they were, discreetly corrupt on occasion, devoted to the protection of privilege. It did not even trouble to make the masses feel important by appealing to them for votes, those that could vote; the small towns and the forks of the creeks rarely heard a candidate for governor. The leaders of the oligarchy were singularly blind to the signs of the time. Although the Progressive movement had touched Louisiana, its impact had been light, and what change had occurred had been mild, almost imperceptible. Riley J. Wilson, the hierarchy's candidate for governor in 1928, thought that

Long's proposal to pave the roads was preposterous because it would cost too much money. Nor would the ruling classes accept the inevitability of change even when they saw Long swept into power on a program demanding change. Looking back today, many of them see that they made a fatal error in opposing every idea advanced by Long. But said one dolefully, "There is no reform from within, it comes only by defeat." Others still do not know what happened to them. Old patricians who stood apart from the machine or affected not to see its workings ask, Why should the voters have repudiated men who believed in honest, economical government? They do not know that the masses in any state are not impressed by honesty unless it promises to bring a better life. The Louisiana ruling class is a perfect illustration of an elite inviting destruction by its own myopia. As he well knew, Huey Long was fortunate in his enemies. "It has been my good fortune to have blind men like these in politics," he said. "They cannot see something after it has passed over them, and they have been knocked down by it a half-dozen times."

Before the advent of Long on the Louisiana scene, governors were elected by "leaders," who usually were the sheriffs of the parishes. The candidate who lined up the largest number of influential leaders could make a deal with the city machine and take the office. Abruptly and rudely Long destroyed this pattern. Often in his first campaigns he would invade a parish and denounce the boss. There was design in this. As he explained to one man, the boss had forty per cent of the vote, forty per cent were opposed to him, and twenty per cent were in-between. "I'm going into every parish and cuss out the boss. That gives me forty per cent of the votes to begin with, and I'll hoss trade 'em out of the in-betweens." Whatever the formula, it worked. In the rueful words of one opponent, "Overnight, one might say, the leaders found themselves without followers, and the mob was in control." Long then created his own local organization, the sheriff or leader being his man. "That man was sheriff and leader because Huey wanted him to be," explained one admirer. "He cut out the middleman in politics. He went directly to the people. Sometimes he would appoint two leaders to watch each other, and deal directly with the people. That's a system you can't beat."

If Long had stopped after creating an organization of his own, no matter how effective, he would merely have followed the path of previous politicians of his type. But he did more. As W. J. Cash shrewdly perceived, Long was the first Southern mass leader to set himself, not to bring the established machine to terms, but to overwhelm it and replace it with one of his own.⁷ Long told a former teacher at Tulane University, "That damn political science class of yours with your talk of ideals held back my political career for years. I'm fighting a crooked machine in the Old Regulars and have to fight fire with fire. You have to protect your own damn fools." He did, indeed, face a powerful and implacable opposition. In fact, during Long's entire political career there was hardly a time when he was not under some kind of threat of removal or impeachment. "I have tried for about sixteen years to have it some other way," he once said, "and it has never been any other way, so now I have stopped trying to have it any other way." He was saying that the oligarchy was ruthless and that he would fight it on its own terms. Writers who discuss the so-called demagogues like to detail the methods by which these men supposedly corrupted politics, but they forget that the demagogues only utilized and sometimes improved techniques used for years by the elite and employed particularly against spokesmen of the masses. For instance, in the impeachment proceedings against Long in 1929 the opposition offered huge sums of money for votes to convict. Huey himself charged that Standard Oil brought enough money into Baton Rouge to "burn a wet mule." In addition, the crudest kind of economic pressure was applied. Long retaliated with promises of jobs and favors. Often quoted is Long's remark that he bought legislators like sacks of potatoes. This was made when one legislator who had announced he would vote for conviction switched to Long's side. Asked how he had secured him, Huey replied, "Just the same way they got him. It's just like going to market and getting a sack of potatoes. They got a fixed price. You bought him that way and I bought him the same way."

Of necessity, Long had first to create an organization to pass his program in the legislature. He went into office with a minority of pledged supporters. In the lower chamber he could count on

⁷Cash, *Mind of the South*, 287-88.

only nineteen votes, whereas, as many of his measures had to be cast in the form of constitutional amendments, he needed a two-thirds majority or sixty-seven. Gradually the desired control was built up, but in the frank words of one Long leader, "They all didn't come for free." The basis of the Long machine was patronage. Deliberately, Long as governor extended his power over existing boards and other agencies, and through the creation of new agencies to perform new functions he continually enlarged the patronage at his disposal. Eventually he was able to deprive the opposition of almost all political sustenance, and then he finally brought the Old Regulars to their knees. In the last phase of his career he reached out for more and more power, too much power, pushing laws through the legislature that repeated Warmoth's program of control of local government and election machinery and went even beyond it.

