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Documents Relating to Huey Long, 1932-1935

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Annotation: He was the Kingfish, a nickname borrowed from the "Amos and Andy" radio show.

Huey P. Long was one of the most colorful and flamboyant American politicians of the twentieth century. He owned more than a hundred suits, and wore them with orchid shirts, bizarre floral ties and spats. Sometimes he wore green pajamas to greet visitors. He had convicts replace Louisiana's governor's mansion with a virtual replica of the White House

To his supporters, he was a champion of the downtrodden, who taxed the rich in order to build 9,000 miles of concrete highways, put 600,000 free textbooks in the hands of poor students, and establish programs that taught 175,000 illiterate adults to read.

To his detractors, he was a buffoon, a corrupt demagogue, or even worse, a potential fascist, who used bribery, blackmail, and strong-arm tactics to get his way. One opponent called Long "a common, sordid, dirty soul with the greed and coarseness of the swine . . . the venom of the snake, the cruel cowardice of the skulking hyena." He had a "deduct" system requiring each state employee to pay 10 percent of his salary to Long's political machine.

In Louisiana, he overthrew a political system dominated by wealthy planters and industrialists and the oil industry. State spending rose from \$29 million in 1928, when he took office to \$83 million in 1931. Meanwhile, the state's debt climbed from \$11 million to \$125 million.

He attracted a national following with his promise to make "Every Man a King." Millions of Americans joined "Share Our Wealth" clubs, which proposed that Congress confiscate all incomes over \$1 million a year, and use the revenue to guarantee every family had a home, an old age pension, and a radio. President Roosevelt called him "one of the two most dangerous men in the country"; the other was Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

In 1935, when he was just 42 years old, Long was assassinated in the 34 story state capital that he had built by a doctor whose family had been feuding with Long's machine. His last words were: . "God, don't let me die," Huey whispered. "I have so much to do."

Document: 1. Huey P. Long, Senate Speech, April 29, 1932

The great and grand dream of America that all men are created free and equal, endowed with the inalienable right of life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness - this great dream of America, this great light, and this great hope - has almost gone out of sight in this day and time, and everybody knows it; and there is a mere candle flicker here and yonder to take the place of what the great dream of America was supposed to be.

The people of this country have fought and have struggled, trying, by one process and the other, to bring about the change that would save the American country to the ideal and purposes of America. They are met with the Democratic Party at one time and the Republican Party at another time, and both of them at another time, and nothing can be squeezed through these party organizations that goes far enough to bring the American people to a condition where they have such a thing as a livable country. We swapped the tyrant 3,000 miles away for a handful of financial slaveowning overlords who make the tyrant of Great Britain seem mild.

Much talk is indulged in to the effect that the great fortunes of the United States are sacred, that they have been built up by the honest and individual initiative, that the funds were honorably acquired by men of genius far-visioned in thought. The fact that those fortunes have been acquired and that those who have built them for the financial masters have become impoverished is a sufficient proof that they have not been regularly and honorably acquired in this country.

Even if they had been that would not alter the case. I find that the Morgan and Rockefeller groups alone held, together, 341 directorships in 112 banks, railroad, insurance, and other corporations, and one of this group made an after-dinner speech in which he said that a newspaper report had asserted that 12 men in the United States controlled the business of the Nation, and in the same speech to this group he said, "And I am one of the 12 and you the balance, and this statement is correct."

They pass laws under which people may be put in jail for utterances made in war times and other times, but you can not stifle or keep from growing, as poverty and starvation and hunger increase in this country, the spirit of the American people, if there is going to be any spirit in America at all.

Unless we provide for the redistribution of wealth in this country, the country is doomed; there is going to be no country left here very long. That may sound a little bit extravagant, but I tell you that we are not going to have this good little America here long if we do not take to redistribute the wealth of this country.

2. Huey P. Long, Share Our Wealth, 1934

For 20 years I have been in the battle to provide that, so long as America has, or can produce, an abundance of the things which make life comfortable and happy, that none should own so much of the things which he does not need and cannot use as to deprive the balance of the people of a reasonable proportion of the necessities and conveniences of life. The whole line of my political thought has always been that America must face the time when the whole country would shoulder the obligation which it owes to every child born on earth - that is, a fair chance to life, liberty, and happiness.

