Was Huey Long a progressive reformer or a dangerous demagogue?

**Viewpoint:** Huey Long was a populist reformer who politically pursued and achieved an important social agenda.

**Viewpoint:** Huey Long was a dangerous demagogue who dominated Louisiana with an iron fist and exploited reform rhetoric.

In the early months of 1933, as Franklin D. Roosevelt prepared to assume the presidency of the United States, the American economy, faltering since 1929, collapsed completely. On the day Roosevelt took the oath of office in Washington, D.C., it was impossible to cash a check in the nation's capital. The economic collapse was part of a worldwide phenomenon, and Roosevelt's response—the New Deal—was just one possible option. In Germany, at the same time Roosevelt was forming his administration, Adolf Hitler was assuming power as chancellor and was promising economic restoration by dissolving democratic institutions and targeting enemies of the German people.

Could a fascist dictatorship have emerged in America? The lure of the "man on the white horse" who proposed simple solutions to complicated problems is never so enticing as in an economic emergency. To some Americans, Louisiana governor and senator Huey P. Long seemed to present this kind of threat to democratic government. As governor, Long ran Louisiana with a power no other state governor enjoyed. Even when he was elected to the U.S. Senate, Long continued to dominate the state, writing out bills on yellow legal pads which then were passed by a loyal legislature and signed into law. Being a governor and a senator did not satisfy Long's ambitions. He set his sights on the presidency in 1936. When asked what he would do if he were president and the Supreme Court struck down his ambitious "Share Our Wealth" plan, Long responded that he would have Congress pass a law making all members of Congress members of the Supreme Court, and then try the case again.

Long as a political operator did not feel constrained by political institutions. Was he the harbinger of a fascist state? Or was his brief reign in Louisiana actually a populist attempt to wrest power from the special interests and place it in the hands of the people? Because Long governed Louisiana during a time of economic crisis and because the world had contemporary examples of other leaders using the emergency to seize power, Long's policies and his unwillingness to let institutions thwart the people's will has left him charged with being little more than a petty tyrant. However, a closer look at Long's policies in Louisiana, his attacks on the Standard Oil Company and on the institutions of power, reveals a more complicated story. Was Louisiana actually more democratic after Long's regime than it had been before? Were Long's opponents, including the man who assassinated him, defenders of republican government, or guardians of special privilege?

In these two essays, historians Elizabeth D. Schafer and Anthony Connors make different appraisals of the controversial Huey Long. Schafer
argues that Long was a reformer, and a potent enough one to rouse his enemies to assassinate him. On the other hand, Connors argues that Long was in fact a demagogue, not a serious reformer. How should history judge Long? Was he preparing to install a dictatorship on the ruins of American democracy, or was he preparing a major reform of an unjust political system?

Viewpoint:
Huey Long was a populist reformer who politically pursued and achieved an important social agenda.

Huey Pierce Long Jr. (1893–1935), a Louisiana governor and U.S. senator, was an enigmatic personality of Great Depression-era politics. Biographies of Long often incorporate mythic elements based on facts, half-truths, propaganda, and lies disseminated by both Long's supporters and enemies. Long constantly rewrote his personal history to reinforce his power and influence. While his opponents vilified Long as a danger to democracy because of his almost dictatorial control of state politics and campaign against people he considered elitists, many of Long's constituents revered him for initiating social reforms that improved the quality of life for average citizens. His publicly avowed interest in the welfare of Louisiana's poor and illiterate residents not only won loyal support from much of the state's lower- and middle-class population, but his populist rhetoric also insured that he was victorious in political campaigns and legislative battles.