Like countless other politicians before and after him, Long built a powerful machine. But being a supreme realist, he knew that there were certain areas of government that had to be immune from politics. That is, some jobs had to go to men who would not be interfered with by anybody. This was necessary both to insure the proper functioning of government and to preserve the life of the machine. He insisted that appointees to certain positions enjoy complete freedom of decision and action. Said one not altogether friendly observer, "He was smart that way. He knew where to fit men into positions—nonelastic men." When a judge told him that Long followers were trying to influence his decision on a case, Huey told him to disregard the pressure, "Remember that a crooked judge is no credit to Huey Long." To some heads of departments he would say, "The only thing I ask you is not to hire any of my enemies." The federal Resettlement Administration feared that Long would try to politicalize its program, and sent a man to Louisiana to watch him. This official found to his surprise that it was the opposition that demanded the patronage. One day Huey called him in, assured him that he wanted the program to succeed and would not interfere with it. Then, thinking of his enemies, Long added, "The first time I catch you appointing somebody because one of those sons of bitches tells you to, I'll drive you out of Louisiana."

Political machines have to have money, to sustain the strength of the organization and to perform certain welfare functions expected by their followers. This was particularly true in the 1920's and the early 1930's, before the impersonal welfare of the New Deal and later of the states substituted for the services of the machines and hence undermined their power. Long leaders are completely frank in explaining how the machine raised money for campaigns and for other purposes, notably publicity. Because most of the press was in opposition, Long hit on the idea of disseminating his ideas through printed circulars, some 26,000,000 being distributed. During Long's administration the state engaged in a tremendous road building program. The road contractors and contractors on other public works were called on for regular contributions in elections. So also were the distributors of highway machinery, who enjoyed lucrative relations with the state, and the companies that wrote the state's insurance. For obvious reasons, these interests met their assessments. The number of state employees was deliberately maintained at a high level, the jobs being spread around lavishly, and the occupants had to contribute a percentage of their salaries to the machine war chest. Some officials were required to render monthly payments, but in Long's time lower salaried workers were assessed only before elections. In addition, there were approximately a thousand leaders and subleaders who stood ready to supply money for critical needs. As one of these told the writer, "He would send for me and all these other men to come to his room in the Roosevelt, and he would say 'I need \$60,000 to pay the poll taxes,' and we would all shell out and that is how Huey got his money. He didn't have to graft it." Not only do Long leaders frankly detail these financial dealings, they insist passionately that the machine's system of raising money was moral, certainly more moral than the system of the opposition. The opposition, they say, asked for money from the interests under the table and hence was subject to the power of a minority, whereas the Long organization took money openly and hence was free to act for the majority.

And act for the majority the machine did. 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. The record of accomplishment can only be summarized here. In 1928 Louisiana had 296 miles of concrete roads, 35 miles of asphalt roads, 5,728 miles of gravel roads, and three major bridges within the state highway system. By 1935 the state had 2,446 miles of concrete roads, 1,308 miles of asphalt roads, 9,629 miles of gravel roads, and more than forty major bridges within the state highway system. In the field of education, free textbooks were provided (stimulating a twenty per cent jump in public school enrollment), appropriations for higher education were increased, and over 100,000 adult illiterates, of both races, were enrolled in free night schools. Facilities in state hospitals and institutions were enlarged, and the services were modernized and, more important, humanized. The money to pay for this tremendous program came partly from increased taxes, bearing largely on corporate interests, but mostly from bonds, the state debt jumping from \$11,000,000 in 1928 to nearly \$150,000,000 by 1935.⁸ Moreover, the costs were based on sound financial practices, the legislature appropriating no money without collaterally providing the revenues and bond issues being capitalized by taxes. Not the least accomplishment in Long's record was his revitalizing of state politics. He created a new consciousness of politics on the part of the masses. By advancing issues that mattered to the masses and by repealing the poll tax, he stirred voter interest to a height unmatched in any other Southern state, and he left Louisiana with an enduring bifactionalism that has many of the attributes of a two-party system.