Here is what I ask the officers and members and well-wishers of all the Share Our Wealth Societies to do:

First. If you have a Share Our Wealth Society in your neighborhood or, if you have not one, organize one - meet regularly, and let all members, men and women, go to work as quickly and as hard as they can to get every person in the neighborhood to become a member and to go out with them to get more members for the society. If members do not want to go into the society already organized in their community, let them organize another society. We must have them as members in the movement, so that, by having their cooperation, on short notice we can all act as one person for the one object and purpose of providing that in the land of plenty there shall be comfort for all. The organized 600 families who control the wealth of America have been able to keep the 125,000,000 people in bondage because they have never once known how to effectually strike for their fair demands.

Second. Get a number of members of the Share Our Wealth Society to immediately go into all other neighborhoods of your county and into the neighborhoods of the adjoining counties, so as to get the people in the other communities and in the other counties to organize more Share Our Wealth Societies there; that will mean we can soon get about the work of perfecting a complete, unified organization that will not only hear promises but will compel the fulfillment of pledges made to the people.

It is impossible for the United States to preserve itself as a republic or as a democracy when 600 families own more of this Nation's wealth - in fact, twice as much - as all the balance of the people put together. Ninety-six percent of our people live below the poverty line, while 4 percent own 87 percent of the wealth. America can have enough for all to live in comfort and still permit millionaires to own more than they can ever spend and to have more than they can ever use; but America cannot allow the multimillionaires and the billionaires, a mere handful of them, to own everything unless we are willing to inflict starvation upon 125,000,000 people.

Here is the whole sum and substance of the share-our-wealth movement:

1. Every family to be furnished by the Government a homestead allowance, free of debt, of not less than one-third the average family wealth of the country, which means, at the lowest, that every family shall have the reasonable comforts of life up to a value of from \$5,000 to \$6,000. No person to have a fortune of more than 100 to 300 times the average family fortune, which means that the limit to

fortunes is between \$1,500,000 and \$5,000,000, with annual capital-levy, taxes imposed on all above \$1,000,000.

2. The yearly income of every family shall be not less than one-third of the average family Income, which means that, according to the estimates of the statisticians of the United States Government and Wall Street, no family's annual income would be less than from \$2,000 to \$2,500. No yearly income shall be allowed to any person larger than from 100 to 300 times the size of the average family income, which means; that no person would be allowed to earn in any year more than from \$600,000 to \$1,800,000, all to be subject to present income-tax laws.

3. To limit or regulate the hours of work to such an extent as to prevent overproduction; the most modern and efficient machinery would be encouraged, so that as much would be produced as possible so as to satisfy all demands of the people, but to also allow the maximum time to the workers for recreation, convenience, education, and luxuries of life.

4. An old-age pension to the persons of 60.

5. To balance agricultural production with what can be consumed according to the laws of God, which includes the preserving and storage of surplus commodities to be paid for and held by the Government for the emergencies when such are needed. Please bear in mind, however, that when the people of America have had money to buy things they needed, we have never had a surplus of any commodity. This plan of God does not call for destroying any of the things raised to eat or wear, nor does it countenance wholesale destruction of hogs, cattle, or milk.

6. To pay the veterans of our wars what we owe them and to care for their disabled.

7. Education and training for all children to be equal in opportunity in all schools, colleges, universities, and other institutions for training in the professions and vocations of life; to be regulated on the capacity of children to learn, and not on the ability of parents to pay the costs. Training for life's work to be as much universal and thorough for all walks in life as has been the training in the arts of killing.

8. The raising of revenue and taxes for the support of this program to come from the reduction of swollen fortunes from the top, as well as for the support of public works to give employment whenever there may be any slackening necessary in private enterprise.

3. Raymond Gram Swing, *The Nation*, January, 1935

He is not a fascist, with a philosophy of the state and its function in expressing the individual. He is plain dictator. He rules, and opponents had better stay out of his way. He punishes all who thwart him with grim, relentless, efficient vengeance.