Historians have debated the sincerity of Long's platform. His detractors claimed that Long's social concern was manufactured to feed his ego and ambition. Others, like T. Harry Williams, in Huey Long (1969), stressed that Long genuinely wanted to achieve reforms in Louisiana and suggested that scholars who focused on attacking his character and intentions ignored how Long was a catalyst for socioeconomic and cultural changes that have been obscured by analyses of his behavior and motivations. Williams defended Long as a hero to his community and politics. He emphasized Long's reforms and minimized his manipulative, aggressive, and often unconventional political methods in his biographical portrayal because “Long was the one Southern popular leader who promised something and then delivered.” Williams utilized the “Great Men of History” theory when he researched and wrote his Pulitzer-Prize-winning biography of Long in the 1950s and 1960s, a period when narrative histories, many about military leaders, often were more praiseworthy of their subjects than analytical. Empathetic toward Long, Williams affirmed his reform measures while excusing his corrupt acts as a means to achieve societal improvement. Basing his opinions on interviews with contemporaries and family members because of the lack of archival documents, Williams revealed an affinity toward Long, familiarly calling him by his first name throughout the text and seemingly defending Long more than criticizing him. He countered the conclusions of historians who said that Long was the “inevitable product of conditions in Louisiana” when he became the spokesman for necessary reforms. Williams argued that if this had been the situation, anyone could have emerged as an agent attempting reform in Louisiana, offering different perspectives and tactics than Long to pursue similar goals. Williams dismissed that historical viewpoint, insisting that Long's reform ideas and methods to achieve them were unique to his personality. “This thesis obscures the greatness of Huey and the mass leaders,” Williams stressed, revealing his adulatory interpretive framework. “It springs from a desire to deny the leadership principle or the role of the great man in history.”

Commenting on how he perceived Long, Williams stated “I believe that some men, men of power, can influence the course of history. They appear in response to conditions, but they may alter the conditions, may give a new direction to history.” He acknowledged, “In the process they may do great good or evil or both, but whatever the case they leave a different kind of world behind them. Their accomplishment should be recognized. I believe that Huey Long was this kind of man.” Williams remarked how Robert Penn Warren's fictional character, Willie Stark, resembled Long in the novel All the King's Men (1946). He tolerantly declared that “the politician who wishes to do good may have to do some evil to achieve his goal,” noting the similarities between Stark’s choices and “the course that Long, faced with a relentless opposition, felt he had to follow.” He distinguished between Long and Stark, stressing that the fictional character had been destroyed by evil because "in striving to do good he was led on to grasp for more and more power, until finally he could not always distinguish between the method and the goal, the power and the good." Williams seemingly expected readers to forgive Long's crimes because, like Stark, "His story is a reminder, if we need one, that a great politician may be a figure of tragedy." Williams summarized, “It was to help the people that Huey had seized power and
then more power. He was not a fascist and he did not want to be a dictator."

Williams and other Long advocates stressed the reforms he initiated, lobbied for, and obtained that improved Louisiana's economy, educational system, and transportation networks. Many biographical sources were written in the 1930s by Long's contemporaries who either wholly endorsed his political procedures, highlighting his reforms, known as the "Long Revolution," or castigated him as a depraved detriment to democracy. Later historians also either praised or condemned Long, or, like Alan Brinkley, in Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression (1982), presented a more balanced interpretation but admitted that Long's reforms were beneficial. Long's advocates commended him for publicly protesting what he believed were injustices perpetrated by the state and federal governments during the Depression. These scholars emphasized that by voicing his criticisms Long provoked political turmoil within the state legislature that resulted in public improvements. Biographers of Long noted that he was obsessively and ruthlessly ambitious, making politics his priority over everything else, and was thus seemingly despotic as he crusaded against what he considered to be the oppression of Louisiana's impoverished population. Whether Long sought progressive reforms because he was truly sympathetic toward others or he viewed that platform as the best way to counter powerful, wealthy elites in government and industry, Williams and other Long supporters stressed that his reforms protected individuals and communities from being victimized by greedy corporations and conservative government officials.

Long promoted local versus big government in his political rhetoric. He believed that citizens of a community should interact and be responsible for each other's well being. As a lawyer, he won compensation cases against employers and large companies. Beginning his political career as a member of the Public Service Commission, Long immediately attacked oil companies, utilities, and conservative politicians who were entrenched in the state government. After he was defeated in the 1924 gubernatorial race, Long concentrated on the 1928 contest during the next four years. Using the slogan "Every Man a King, But No One Wears a Crown," Long relied on his populist oratory to appeal to Louisiana's rural voters and carefully orchestrated his appearances. For example, Long's biographers relate how he gave a speech underneath the Evangeline Oak, famous because of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem about a forsaken lover. Playing on that theme, Long asked "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?" Long concluded, "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!" Rural voters insured Long became governor despite weak support in urban New Orleans.