The secret of Long's power, in the final analysis, was not in his machine or his political dealings but in his record—he delivered something. One man, trying to put through to the writer the impact of Long on the masses, could say only, "They felt the hand of Huey." But how is his record to be evaluated? In looking at various judgments of Long, we discover again that curious tendency of scholars to hold politicians to an ideal and impossible standard. Thus one writer lists Long's accomplishments

⁸The size of the debt is differently computed, depending on what items are included. Long claimed that he was not responsible for over \$42,000,000 in bonds issued against the Port of New Orleans under previous governors and sold as state obligations. The maturities fell due in his administration.

and concedes them to be impressive, but then says, aha, they amount to nothing because he didn't touch the problem of sharecropping and tenantry.⁹ Another, forgetting that Long acted in a largely rural state, cries, yes, but he did little for labor.¹⁰ Such complaints are like saying, why didn't Franklin Roosevelt nationalize the banks? The answer to such queries is, of course, that seemingly ideal solutions may not be politically possible or feasible at a given moment. The politician does what he can, not what he should do. If he acted otherwise, he would cease to be a politician and the democratic system would cease to exist.

Was Huey Long a dictator? The term was thrown at him freely in the 1930's by a generation impressed with the example of the Fascist leaders in Europe, and it has passed into many of the books. The trouble with the dictator label is that it has a European connotation and does not fit the American scene. Long was an American boss, a very powerful and sometimes ruthless one, who in his last phase had too much power. He probably knew that this was so, because he repeatedly told the men who would be his successors that they could not wield his authority. But he was never more than a boss. As one of his associates shrewdly put it, "Huey wouldn't have acted as a dictator on any issue that might have alienated the majority of the voters."

Certainly he had none of the qualities we associate with the Fascist leader. Not even his worst enemies accused him of having religious or racial prejudices. Once Dr. Hiram Evans of the Klan denounced him as un-American and threatened to campaign against him in Louisiana. Long came into the press gallery at the state senate and said he wanted to issue a statement: "Quote me as saying that that Imperial bastard will never set foot in Louisiana, and that when I call him a son of a bitch I am not using profanity, but am referring to the circumstances of his birth." His knowledge of the philosophy of European dictators was only perfunctory, although his evaluation of them was reasonably accurate. Asked if he saw any similarity between himself and Hitler, he said, "Don't compare me to that so-and-so. Anybody

⁹Cash, *Mind of the South*, 289.

¹⁰Allan P. Sindler, *Huey Long's Louisiana* (Baltimore, 1956), 105.

that lets his public policies be mixed up with religious prejudice is a plain God-damned fool." The symbols of Fascism excited in him only an amused scorn. Discussing the NRA in the Senate, he said, "However, Mr. President, I hope that if we give it the sign of the Fascisti, known as the 'blue eagle,' or the 'double eagle,' or whatever they call it, we will at least let the eagle have a chance to live It is all right that the Germans have the Fascist sign in the form of a swastika; it is all right that the Mussolinis . . . in Italy have their sign in the form of a black shirt, and it may have been all right that the Fascisti in America have their emblem in the form of a double eagle, but at least we ought to have given that emblem the right to have lived and to have thrived. I really believe, Mr. President, that we almost condemned that eagle to death in advance when we published [it] looking squarely into the countenance of . . . Hugh S. Johnson"

Political observers of the 1930's were led to level the dictatorship charge by Long's actions when as United States Senator but still boss of the state he returned to Louisiana to jam laws through the legislature. Special session after special session was called, and Long would dominate committee hearings and storm onto the floor of either house to shout at his followers. On one occasion forty-four bills were passed in twenty-two minutes. In seven special sessions between August 1934 and September 1935, a total of 463 bills was enacted. Some bills started out as one thing in one house and became something entirely different in the other. Thus a House measure to codify existing license laws turned at the last minute in the Senate into a bill to tax Standard Oil, much to the consternation of the Standard lobbyists, who had innocently gone home.

