

The Enigma of Huey Long: An Essay Review

By HUGH DAVIS GRAHAM

ROBERT PENN WARREN HAS CONSISTENTLY IF UNCONVINCINGLY denied that Willie Stark, his protagonist in *All the King's Men*, was consciously modeled after Huey Long. Yet the clear implication of that popularly accepted analogy is that Long, like Stark, sought to achieve noble ends through sordid means and was in the end possessed by the evil and destroyed by it.

Most chroniclers of the short and explosive career of Huey Pierce Long have implicitly embraced this formula and its attendant moral indictment. During Long's public life the preponderance both of conservative and liberal journalists condemned him as a dangerous radical. Of the six previously published journalistic biographies of Huey, two were written by Long associates, and the assessments of the remaining four range from fearful criticism to vituperation. In *The Politics of Upheaval*, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., painted Huey darkly as the "messiah of the rednecks," an irresponsible demagogue threatening Roosevelt's New Deal.¹ In *Southern Politics*, V. O. Key, Jr., saw the Kingfish as representing "the seamy side of democracy."² Key viewed Long's major political contribution as both inadvertent and ironical: contemptuous as he was of party loyalty and the two-party system, Huey's legacy endowed Louisiana's Democratic politics with an enduring bifactionalism that functionally approximated the two-party system. In *Huey Long's Louisiana*, Allan Sindler explained Huey as an almost predetermined product and political reflection of his depressed environment, and in his conclusion Sindler invoked a plague on both the houses of the Longs and the anti-Longs.³

Among major historians, only T. Harry Williams of Louisiana

¹ Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston, 1960).

² Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York, 1949).

³ Sindler, *Huey Long's Louisiana: State Politics, 1920-1952* (Baltimore, 1956).

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State University has, in a series of addresses and articles beginning in the late 1950s, consistently assessed Huey and his legacy with a measure of empathic warmth. Now we have Williams's long-awaited scholarly biography.⁴ It is at once methodologically pathbreaking in its impressive research, written in straightforward and lean if not elegant prose, and, in a fair- and even tough-minded fashion, consistently sympathetic in its interpretation. A massive and sobering study in power, Cashian hell-of-a-fellow politics, and southern hair-trigger violence, it is also frequently hilarious.

Huey Long is largely an exercise in oral history. This is partly because as far as we know Huey left no diary or customary body of manuscript evidence. Politicians, for whom Professor Williams professes a warm respect, are understandably loath to commit their intrigues to paper, and this traditional occupational inhibition has been vastly reinforced by the electronic age. So Williams, inspired by his work with the Columbia oral history project in the early 1950s, spent over a decade tape recording interviews with 295 knowledgeable contemporaries of Huey. His citations acknowledge these sources where he can, although they are for understandable reasons replete with references to "confidential communication(s)," although we are assured that these transcripts will be available at the LSU Library when their time-seals expire. Unfortunately, Earl K. Long was unwilling to be interviewed, although Williams gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Russell B. Long in providing access to numerous Long relatives and associates who might otherwise have remained silent. Also unfortunate for the author was the recent discovery in the old LSU library building of several additional file cabinets of Long papers—after a dozen years of research and when the biography was written and rolling off the presses. Apparently, the new evidence was supportive in a minor way and was not crucial, but such is the origin of professorial coronaries.⁵ A minor technical complaint is that no map of Louisiana is provided, although the twenty pages of illustrations are welcome reminders both of how rapidly styles of life change and how rapidly styles of dress come full circle.

Inevitably, a bizarre web of mythology has grown to surround

⁴ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1969. Pp. xiv, 884. \$12.50.).

⁵ See T. Harry Williams and John Milton Price, "The Huey P. Long Papers at Louisiana State University," in this issue of the *Journal*, 256-61.

and obscure the meaning of Huey's controversial odyssey. Williams is able to puncture a few myths—some deliberately nurtured by Huey, others spun by his enemies—with relative certitude: Huey was not raised in poverty; his dissembling pretensions to rustic simplicity and even buffoonery disguised an electric mind capable of almost total recall; he did not complete Tulane's three-year law course in one year; the rain did not doom his first gubernatorial race in 1924; there were two Round Robins, not one, in his fight against impeachment; he neither bankrupted Louisiana nor richly lined his own pockets from the spoils; he was not shot by one of his bodyguards; and no conspiracy dispatched Dr. Carl A. Weiss, Jr., to gun Huey down.

