

an elite but by fragmentation. There was no statewide machine; in fact there was no statewide political organization. The New Orleans machine, rather than dominating state politics, found it difficult to elect a governor. In fact, any South Louisiana politician, especially a Catholic, faced an uphill struggle in running for governor. It is true that many rural Louisianans paid close attention to the machine's choice of candidates: Whoever the machine was for, they were against.

Long dominated Louisiana as no politician before or since. He injected a dose of adrenaline into state politics and Louisiana has been running on adrenaline ever since. Of his France, Louis XIV is supposed to have said, "L'etat, c'est moi." Huey Long might have said the same thing about his Louisiana.

Huey Pierce Long and Historical Speculation

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ALL ADULT LOUISIANANS and most Americans know the name of Huey Long. Historian Glen Jeansonne has noted: "So pervasive is the influence of 'Longism' that no Louisianan can be indifferent about it." Few scholars doubt that the Kingfish was the most significant politician Louisiana has ever produced. There is, however, no clear consensus about Huey Long's place in history.

During his remarkably brief political career, Long evoked a multitude of descriptions. Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky called him "the smartest lunatic" he ever met. New Dealer Raymond Moley said that he was "no backwoods buffoon." Gerald L. K. Smith, perhaps his most loyal disciple, believed that Long was a "superman." Journalist Raymond Gram Swing contended that the Kingfish was a forerunner of American fascism. One gentleman from Kansas, upon his return from Germany, indeed called Adolph Hitler "a kind of Teutonic Huey Long." Personally detesting such descriptions, Long once said emphatically: "Don't compare me to that so-and-so. Anybody that [sic] lets his public policies be mixed up with religious prejudice is a plain God-damned fool." Hodding Carter, one of Long's most articulate opponents, nonetheless deemed him a dictator. In 1932, John Kingston Fineran called him a "Tinpot Napoleon." Many including the *New York Times* called the Kingfish a dema-

gogue. William Langer of North Dakota, one of Long's few close friends in the United States Senate, however, called the Louisianan "that fearless, dauntless, unmatched champion of the common people." President Franklin D. Roosevelt, on the other hand, told Rexford Tugwell that Long was "one of the two most dangerous men in America" (the other was the legendary General Douglas MacArthur). Some contended that the Louisiana Kingfish was a modern populist. Others said that Long was "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 once dismissed these conflicting views with the cryptic observation that he was *sui generis*, unique unto himself.

Since Long's death, historians, political scientists, journalists and other thoughtful observers have continued the speculations and the descriptions. In 1935, biographer Forrest Davis depicted Long as a twentieth-century backwoods hero like Daniel Boone or Davy Crockett. In 1938, however, Thomas O. Harris revived the term "dictator." In 1941, Harnett Kane subtitled his study of Long and the Louisiana scandals "The American Rehearsal for Dictatorship." Mississippian Will Percy maintained that "[Huey Long] was... a moral idiot of genius." Historian Donald McCoy placed Long among "God's angry men" of the Depression era. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., called him the "Messiah of the Rednecks." Political scientist V. O. Key compared Long to "a South American dictator." Key's chapter on the Pelican state in his magnum opus *Southern Politics in State and Nation* is significantly entitled "Louisiana: The Seamy Side of Democracy." In 1956, political scientist Allan P. Sindler judiciously weighed Long's "brazen dictatorship" with his record of "substantial accomplishment."

Sindler's balanced, though critical, evaluation of the Kingfish prevailed until the publication of T. Harry Williams's *Huey Long* in 1969. The Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian, unlike most scholarly observers, viewed Long in a positive light. Williams argued that the word "demagogue" was not appropriate to Long and preferred to use philosopher Eric Hoffer's term "mass leader" in his description of the Louisiana politician. He further applauded the Kingfish for introducing realism to the moonlight-and-magnolia world of southern politics. Long, according to Williams, fought "fire with fire" in Louisiana and avoided the race-baiting tactics that many of his southern contemporaries employed. Columbia University historian Alan Brinkley, accepting the Williams thesis, added that Long's popular acclaim derived from his role as a spokesman for America's "forgotten people," those men and women who believed that their ability

to control their own destiny was rapidly eroding in the labyrinth of modern industrial society.