During his four years as governor, Long's reform accomplishments were impressive. "I'm for the poor man—all poor men," Long stated. "Black and white, they all gotta have a chance. They gotta have a home, a job, and a decent education for their children." He secured allies in the state legislature and placed supporters in state offices to accrue power and initiate his reform program. Long also studied the state constitution and codes to determine what loopholes he could use to obtain more legislative power to reinforce his patronage system to guarantee his reforms were passed and funded. Scholars emphasize that Long's reforms transformed Louisiana by "helping to fulfill one of the first
needs of any developing society: the creation of an infrastructure, the construction of the basic services and facilities without which more complex economic progress would be impossible."

Long focused on humanitarian concerns such as health care. He secured the establishment of additional public health facilities to meet public demand. Long was concerned that mental health patients should receive better care than traditionally provided in crowded and unsanitary institutions. He assured that patients could participate in Mardi Gras celebrations and other amusements as well as have access to beauty parlors. Long insisted that patients not be confined in straitjackets or locked to chairs and that hospitals become more sanitary, using sterilized equipment and hiring qualified personnel trained for specific nursing tasks. He arranged for Louisiana State University to operate a medical school because Tulane University's program, the only one in the state, did not graduate enough students to meet the state's need for physicians.

According to scholars, Long's most significant reforms improved education. He used public funds to distribute free textbooks to public and private schools. As a result, enrollment in public schools increased 20 percent. Long also sought betterment of classrooms and equipment, expanded facilities, and provided more school buses to transport rural children. The state university at Baton Rouge was his pet project. In addition to issuing state money for instruments and uniforms for Louisiana State University's band, he recruited talented musicians and wrote music for them to play. He also was an ardent fan of the football team. Long provided funding so that Louisiana State University could build necessary laboratories and structures, hire quality faculty, and offer scholarships and low tuition to make a college education accessible to all Louisianans. By 1935 Louisiana State University was ranked twentieth in size of all national universities and was listed the eleventh largest of state universities. Long also secured funds for night schools to alleviate adult illiteracy. The 1930 census revealed the success of this program. The number of illiterate whites decreased from 10 percent in 1920 to 7 percent, and the rate of illiterate blacks declined from 38 percent to 23 percent. A total of 100,000 fewer illiterate adults were reported in the 1930 census as compared to 1920 statistics.

Long's building projects and public works offered employment during the Great Depression. In 1935 a Long supporter wrote President Franklin D. Roosevelt to praise Long's efforts to ease economic discomfort, stating "If all you high up men would listen to our great man there would not be people begging the streets."

Although Long's programs did not effectively end economic despair, they probably mitigated conditions. Critics have argued that some of the projects were unnecessary and ostentatious displays to appease Long's vanity and ego. For instance, the new state capitol and governor's mansion were elaborate and replaced still-functional buildings. Long's supporters responded that the resulting jobs outweighed any negative comments. Long secured monies to build a spillway and seawall in New Orleans to prevent flooding from the Gulf of Mexico, Mississippi River, and Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans. He also improved the New Orleans port and increased commerce by reducing charges for handling cotton by as much as 50 percent. Long insisted that an up-to-date sprinkler system be installed at the port and its warehouses to reduce insurance rates.

The Shushan Airport built at New Orleans (named for a loyal Long supporter, Abraham Shushan) was the largest facility in the nation for land and sea planes at that time. Long was concerned about transportation, especially in rural areas, and financed the paving of 3,754 miles of road, paid for by bond issues. Another 4,000 miles of rural roads were graded to remove potholes and graveled for better traction. Existing roads were widened, and new roads enabled isolated farmers to reach markets. Before transportation improvements began, Louisiana had 300 miles of paved roads and three bridges. From 1929 to 1936, known as the Long-Allen Administration because of Long's influence on his gubernatorial successor Oscar K. Allen, Louisiana benefited from the most miles being paved in all of the Deep South states and the largest highway system being built at that time in the United States. Forty bridges, including one across the Mississippi River at New Orleans, were erected so that motorists could cross Louisiana's creeks and bayous without paying ferries. Long also directed improvement of railroads.