Other tenacious myths do not yield so conclusively to empirical analysis because the evidence—predominantly testimony—is contradictory and often highly personal. These include the notions that Huey absorbed his Populistic ideology from maverick state senator S. J. Harper, that his impeachment fundamentally soured his idealism, and that Alice Lee Grosjean was his mistress. Similarly, it has been alleged that Huey did not compile *Constitutions of the State of Louisiana*, a book that earned him an honorary doctor of laws degree from Loyola University, and that he was not primarily responsible for writing *My First Days in the White House*, an impish campaign tract which was published posthumously in 1935. Academic critics have been particularly attuned to the allegation that Long's theory of administration, as reflected in his dealings with Louisiana State University and Charity Hospital, was excessively personal and destructive of academic freedom. At the broadest level of damaging generalization, Huey has been accused of being a physical coward, indifferent toward and even openly contemptuous of his family and his lieutenants, lustful of vengeance, and utterly power mad.

In weighing such indictments Williams customarily reconstructs first the anti-Long case, then the pro-Long defense, and concludes with a logical assessment of how Huey was likely to have thought and behaved in light of his dominant inner drives. And here we come to the crux of Williams's interpretation. He regards Huey's neo-Populistic sympathy for the poor as both plausible and genuine, and he has sprinkled the narrative with redeeming evidence of Huey's impulsive generosity. But Williams acknowledges a "curious duality" within Long that realis-

tically linked a desire for power to his idealistic goals. It was a dualism that invited confusion of ends and means and erosion or obscurement of the former in pursuit of the latter. "He wanted to do good, but for that he had to have power. So he took power and then to do more good seized still more power, and finally the means and the end became so entwined in his mind that he could not distinguish between them, could not tell whether he wanted power as a method or for its own sake. He gave increasing attention to building his power structure, and as he built it, he did strange, ruthless, and cynical things."⁶

It is a tribute to Williams that he left the warts intact, for they were abundant. As a child, even as an infant, Huey is variously recalled by his contemporaries as being brash, bossy, ornery, audacious, egocentric, arrogant; young Huey is recalled as a showoff, a smart aleck, a pest—although, to be sure, he was admittedly bright and bursting with energy and curiosity. Williams attempts no systematic psychoanalytical assessment of Huey, although he does observe that later, especially during crises in his political career, Huey's mood occasionally partook of "something savage and frenzied; it was almost manic," and still later that he "alternated between moods of abnormal elation and depression."⁷ Late in his life he was increasingly haunted by a phobia that time was running out, that assassins lurked ubiquitously.

What made Huey run so fast and so desperately? Budd Schulberg ascribed the fictional Sammy Glick's frenetic gait to inner pressures generated by his early ghetto environment. But if Huey's social sympathies were environmentally conditioned by the chronic depression of Winn Parish and its abiding hospitality to Populists, Socialists, even Wobblies, Huey's vaunted ambition seems almost genetic in origin: he emerges from the womb in full stride, hell-bent for the Presidency.

In his late teens Huey confidently described to his bride, Rose, his plan to advance from a lesser state office to the governorship, then to the Senate, and on to the White House. By 1936, just prior to his assassination, Senator Long apparently intended to run either himself or, more probably, another progressive on a third-party Share Our Wealth ticket in hopes of splitting the Democratic vote and throwing the election to the Republicans. After four years of inept Republican rule, he ap-

⁶ Williams, *Huey Long*, 751.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 345, 660.

pears callously to have calculated, the White House would be waiting for Huey. We will never know how close he came to the top, but the aggressive stump methods he employed in his mercurial ascent have led him to be classed, especially by his conservative critics, not as *sui generis* but as another vulgar southern demagogue, but one more dangerous because he was more effective.

Williams quarrels with this classification and its pejorative implications on three counts. First, unlike Tillman and Blease, Vardaman and Bilbo, the late (and, one increasingly suspects, the real) Watson and Talmadge, Huey conducted his flamboyant campaigns on what were essentially class appeals focused on realistic questions of economic interest rather than the xenophobic nigger- and Yankee-baiting so common to the South's demagogic breed. Williams concedes that Huey's racial views differed little from that of the common southern white, and he documents several occasions on which Huey openly appealed to racial animosities. But his biography demonstrates that such lapses from Long's customary realism were incidental and ephemeral.

