

“Every Man a King”-- Huey P. Long (February 23, 1934)

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Essay by Christopher Sterling (guest post)*



Huey P. Long (1893-1935) was serving as a U.S. Senator when he gave this radio address. A consummate political animal, he innately understood how radio could spread his message of social protest.

Louisiana was Long's birthplace and political base. Initially home-schooled (he was one of nine children), he was soon a successful attorney. He began his political climb in 1918 with election to what would soon become the state Public Service Commission, becoming its chair in 1922. Six years later, Long achieved his first pinnacle of power when he was elected governor in a runoff election. His populist platform spoke for the little people as opposed to the long dominant oil industry or old plantation elite. After defeating an attempt to impeach him, and following years of little state economic development, Long pioneered a state-wide road building and public works movement that improved infrastructure while putting people to work. He poured funds into both public health and education, helping to shift the state up from the bottom of the national scale.

How he accomplished all this quickly attracted attention. Dubbed the “Kingfish,” Long's methods cut corners and eliminated dissent as he developed a strong political machine that dominated every aspect of life in Louisiana. More than a few critics dubbed him a dictator with his widespread power of appointment and control of politics on all levels. He took his methods to the national stage when he entered the Senate in 1932 (having actually won the seat in the 1930 election, but deciding to serve out his gubernatorial term), leaving behind a crony to run the statehouse. A harsh critic of President Hoover, he supported Franklin Roosevelt for the presidency in 1932.

Less than a year into Roosevelt's first term, however, Long had become one of the President's most strident political enemies, arguing that the New Deal didn't go far or fast enough. In 1934, the Senator began to build a national organization (the Share Our Wealth Society with “Every Man a King” as its motto) to help him run for the presidency in his own right in 1936. His populist (and widely popular) program promoted economic

policies designed to soak the rich to assist the poor. Among many other things, he argued for a minimum annual income for everyone. How this would all be paid for was never made clear.

Over an intense period of a very few years in the early 1930s, Long delivered some version of the “King” speech many times, often adjusted in detail for the circumstances. He sought to talk with rather than at his listeners, employing an informal southern style to persuade. He made his idea of income equity (among others) seem eminently reasonable --and doable. Using simple language and avoiding sounding like a pontificating politician, Long provided readily understandable answers for the economic peril the country was suffering. He appeared in control of the facts and reasoning that could open the door to resumed prosperity.

Radio played an important part as Long made regular speeches extolling his views and plans. He often went on the air from different cities as he made national tours rounding up support for his “share the wealth” ideas. He was engagingly conversational, encouraging listeners to tell their friends that Huey Long was on the air. He spoke plainly, appealing to popular themes of helping the little guy. And his political clout grew—many presumed he was building a third national party to run against Roosevelt. At times his national radio audience approached 25 million.

Long’s rapid rise ended, ironically, back in Louisiana. While on a brief political visit, he was shot on September 10, 1935 in the halls of the art deco Baton Rouge state capitol building he had built. His assassin was quickly riddled with bullets by Long’s angry security team. With his death, much of his political machine and national organization rapidly broke into conflicting groups. But his legacy continued when his brother became governor in 1939, and his son Russell later served seven terms in the U.S. Senate.

Long has been depicted in a host of books and films. Robert Penn Warren’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel “All The King’s Men” (1946) later became a 14949 Oscar-winning film and was widely perceived as a thinly veiled portrayal of Huey Long.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.