But to say this does not make him wholly intelligible. One does not understand the problem of Huey Long or measure the menace he represents to American democracy until one admits that he has done a vast amount of good for Louisiana. He has this to justify all that is corrupt and peremptory in his methods. Taken all in all, I do not know any man who has accomplished so much that I approve of in one state in four years, at the same time that he has done so much that I dislike. It is a thoroughly perplexing, paradoxical record.

If he were to die today, and the fear and hatred of him died too, and an honest group of politicians came into control of Louisiana, they would find a great deal to thank Huey Long for. He has reshaped the organism of an archaic state government, centralized it, made it easy to operate efficiently. Most important of all, he has shifted the weight of taxation from the poor, who were crippled under it, to the shoulders that can bear it.

Huey Long is the best stump speaker in America. He is the best political radio speaker, better even than President Roosevelt. Give him time on the air and let him have a week to campaign in each state, and he can sweep the country. He is one of the most persuasive men living." This is the opinion not of a Long supporter, but of one of the key men in the fight against the Kingfish in Louisiana. The North, he said, is misled into dismissing him as a clown, and has no conception of Huey's talents and of his almost invincible mass appeal. Mrs. Hattie Caraway of Arkansas can testify to his powers, for when she entered the primary asking to succeed her late husband in the United States Senate, she was generally expected to run last among five candidates and to poll not more than 2, 000 votes. The four men against her were experienced and able. But Huey took his sound van into Arkansas for one week, and

though he could not get into every county, he made a circular tour during which he spoke six times a day. Instead of 2,000 votes Mrs. Caraway won a majority over the combined opposition in the first primary, tantamount to election in a Democratic state. An analysis of the vote showed that the districts where Huey did not appear virtually ignored her, while those which he toured gave her a landslide.

When his hour strikes, Huey will attack the rest of America with the same vehemence. That probably will be during the campaign of 1936. His platform will be the capital levy, strangely enough his exclusive possession as a political theme. He will speak more violently than Father Coughlin against the money interests of Wall Street and against the evil of large fortunes. He will pose as a misunderstood man, and to most listeners he will give their first information of what he has accomplished in Louisiana. He will be direct, picturesque, and amusing, a relief after the attenuated vagueness of most of the national speaking today. He will promise a nest egg of \$5,000 for every deserving family in America, this to be the minimum of poverty in his brave new world. He rashly will undertake to put all the employables to work in a few months. He will assail President Roosevelt with a passion which may at first offend listeners, but in the end he might stir up opposition of a bitterness the President has not tasted in his life. Obviously, he cannot succeed while the country still has hopes of the success of the New Deal and trusts the President. Huey's chances depend on those sands of hope and trust running out. He is no menace if the President produces reform and recovery. But if in two years, even six, misery and fear are not abated in America the field is free to the same kind of promise-mongers who swept away Democratic leaders in Italy and Germany. Huey believes Roosevelt can be beaten as early as 1936, but he is prepared to agitate for another four years. In 1940 he will still be a young man of forty-six.

Huey Long publishes his own newspaper, but in Louisiana he depends still more on a remarkable system of circulars. His card catalogue of local addresses is the most complete of any political machine in the world. It holds the name of every Long man in every community in the state, and tells just how many circulars this man will undertake personally to distribute to neighbors. Huey's secretary maintains a pretentious multigraph office, and it can run off the circulars and address envelopes to each worker in a single evening. Huey then mobilizes all the motor vehicles of the state highway department and the highway police. The circulars can leave New Orleans at night and be in virtually every household in the state by morning.

One may say that remarkable as that may be, it will work only in Louisiana and cannot be done throughout the United States. But in a way it can. By November the "Share Our Wealth" campaign had recruited 3,687,641 members throughout the country in eight months. (The population of Louisiana is only 2,000,000.) Every member belongs to a society, and Huey has the addresses of those who organized it. To them can go circulars enough for all members. The "Share Our Wealth" organization is first of all a glorified mailing list, already one of the largest in the land, but certain to grow much larger once the Long campaign gets under way. It is the nucleus of a nation-wide political machine. And though the movement is naively simple, its very simplicity is one secret of its success. Anyone can form a society. Its members pay no dues. They send an address to Huey and he supplies them with his literature, including a copy of his autobiography. He urges societies to meet and discuss the redistribution of wealth and the rest of his platform. He promises to furnish answers and arguments needed to silence critics.