But the observers who were horrified at this seeming travesty of the legislative process missed some things. For one, the most important bills had previously been explained in detail by Long in a closed caucus of his supporters. For another, many measures were passed as constitutional amendments and had to be submitted to a popular vote. Fourteen amendments adopted in one special session were ratified by the voters by a margin of seven to one. Still, one wonders if Long's methods comported with the

spirit of democratic government. He apparently wondered too. "They say they don't like my methods," he said once. "Well, I don't like them either . . . I'd much rather get up before a legislature and say 'Now this is a good law; it's for the benefit of the people, and I'd like for you to vote for it in the interest of the public welfare.' Only I know that laws ain't made that way. You've got to fight fire with fire." But in the later stages of his career he did not have to employ fire. He still faced an unrelenting opposition, it is true, but he had it well in hand. Having been forced to overthrow the oligarchy by ruthless methods, he continued to use the same methods after his victory was assured. Either he feared the recuperative genius of the oligarchy or he had become too fascinated with the exercise of sheer power to give it up. Undoubtedly he had been hardened by the constant attempts of the opposition to destroy him, especially by the try at impeachment. There is some kind of personal and sectional tragedy in the Long story. He might have been, lamented one critic, such a leader as the South had never had. But it was not entirely his fault that he did not become Dixie's peerless Progressive. Perhaps the lesson of Long is that if in a democracy needed changes are denied too long by an interested minority, the changes, when they come, will come with a measure of repression and revenge. And perhaps the gravest indictment that can be made of Southern politics in recent times is that the urge for reform had to be accomplished by pressures that left in leaders like Long a degree of cynicism about the democratic process.

Was Huey Long, then, a demagogue? Here again we encounter semantic difficulties. The Greeks gave us the term, and we have accepted their definition. The demagogue was "a man of loose tongue, intemperate, trusting to tumult, leading the populace to mischief with empty words." He was "foul-mouthed, . . . a low mean fellow." Implicit in Greek thinking about the subject was the assumption that in politics the masterful leader manipulated the mindless mass with the mere turbulence of his rhetoric. We know that for the American scene, at least, this concept has little validity, yet we permit it to affect our judgments of American politicians. Scholars particularly have been influenced by the notion that violent language is the peculiar mark of the dema-

gogue. They seem to think that popular leaders have risen to power simply because they could excite and entertain the voters. Certainly Huey Long was a master in the use of scathing invective and also of effective satire, as witness his elucidation of the possible meanings of NRA: National Racketeering Association, National Ruin Administration, Nuts Running America, or Never Roosevelt Again; or his application of damaging and durable nicknames to his aristocratic Louisiana foes: "Kinky" Howard, "Liverwurst" Nicholson, "Shinola" Phelps, "Turkeyhead" Walmsley, "Feather Duster" Ransdell, and "Whistle Britches" Rightor. But his skill with words was only one of several factors that explain his success, and a minor one at that. And only a cursory reading of the literature of Louisiana politics will reveal that extreme language was not a Long patent. Among the terms applied to Long—by the best people—were: "an ultra Socialist" whose views went "beyond Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky," "an impeached thief and scoundrel," "a political freak, cringing coward, and monumental liar," a man with "the face of a clown, the heart of a petty larceny burglar, and the disposition of a tyrant."

Long himself was deeply interested in the application of the term of demagogue and perceptively aware of its limitations. In one especially realistic analysis he said, "There are all kinds of demagogues. Some deceive the people in the interests of the lords and masters of creation, the Rockefellers and the Morgans. Some of them deceive the people in their own interest. I would describe a demagogue as a politician who don't keep his promises." On that basis he denied that he deserved the label. But on another occasion, changing the definition, he accepted it. Referring to his program, he said: "I shall have to admit, it is a demagoguery, because in the old Greek parlance that meant the language that was acceptable to the majority. That is not meant as a derogatory term, and I do not take it as such, because when I advocated free school books in Louisiana that was termed demagoguery; when I advocated free bridges instead of toll bridges it was called demagoguery; and when I advocated paved highways instead of dirt roads that likewise was called demagoguery."

Let us dispense with the word demagogue in dealing with men like Long and employ instead a term suggested by Eric Hoffer,

mass leader. As listed by Hoffer, the principal qualities required in a mass leader are—and Huey Long had all of them—audacity, an iron will, faith in his cause or in himself, unbounded brazenness, and a capacity for hatred, without which he may be deflected from his goal.¹¹ To these we may add others. The mass leader must have an abnormal and combative energy. Long was, as Henry Adams said of Theodore Roosevelt, “pure act.” The mass leader must know which enemies he should destroy and which ones he should maintain as symbols of the continuing evil he fights against. “Corporations are the finest enemies in the world,” Long once remarked. “You got to know how to handle them.” After he had broken the power of Mayor Walmsley in New Orleans, an associate asked why he simply did not get rid of Walmsley. “He said, ‘No, that would be bad psychology. You always leave a figurehead for your boys to fight against. If you don’t, they start fighting against themselves. Walmsley is a perfect target for us to fight. He’s impotent and can’t do us any harm.’”