In addition to bond issues, Long established new taxes to pay for his reforms. He exempted people earning low incomes from paying state property taxes and altered the tax codes so that wealthier residents and corporations would be taxed more. The severance tax for natural resources extracted from Louisiana placed a greater burden on oil and gas companies so that property taxes were not the sole basis of state funds. Long demanded that oil companies allow smaller companies to use their pipelines and arranged for affordable delivery of natural gas to residences and businesses, setting reasonable rates for all utilities, including electricity and telephone services.

Long claimed he wanted to help all poor people regardless of race. He did not overtly discrimi-
nate against African Americans like many of his opponents. Long, however, did occasionally tell racial jokes and show contempt for blacks as being inferior to whites. As a senator, he did not attempt to help pass federal antilynching laws or achieve civil-rights measures. Despite Long’s indifference, black Louisianans, most of whom could not legally vote, supported him and formed Huey Long organizations. “He was fair to colored people, good to all poor people,” one black man explained, saying “He walked the land like Jesus Christ and left nothing undone.” Long extended his educational reforms to blacks, commenting “I can’t have my people ignorant.” He also secured jobs for blacks in hospitals and on highway construction, and boldly threatened Ku Klux Klan leaders. Critics argued that these were low-paying, demeaning jobs and that Long manipulated his racial agenda for his political advantage.

Publicizing his reforms in his newspaper, the Louisiana Progress, and in a motion picture, Long stressed how he had achieved progress for the state. Williams reiterated why Long was worshipped by many Louisianans: “He had given them things they had long yearned for and thought they would never get, and this they did not forget.” Voters viewed Long with an almost religious fervor, overlooking how he attained the reforms and focusing on how he addressed and resolved their anxieties about individual and community concerns. In 1940, even after Long’s corruption had been exposed, 55 percent of Louisiana voters questioned by a Gallup poll said that Long had benefitted the state. A New Orleans woman declared, “Huey Long was the bestest man we ever had,” and another worker agreed, saying “He did more for us poor folks in a day than all the others did in all the years.” Even in 1974, when Louisianans were asked to name the state’s greatest governor, Long dominated the survey.

Williams explained that Long’s enduring status was earned because he “lifted Louisiana from a condition of near feudalism into the modern world almost overnight” and “inspired thousands of poor white people all over the South to have a vision of a better life.” Through Long’s reforms, Williams asserted, he “introduced into all of Southern politics, which had been pervasively romantic, a saving element of economic realism.” Long’s charismatic image and perseverance to pursue his political agenda to protect individuals from powerful bureaucracies and corporations overshadowed his questionable activities, exacting control of supporters, and extreme ambitions. Perhaps Long’s assassination assured that some scholars would strive to promote Long’s legacy of public works and progressive reforms to depict him as a misunderstood martyr.

—ELIZABETH D. SCHAFER, LOMCHAPOKA, ALABAMA

Viewpoint: Huey Long was a dangerous demagogue who dominated Louisiana with an iron fist and exploited reform rhetoric.

When U.S. Senator Huey Pierce Long Jr. (D-Louisiana) died on 10 September 1935—two days after being shot by an assassin inside the Louisiana state capitol building—many grieved the loss of a protector of the poor and champion of the redistribution of wealth in Depression-era America. Yet others, secretly or openly, breathed a sigh of relief that a dangerous demagogue had been silenced. The list of enemies of the self-proclaimed “Kingfish” was lengthy in his home state; and as Long was an outspoken critic of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, and raised the specter of dictatorship in America, he appeared a menace to democratic traditions on a national scale.

The debate has gone on since Long first became governor of Louisiana in 1928. Some argued that he started his political career with the best of intentions but ultimately succumbed to the temptations of personal power and influence. He is often forgiven his misdeeds because of the ugly political and economic climate of the 1930s: desperate times called for desperate measures. While all these possibilities have elements of truth, it is more likely that Long was never a sincere reformer, that from the early years he used reform rhetoric as a means of gaining power, first in Louisiana, then on the national stage. While it cannot be denied that he brought much needed change to impoverished Louisiana—free textbooks, new hospitals, bridges and roads—the scale of corruption and brutality of his administration belie the picture of an honest agent of positive change.