In 1991, however, the late William Ivy Hair produced a decidedly dark view of the Kingfish that portrayed the Louisiana politician as an ambitious, insincere demagogue who produced little that was good and nothing that was not calculated to advance his own career. Glen Jeansonne, T. Harry Williams's most vitriolic critic, in his biography of Gerald L. K. Smith, the evangelical coordinator of Long's "Share-Our-Wealth" movement, and in his own biography of Long continues this theme of overwhelming ambition and avarice. With these new biographies, the historical interpretation of the Louisiana leader has come full circle.

I can presently offer no resolution to this continuing scholarly debate, but I do have an idea or two of my own. Nineteen years ago, I wrote these words about Huey Long in the first chapter of my study of New Orleans Mayor deLesseps Morrison: "Long was a captivating campaigner who charmed and disarmed with his promises and buffoonery, but beneath the façade was an ambitious politician who was brilliant and ruthless. Long knew the value of power and he did not hesitate to use it." I further stated that Long's life was "divided between an inordinate lust for power and a passionate desire to lift the people from the primordial mud." This viewpoint still makes the most sense to me.

There is, however, a fascination about Huey Long's place in history which goes beyond the good and ill that he achieved during his lifetime. Because Long was cut down at the age of forty-two, in his prime, a strong sense of unfulfilled destiny pervades his memory. Diverging perspectives on what might have been continue to attract scholarly and popular interest to the Kingfish.

I first encountered one version of this phenomenon when I was a youngster growing up in New Orleans. It was indeed a major part of my introduction to Huey Long as well as one of the earliest things that I learned from my father. During political campaigns, my father and often my uncle would watch the various candidates perform on TV, shake their heads and sometimes say to each other or to me, "Boy, if Huey Long were alive today, things would be a lot different." The conversation would frequently move into a discussion of Huey's intellect, his antics, his willingness to take on the big corporations like Standard Oil and the political bosses like "Turkey Head" Walmsley, even President Roosevelt. My father and my uncle, like many working class Louisianans, spoke of Huey Long with admiration and a fair amount of reverence. They believed in his promises.

I doubt if they ever belonged to the "Share-Our-Wealth" Club, but they were generally familiar with the provisions of the program. Years

later, I found a copy of *My First Days in the White House* in our attic. I read it then and I heartily recommend it now. Dictated by the Kingfish, the text was revised by Earle Christenberry and political reporter Ray Daniell of the *New York Times*. The book, an adventure in speculative fiction, was designed to be a campaign tool for 1936. It is Huey Long at his brazen best. The book begins with Long's election to the presidency and proceeds with the implementation of his solution to the problems of the Depression, the "Share-Our-Wealth" program. The Kingfish appoints Herbert Hoover and FDR to his cabinet, convinces Henry Ford, John D. Rockefeller and the other so-called "money masters" to accept the idea of limited fortunes and recruits the Mayo brothers to end disease in America. Success follows success. Unemployment ends; wealth is redistributed. At the conclusion, the Kingfish embarks on a national tour to ask the people what else he can do. At his first stop, a voice from the crowd responds to Huey's query: "Nothing! We have just found out how bad [sic] we needed you for President all the time!"

For many Americans who believed that *My First Days in the White House* was the Kingfish's destiny, his assassination was a profound tragedy. For others who also believed that the White House was in Long's future, his death was a blessing and Dr. Carl Austin Weiss was a martyr to the cause of liberty. Cecil Morgan, one of Long's strongest opponents, recalled "a relaxation and relief from tension on the faces of many...[foes and followers alike] the day after Huey died." Morgan added, "Literally thousands prayed for his death." These people, too, believed that Long was on his way to the presidency. To their minds, however, Huey's intended path to the White House was probably more cynical and cunning than the fictionalized triumph of *My First Days*.

Many believed that Long's plan rested on a callous third-party race for the presidency in 1936. The Kingfish did not expect to win, but he did hope to divert enough votes away from President Roosevelt to allow the Republican nominee to win the election. With a conservative Republican in the White House and Roosevelt out of the picture, the Depression would continue for four additional years. In 1940, conditions would permit Long to return to the Democratic fold, seize the party's presidential nomination and sweep into the nation's highest office. In 1936, Gerald L. K. Smith did actually support a weak third-party candidate for the presidency, but his effort was virtually meaningless. Huey Long, a magnificent campaigner whose clever electoral tactics propelled silent Hattie Caraway into the United States Senate would, of course, have been a formidable candidate. Perhaps Huey could have diverted those votes from Roosevelt. The cost of this scheme, however, was a hefty one: four more years of Depression, four more years of unemployment, four more

years of hunger, four more years of personal hardship for millions of Americans. Huey's foes certainly thought that he would be willing to pay this price for greater personal power. They further expected that Long in office would create an America that would resemble the nation in Sinclair Lewis's frightening novel *It Can't Happen Here*, a totalitarian state where personal and institutional freedoms became things of the past. It is not surprising that Harnett Kane and Hodding Carter, two leading critics of Longism, used the term "Dictatorship" in their descriptions of the Long experience in Louisiana.