The quality above all others that the mass leader must have is audacity—a boundless self-confidence which lets him give full rein to his ideas, a brazen courage which enables him to disregard conventionality and consistency, and a daring imagination which equips him to ignore existing rules and create his own. Examples of Long’s audacity are too numerous to be considered here, but a few must be cited. During one of the several financial crises of the early 1930’s a run developed on the New Orleans banks, threatening a general collapse. The problem was to close the banks over a weekend until money could be secured from the RFC. Aides feverishly sought for a holiday that could serve as an excuse. Huey easily supplied one. A proclamation by the governor announced that the banks would be closed because, Whereas, on this date Woodrow Wilson severed diplomatic relations with Germany

The triumphant climax of Long’s many savage jousts with Standard Oil came when the legislature, at his bidding, enacted a tax of five cents a barrel on refined oil. From the viewpoint of the Standard Oil this was bad enough, but worse was to come. Another legislature, also at Long’s bidding, authorized the gov-

¹¹Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer* (New York, 1951), 111-14, 153.

ernor to suspend any portion of the tax. The suspension would come, of course, only if the Standard conformed to certain conditions, and the full tax could be reapplied at any time. It was a completely effective device to keep the great corporation in line. At the height of the controversy over the tax measure the company sent an emissary, a close friend of Long's, to ask him to desist. Long listened to this man but then remarked that he was not particularly interested in the tax anymore. "Pete, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Tell the Standard Oil to get the hell out of Louisiana and I'll expropriate that plant and the legislature will appropriate enough money to buy it and we'll operate it. And from the funds the first year we will educate the top boy and girl in every high school in the state at LSU free, and as the profits begin to grow we will educate the second and third ones and so on It will take a constitutional amendment but the people will vote for it when I tell them that we will use that money to educate the boys and girls of Louisiana free from the profits." The emissary departed hastily.

It is possible that we have been too apologetic about and too patronizing toward all the Southern demagogues. Some of them were hopelessly confused and some were merely clowns. Some did nothing to control the interests they attacked and some sold out to those interests. But the best of them tried to do something for their people. Throw out the crudities they had to employ to arouse a submerged electorate and the race baiting, and these men are the Norrises, the La Follettes, and the Borahs of another section. Even such an object of hatred to the righteous as Theodore Bilbo meets the test for admission to the liberal heaven, a straight New Deal voting record in the Senate. Indeed, many of the Southern demagogues, in their genuine concern for the welfare of the masses, in their essential respect for the democratic system, conform in their own peculiar fashion to Eric Hoffer's picture of the good mass leader—the leader who does not hesitate to "harness men's hungers and fears" to weld a following in the service of a cause but who, because of his faith in humanity, does not attempt to use the frustrations of men to build a brave new theoretical world.¹² Or, to shift to another formula, many of the

¹²Hoffer, *True Believer*, 147-48.

demagogues conform, again in their own manner, to Jacques Maritain's image of the prophet leader, whose main mission is "to *awaken* the people, to awaken them to something better than everyone's daily business, to the sense of a supra-individual task to be performed."¹³ Certain it is that without the driving force supplied by the demagogues a static society would not have been renovated as quickly—or as painlessly—as it was.

One night in Long's hotel room in New Orleans, while he seemingly dozed on the bed, a group of visiting correspondents fell to analyzing his political personality. Finally arousing himself, he said, "Oh, hell, say that I'm *sui generis* and let it go at that." In a class by himself he certainly was. He stands without a rival as the greatest of Southern mass leaders. 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. There is something wrong here, he said, and we can fix it up ourselves. Bluntly, forcibly, even crudely, he injected an element of realism into Southern politics. Not without reason did Gerald Johnson, who disliked him, say that Huey Long was the first Southerner since Calhoun to have an original idea, the first to extend the boundaries of political thought.¹⁴ Above all, he gave the Southern masses hope. He did some foolish things and some wrong things. He said some things that he should not have said and some that he did not believe. But this we may be certain he meant: "Nevertheless my voice will be the same as it has been. Patronage will not change it. Fear will not change it. Persecution will not change it. It cannot be changed while people suffer. The only way it can be changed is to make the lives of these people decent and respectable."

¹³Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago, 1951), 141.

¹⁴Gerald W. Johnson, "Live Demagogue, or Dead Gentleman," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XII (January 1936), 9.