Second, although Williams obviously honors the power of great political leadership in conditioning human events, he concurs that powerful socioeconomic determinants had produced in Louisiana a uniquely explosive potential that Huey artfully tapped. Louisiana's impoverished masses had been crushed by defeat in war, abandoned by an evanescent Reconstruction, mired in tenancy and peonage, crippled by unmatched illiteracy, outgeneraled by Bourbon politicians, divided not only black against white but Catholic south against Protestant north. Their aspirations were effectively thwarted by a powerful coalition of old planter elite, newer commercial and corporate interests, and the uniquely potent Choctaw machine in New Orleans. The Populist revolt failed to produce an effective leadership and movement in Louisiana, and progressivism came late and timidly in "good government" clothing. Hence, the regnant conservatives who had so long and indifferently ground the faces of the poor reaped the whirlwind; they must share in the burden of guilt for Huey's excesses.

Finally, unlike the other southern demagogues, Huey had triumphed, had refused to sell out, had indeed crushed his opponents, and had fundamentally transformed his domain. He transformed it into a more equitable society, and in the process he

also transformed it into a dictatorship without parallel in American history. Especially during those seven frenzied special sessions of the legislature summoned so imperiously by Senator Long between August 1934 and September 1935, Huey railroaded through a brace of "power laws, blunt, blatant, and unashamed," and thereby retained the paraphernalia of constitutional government while perverting its substance.⁸ The spectacle was shocking; even Huey's conscience was apparently troubled, but not enough to stay his hand. Alarmed contemporary journalists, who were hypersensitive to the rise of Hitler and Mussolini in Europe, concluded that Huey was the forerunner of American fascism. Williams dismisses these understandable but inappropriate European analogies here as he has elsewhere before and reasserts his thesis that Huey's meaning is most closely approximated by Eric Hoffer's concept of the mass leader.

Williams's important biography will doubtless fail to resolve the interminable debate over the meaning of the enigmatic Kingfish, a debate which for the most part has been lamentably couched in such rigid and unenlightening dichotomies as whether Huey was a demagogue *or* a democrat, a fascist *or* a Karl Marx of the hillbillies, a secular messiah *or* a scoundrel. *Huey Long* will fail to resolve this familiar debate partly because Williams has been so true to his man. Liberals can find in its pages abundant testimony to support their fears that radicalism inevitably brings the stark specter of Stalinism. Conservatives will find evidence that Long cynically pandered to the ignorant masses and debauched republican due process with Populist democracy; their lament is as old as Juvenal's despairing cry that the people desire only two things: bread and circuses.

But hopefully, the wide discussion that Williams's thorough reconstruction of Long's spectacular career should raise will be addressed to broader, harder, and more socially revealing questions. What does it tell us of the weaknesses and possible strengths of American political thought that Long's contemporaries could not agree whether he should be labeled with a leftist term like radical democrat or a rightist term like fascist? And why have the politics of the left and right paradoxically been so closely associated in the rural South?

Long's economic radicalism was clearly of a leftist, equalitarian variety, and in this regard his career raises another compelling question: Why has radical left-wing politics had such a

⁸ *Ibid.*, 728.

hard road in America, and especially in the impoverished South? Consider the toll these heavy odds extracted from Huey Long. In order to overcome the almost unanimous opposition of the conservative mass media, Long had to establish his own newspapers and circular system. In order to overcome the crushing apathy of the lower classes, Long had to act a clown. In order to combat the massive financial advantages of the entrenched conservatives, Long had to establish a system of involuntary "deducts" from the paychecks of public employees.

All this is not to suggest that Huey Long should be exonerated from blame for his highhanded exploits; it is rather to raise a broader question, the implications of which are quite contemporary and extend far beyond the biography of one extraordinary man. When a moral cause fueled by long years of inequity and neglect confronts a rigid political structure, what are one's responsibilities? And when due process takes a beating, how should we apportion the burden of guilt? These hard questions did not die with Huey Long. They were raised once again by the desegregation movement of the 1950s and still again by the student antidraft and antiwar movements of the late 1960s. And the conservatives themselves raised these questions in the antiradicalism movement led by another crusading senator, Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin. So the sword is two-edged. Americans of all political persuasions have historically demanded liberty and equality, but liberty and equality are often contradictory goals. By opting for equality, Huey Long inevitably enmeshed himself in this most ancient of American—and human—dilemmas. That he did not emerge from the fight unblemished or even, in the long run, triumphant is not to say that he should not have tried.