These two divergent views of Huey Long's future America, one a utopian fantasy, the other an oppressive nightmare, nonetheless share one major area of agreement. Both accept the ability of Huey Long to develop a broader political base and ultimately to achieve the presidency. This assumption presents no serious problem except that no one will ever know. Carl Austin Weiss ended the Kingfish's hopes and plans when he shot Long at the state capitol.

There is, however, another possible interpretation of Huey's potential fate. I would now like to suggest to you that Huey Long's future only looked bright because he did not have to live it. His assassination, like the deaths of Abraham Lincoln and John Fitzgerald Kennedy, perhaps saved the Kingfish from a future of political defeats and conceivably even imprisonment. Scholars have certainly raised similar questions about Lincoln and Kennedy. John Wilkes Booth's dastardly act eliminated a great American life, but it also prevented Lincoln from facing the trials of Reconstruction, a difficult process that ruined the careers of Andrew Johnson and U. S. Grant. John F. Kennedy admittedly met a tragic fate in Dallas, but he escaped the traumas that Vietnam bestowed upon his successors Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

From a cold historical standpoint, the Kingfish may have been lucky. Many of Long's contemporaries maintained that the federal government was on the verge of indicting Long on income tax charges. The Federal Bureau of Investigation definitely had him under investigation. At the time of his death, his FBI file was already several inches thick. Several of his closest friends, to be sure, were convicted in federal courts. I might add that, despite the predilection of Louisiana politicians for criminal indictments, no one has ever argued that several years in the Atlanta penitentiary would be conducive to Long's future political advancement. As Louisianans have discovered in the case of a more recent governor, a federal indictment is still a significant political hindrance.

If, however, Long had managed to evade the scandals that befell his aides, there was no guarantee that he would have reached the presidency. Such speculation includes an extremely large assumption. This assump-

tion is that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, one of the foremost political minds of the twentieth century, would idly stand aside and allow it to happen. Roosevelt showed no such inclinations. Even before Huey Long's death, FDR had already taken action to "steal Long's thunder." This action took the form of the Second New Deal, a series of welfare-oriented programs that included social security, the Wagner labor act and later the Wagner housing act, legislation designed to undermine the "Share-Our-Wealth" promises. Roosevelt also had the power of the presidency at his disposal as well as control of the Democratic party. He did not intend to relinquish his high office for a seat in Huey Long's cabinet.

If we accept the potential success of Long's plan to eliminate Roosevelt through the election of a Republican in 1936, however, we must recognize another enormous obstacle to Long's nomination and election in 1940. That obstacle was the world situation after Hitler invaded Poland in 1939. By 1940 World War II was underway. That year the key issue of the presidential campaign was foreign policy, an issue that Huey Long was ill prepared to handle. Long throughout his political career had focused on domestic issues. His closest friends in the Senate were William Borah and William Langer, both leading isolationists. In *My First Days in the White House*, Borah was indeed the fictional Kingfish's choice for secretary of state. Huey Long therefore was a very unlikely candidate for a presidential bid from either party in 1940. No matter his political skills, no matter the cleverness of his schemes, the times and the odds were against him.

That brings me back to my father's musings about the unrealized destiny of the Kingfish. If Long had lived, things surely would have been different, but there is no way we can determine whether they would have been better or worse. There is, furthermore, no way to determine if Long would have prospered or faltered. Recognition of this reality raises one of the most important lessons of historical interpretation. One must concentrate on what actually did happen. Historians must evaluate the Kingfish on the basis solely of his accomplishments and his legacy to Louisiana, not what he may or may not have done had he lived. My personal views on Huey Long's place in history echo those of Harnett Kane who wrote in 1941: "He left the state with gains that will advantage it for generations to come; and with a heritage from which it will suffer for that same period." Long did more good and more evil than anyone else in the Louisiana past. It was, however, highly unlikely that the Kingfish would have ever transcended the political confines of the Pelican State.

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Notes

1. The introductory biographical sketch was written by Glen Jeansonne.
2. The bibliography of writings about Long was prepared by Edward F. Haas.