On the surface, Long’s early career suggests an ambitious young reformer from a populist district in a state badly in need of economic and political reform. Louisiana was indeed in terrible shape in the 1930s, ranking at or near the bottom of the states in income, literacy, health care, and paved roads. Long’s Winn parish had been a hotbed of Populist sentiment in the 1890s. Although never a Populist (his family were all Democrats), Long borrowed from the reform rhetoric he had heard growing up—especially attacks on the corporations and patrician ruling class. Choosing only those elements of the reform move-
ment that suited him, and carefully avoiding the racial liberalism of Populism, Long used reform as his hook to attract attention and distinguish himself from "Old Regular" politicians. He made extravagant reform promises and, to remain in power, he kept many of them.

Despite Long's claims of having grown up hungry and shoeless, his family was relatively well-to-do. By the time he was thirteen they were living in a ten-room house that was considered a mansion by neighbors. Long's stories of impoverished youth were entirely myth, as his infuriated family pointed out. He was perfectly willing to humiliate them to show his own strength of character for having risen from such humble conditions. As his sister Lottie put it, Huey "warped things for political reasons." Yet, most Louisiana—truly poor and undereducated—found his log-cabin origins not only believable but enormously appealing. Long's truth was whatever got him votes.

His first elected position was on the Railroad Commission, later renamed the Public Utilities Commission. His political target, besides crude personal attacks on his opponents, was Standard Oil. He became the champion of independent oil companies who were in danger of being squeezed out by the larger corporations. Yet, it should be noted that Long owned stock in several independent oil companies at this time, and thus had a personal interest in their survival. He of course also capitalized on the publicity of taking on the Goliath that had dominated Louisiana's economy for decades. Long never thought small. He was effective as Public Utilities Commissioner, successfully blocking street-car fare increases and actually reducing telephone rates. As he prepared to run for governor, he clearly saw that the theme of reform was working for him; it gave him a differentiation, a power base, and a great deal of attention. His celebrated attacks on "the corporations," however, proved to be mostly talk: as governor he would pass on more costs to future taxpayers through bond issues than he collected from corporations.

The reform theme helped carry him to victory in the gubernatorial election of 1928, but reform was accompanied by unprecedented corruption and what many referred to as pure dictatorship. Long ruled Louisiana through intimidation, graft, and patronage. His infamous Act 99 created a Bureau of Criminal Identification (BCI), answerable to the governor and completely independent of the police, and authorized them to make arrests anywhere in the state without warrants. The BCI became Long's own police force (one of the officers even carried around a sawed-off shotgun in a paper bag). All contractors on public-works projects were required to kick back 20 percent of their contract bid. All state employees were required to contribute between 5 and 10 percent of their weekly wages to Long's "deduct box," a fund that exceeded a million dollars in 1935.

By providing state legislators patronage jobs in state agencies (jobs that required little or no actual work), he was able to buy their support. Hodding Carter, whose opposition newspaper was shut down by Long, wrote that "Long bought those whom he needed and could buy, and crushed those who had no purchase price or whose price was too high." If bribery did not work, Long personally went to senate and house sessions to order legislators how to vote. When one angry legislator asked him if he knew that there was a state constitution, Long replied "I'm the constitution around here now." Indeed he was. Long's governorship was not only one of the most corrupt in American history, it was also "the most complete absolutism that had ever existed in the United States."

Not satisfied in the governor's mansion, Long quickly set his sights on the U.S. Senate. Taking office in 1932, his record as a senator was spotty, and his attendance poor—he was too often back in Baton Rouge controlling the puppet government he had set up. Loosely associated with the Progressive Bloc in the Senate, he was actually too independent to join coalitions and too self-centered and combative to cooperate with anyone. His initial support for Roosevelt evaporated by mid 1933 when he realized that FDR was not about to grant him the patronage he expected. Long thereafter became the avowed enemy of the New Deal.

His main weapon against the administration was the Share Our Wealth program. Some have argued that it was progressive—even radical. Certainly in rhetoric it sounded progressive, especially in its central tenet that the concentration of wealth in America was a primary cause of poverty and of the Great Depression itself. Long was essentially right in this respect. He had used populist soak-the-rich rhetoric earlier in his career, but attempted to launch a specific program only after his split with Roosevelt. This shift lent support to the argument that Share Our Wealth was more a weapon in his battle with FDR than a serious attempt at fundamental economic change.