I doubt whether Huey and the Reverend Gerald L. K. Smith realize that property as such cannot be redistributed. How, for instance, divide a factory or a railroad among families? Value lies in use, and if the scheme were to be realized, all property would have to be nationalized, and the income from use distributed. The income from \$5,000 would not be much for each family, not more than \$200 or \$300, certainly not enough to make true the dream of a home free of debt, a motor car, an electric refrigerator, and a college education for all the children, which is Huey's way of picturing his millennium. And if property is to be nationalized, why not share it equally? Why give the poor only a third, and decree the scramble for the other two-thirds in the name of capitalism? If Huey were to ask himself this question, he probably would answer that since both he and America believe in capitalism, he must advocate it. But probably he has not thought the platform through. He conceived of it early one morning, summoned his secretary, and had the organization worked out before noon of the same day. It isn't meant to be specific. It is only to convey to the unhappy people that he believes in a new social order in which the minimum of poverty is drastically raised, the rich somehow to foot the bill through a capital levy. It may be as simple as a box of kindergarten blocks, but could he win mass votes, or organize nearly four million people in eight months, by distributing a primer of economics?

4. Obituary, New York Times, September 11, 1935)

Of Huey Long personally it is no longer necessary to speak except with charity. His motives, his character, have passed beyond human judgment. People will long talk of his picturesque career and extraordinary individual qualities. He carried daring to the point of audacity. He did not hesitate to flaunt his great personal vainglory in public. This he would probably have defended both as a form of self-confidence, and a means of impressing the public. He had a knack of always getting into the picture, and often bursting out of its frame. There would be no end if one were to try to enumerate all his traits, so distinct and so full of color. He succeeded in establishing a legend about himself - a legend of invincibility - which it will be hard to dissipate.

It is to Senator Long as a public man, rather than as a dashing personality, that the thoughts of Americans should chiefly turn as his tragic death extinguishes the envy. What he did and what he promised to do are full of political instruction and also of warning. In his own State of Louisiana he showed how it is possible to destroy self-government while maintaining its ostensible and legal form. He made himself an unquestioned dictator, though a State Legislature was still elected by a nominally free people, as was also a Governor, who was, however, nothing but a dummy for Huey Long. In reality, Senator Long set up a Fascist government in Louisiana. It was disguised, but only thinly. There was no outward appearance of a revolution, no march of Black Shirts upon Baton Rouge, but the effectual result was to lodge all the power of the State in the hands of one man.

If Fascism ever comes in the United States it will come in something like that way. No one will set himself up as an avowed dictator, but if he can succeed in dictating everything, the name does not matter. Laws and Constitutions guaranteeing liberty and individual rights may remain on the statute books, but the life will have gone out of them. Institutions may be designated as before, but they will have become only empty shells. We thus have an indication of the points at which American vigilance must be eternal if it desires to withstand the subtle inroads of the Fascist spirit. There is no need to be on the watch for a revolutionary leader to rise up and call upon his followers to march on Washington. No such sinister figure is likely to appear. The danger is, as Senator Long demonstrated in Louisiana, that freedom may be done away with in the name of efficiency and a strong paternal government.

Senator Long's career is also a reminder that material for the agitator and the demagogue is always ample in this country. He found it and played upon it skillfully, first of all in what may be called the lower levels of society in Louisiana. Afterward, when he began to swell with national ambition, and cast about for a fetching cry, he found it, or thought he did, in his vague formulas, never worked out, about the "distribution of wealth." For a time he seemed in this way to be about to fascinate and capture a great multitude of followers, or at least endorsers, mainly in the cities of this country. There is reason to believe that his hold upon them was relaxing before his assassination. Many observers thought that he had already passed the peak of his national influence. Be that as it may, the moral of his remarkable adventure in politics remains the same. It is that in the United States we have to re-educate each generation in the fundamentals of self government and in the principles of sound finance. And we must have leaders able to defend the faith that is in them. When such masses of people are all too ready to run after a professed miracle-worker, it is essential that we have trained minds to confront the ignorant, to show to the credulous the error of their ways, and to keep alive and fresh the true tradition of democracy in which this country was cradled and brought to maturity.

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