Accurate as it was in focusing on actual problems of Depression-era America, Share Our Wealth was a complete failure at providing a feasible program. Long assumed that there was enough surplus wealth in America to supply every poor family with $5,000 annually—simply by confiscating all family income and savings over $1.7 million. In fact, the government would have had to take all income over $4,000 in order
EVERY MAN A KING

The following is a description of Huey Long’s Share Our Wealth program taken from a radio address made by him in January 1935.

... There are thousands of Share Our Wealth societies organized in the United States now. We want 100,000 such societies formed for every nook and corner of this country—societies that will meet, talk, and work, all for the purpose that the great wealth and abundance of this great land that belongs to us may be shared and enjoyed by all of us.

We have nothing more for which we should ask the Lord. He has allowed this land to have too much of everything that humanity needs.

So in this land of God’s abundance we propose laws, viz.:

1. The fortunes of the multimillionaires and billionaires shall be reduced so that no one person shall own more than a few million dollars to the person. We would do this by a capital levy tax. On the first million that a man was worth, we would not impose any tax. We would say, “All right for your first million dollars, but after you get that rich you will have to start helping the balance of us.” So we would not levy any capital levy tax on the first million owned. But on the second million a man owns, we would tax that 1 percent, so that every year the man owned the second million dollars he would be taxed $10,000. On the third million we would impose a tax of 2 percent. On the fourth million we would impose a tax of 4 percent. On the fifth million we would impose a tax of 8 percent. On the sixth million we would impose a tax of 16 percent. On the seventh million we would impose a tax of 32 percent. On the eighth million we would impose a tax of 64 percent; and on all over the eighth million we would impose a tax of 100 percent.

What this would mean is that the annual tax would bring the biggest fortune down to $3 or $4 million to the person because no one could pay taxes very long in the higher brackets. But $3 to $4 million is enough for any one person and his children and his children’s children. We cannot allow one to have more than that because it would not leave enough for the balance to have something.

2. We propose to limit the amount any one man can earn in one year or inherit to $1 million to the person.

3. Now, by limiting the size of the fortunes and incomes of the big men, we will throw into the government Treasury the money and property from which we will care for the millions of people who have nothing; and with this money we will provide a home and the comforts of home, with such common conveniences as radio and automobile, for every family in America, free of debt.

4. We guarantee food and clothing and employment for everyone who should work by shortening the hours of labor to thirty hours per week, maybe less, and to eleven months per year, maybe less. We would have the hours shortened just so much as would give work to everybody to produce enough for everybody; and if we were to get them down to where they were too short, then we would lengthen them again. As long as all the people working can produce enough of automobiles, radios, homes, schools, and theaters for everyone to have that kind of comfort and convenience, then let us all have work to do and have that much of heaven on earth.

5. We would provide education at the expense of the states and the United States for every child, not only through grammar school and high school but through to a college and vocational education. We would simply extend the Louisiana plan to apply to colleges and all people. Yes; we would have to build thousands of more colleges and employ 100,000 more teachers; but we have materials, men, and women who are ready and available for the work. Why have the right to a college education depend upon whether a father or mother is so well-to-do as to send a boy or girl to college? We would give every child the right to education and a living at birth.

6. We would give a pension to all persons above sixty years of age in an amount sufficient to support them in comfortable circumstances, excepting those who earn $1,000 per year or who are worth $10,000.

7. Until we could straighten things out—and we can straighten things out in two months under our program—we would grant a moratorium on all debts which people owe that they cannot pay.

And now you have our program, none too big, none too little, but every man a king. . . .

to provide just $1,400 to the poor. The true nature of wealth was beyond Long’s understanding. “Only by some miracle,” concludes David H. Bennett in *Demagogues in the Depression* (1969), “could he hope to convert forests and mines, highways and schools, oil wells and transportation systems, factories and battleships into house and bank account for every family.” Or perhaps he did understand—but continued to promote a simplistic formula because it increased his publicity and alarmed Roosevelt.

One way to assess Long’s seriousness in proposing to redistribute wealth in America is to look at what he actually did while in complete control of Louisiana. Income taxes remained low for the wealthy and many of the thirty-five new taxes introduced during his administration were regressive, hurting the poor more than the rich. Furthermore, any sharing of wealth appears to have benefited the Kingfish more than others, as he purchased a new Buick out of state funds, lived lavishly (with hotel suites in Washington, New Orleans, and Baton Rouge), maintained a small army of thug bodyguards at state expense, and controlled the “deduct box.” The welfare of the common man and woman may have been his theme, yet he refused to adopt the Federal Child Labor Amendment or minimum-wage guidelines in Louisiana. Long was hardly the man to administer wealth redistribution in America.

The organization of Share Our Wealth brings up a related issue: was Long a fascist? SOW’s national organizer was Gerald L. K. Smith, one of the most frightening anti-Semitic political agitators of the period. Before joining forces with Long, Smith had been involved with the Silver Shirts—an openly fascist organization—and had expressed admiration for Adolf Hitler. Certainly, Share Our Wealth cannot be condemned because of unscrupulous leaders, nor can Long be blamed for Smith’s anti-Semitism. Yet, when an organization is built upon the personal ambitions of two such discreditable men, it is natural to question the reformist basis of the program.

To some, Long was a fascist. His obituary in *The New York Times*, referring to his one-man rule in Louisiana, said: “If Fascism ever comes in the United States it will come in something like that way.” By most standards, however, Long was not a fascist; he relied more on slogans than on real programs, and there was no military aspect to his plans. But one does not have to be a fascist to be dangerous. His dictatorial rule and flagrant corruption, disruptive behavior and inflammatory rhetoric, and willingness to use anyone or anything to gain power—all speak to his potential danger, especially in the chaotic social and political context of the Depression. With Long the danger was not just potential; he presided over the dismantling of democratic government in Louisiana.

One final aspect of Long’s progressivism put forth by his defenders was his liberalism on race. He was, however, weak on black issues; on this subject he ranged from cautiously neutral to carelessly indifferent. He never condemned lynching; in fact as a U.S. Senator he steadfastly opposed a federal antilynching law. “We just lynch an occasional nigger,” he explained. Roy Wilkins, interviewing Long for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1935, admitted that the Senator had fewer prejudices than the typical Southern politician, but was sure that “he wouldn’t hesitate to throw Negroes to the wolves if it became necessary.” The record also shows that while overall spending on education in Louisiana increased during Long’s control of the state budget, the average salary of black teachers actually decreased. The state-mandated minimum expenditure of $12 per student was exceeded for white children ($44.98 in 1933), but not for blacks ($7.88). It is true that Long was not personally antagonistic to blacks or Jews, yet his purported fairness on racial matters rarely extended to public policy.

In the final analysis Long was indeed dangerous, but with just enough outrageous charm and concern for reform—some genuine, much of it calculated—to be appealing during a time of political and economic anxiety. But reform rhetoric does not necessarily make a reformer. One must look at his career and the outrageous behavior that drew attention to himself more than to his programs. It is hard to conceive that his intention was ever more than gaining public adulation and, once in office, complete control. Miles of paved highways and free school books were real accomplishments, but they are far outweighed by the damage he did as governor. As a senator, he devoted his prodigious energy to tearing down rather than building a consensus or a program—all the while continuing his stranglehold on Louisiana politics. This mockery of American democratic traditions makes a sham of his professed progressive ideas. There is no chance that he might have made himself over into a true reform leader on a national scale any more than he was during his “dictatorship” in Louisiana.

Ultimately, the question is where to draw the line between legitimate reform and the exploitation of the rhetoric of reform for unbridled personal ambition. It was clear by the time Long became governor, and began his one-man rule, that his appetite for personal power—more than any urge to do good—was his ruling passion. His most recent biographer, William Ivy Hair, asserts in *The Kingfish and His Realm: The
Life and Times of Huey P. Long (1991) that this behavior was basic to his personality—Long was always unruly, ambitious, supremely self-interested, and would use anyone who could get him what he wanted. Given his nature, there is no reason to assume that progressive ideas or programs would be anything more than tools at Long's disposal.

—ANTHONY CONNORS, CLARK UNIVERSITY

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