Every Man A King
But Huey Wears The Crown
The “Kingfish” and his rule over Louisiana

Linus Kozma
Senior Division
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Huey Long’s populist and progressive policies yet autocratic rule over Louisiana created division in the state for decades. His public works programs continue to help people even today, but in order to pass them he resorted to dictatorial means.

Huey Long was a Louisiana politician, also known by his nickname “The Kingfish”, who would eventually rise to become a state level dictator, first as a Governor and then later as a senator. He would threaten, blackmail, and discredit opponents to get his plans and policies through Congress and State Legislature. It is these ideas, in stark contrast to his methods, that make him an extremely controversial figure.

Huey Long was born in 1893. Before Huey Long became a politician, his childhood and young adult life helped to shape his policies. Early in his life, he struggled to attain a proper education. However after only one year at Tulane University School in 1915 as a special student, Long managed to pass the bar exam and become an attorney. He then earned a reputation for his work on workers’ compensation cases, as well as land and timber rights. Later in 1918 would be his first step into a government position, the Louisiana Railroad Commission. (renamed later to the Public Service Commission.) Even before his national ambitions, he championed the working class, challenging corporate monopolies and seeking lower utility rates from companies. He rose in popularity to become the chair of the commission. His ideas of challenging large business and helping the struggling and poor were already beginning to take shape. He then ran unsuccessfully for Governor in 1924, under the idea of opposing Standard Oil and traditional Louisiana politics. The incumbent governor was John M. Parker. It is later suspected that a failure to take position on the Ku Klux Klan and a heavy rain downpour the day of the election caused his defeat,
despite frequent use of the radio, a tactic he would continue to use throughout all of his campaigns.¹

1928, however, would see him elected to the office of Governor. His first public works and welfare programs came into fruition, with policies such as expanded roads and bridges, expanded universities, and a state hospital which was intended to give free treatment to all. In total, 9,700 miles of roads and 111 toll free toll-free bridges were constructed. Additionally Long expanded Louisiana State University and tripled enrollment, as well as introducing free textbooks, adult education classes, and night literacy classes. He also established LSU medical school. Long also lowered tuition and created scholarships to allow more poor students to be able to attend.² He funded his efforts with an increased income and inheritance tax, and a severance tax on oil. These measures made him extremely unpopular with the wealthy, especially those who had interests in oil. The severance tax, enacted in 1929, caused such displeasure that it led to several impeachment attempts ranging in severity from corruption to public profanity. However, using his popularity amongst the general population and knowledge of the law, he managed to evade the charges. In 1930, he also created the *Louisiana Progress*, later *American Progress*, his own newspaper, to sidestep media that favoured his opponents so he could get his ideas directly into print and to the people.³

³ Haas
1929 would see the stock market crash and the great depression strike America. During the Great Depression, industrial production in the United States dropped 47%, the GDP dropping by 30%. Perhaps most importantly in Long’s case, unemployment raised to as high as 20%, although there is some debate as to the exact numbers and percentages.\footnote{Pells, Richard H., and Christina D. Romer. "Great Depression." Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed February 18, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression.} Despite this, Huey Long’s programs proved very effective at counteracting the effects of the depression in Louisiana. Long was able to employ 22,000 to work on the roads alone, 10% of the nation’s highway workers. The increased transportation, healthcare, and education meant that Louisiana’s quality of life actually improved despite national decline.\footnote{Long Legacy Project}

However, not all of his efforts were successful. 1930 also marked a defeat from state lawmakers over multiple construction projects supported by Long. Long wasn’t going to accept this defeat so easily, and he decided to campaign for Senator under the assurance that he would stay Governor until his term concluded. Long was worried about his absence and if it would allow Louisiana’s lieutenant governor, a fierce political opponent, to gain leverage in Louisiana. Thus, he turned to The New Orleans Regular Democratic Organization, also known by its nickname the “Old Regulars”. The Old Regulars were a powerful group headed by New Orleans mayor T. Semmes Walmsley. This alliance would be temporary, and would lead to a standoff in Louisiana between the National Guard and New Orleans police when broken.\footnote{Haas}

While the alliance lasted it allowed Long to continue his construction plans. A new state capitol building and a governor's mansion began construction. Soon, plans for increased education spending and new road construction, funded by a new gas tax, also began. In 1931 he
used his growing strength over the state to remove the lieutenant governor and replace him with Oscar K. Allen, an ally and longtime friend of Long.

Not all of Long’s actions were directed purely at his own agenda. He also supported other politicians he believed would help America through the Great Depression. One was Hattie Caraway in Arkansas in 1932, who would become the first woman to be elected as a Senator. Long’s intense seven day campaign helped her win the election. The other politician was Franklin D. Roosevelt, also in 1932. Long was a strong initial supporter of Roosevelt and helped him by campaigning in the North. 7

Long would continue to consolidate his power in Louisiana, becoming a Senator while an ally of Long’s was elected as Governor. Long however, had begun to look outside Louisiana. 1934 would be an important year in Long’s political career, with the unveiling of his “Share The Wealth” Program. This was Long’s grand vision for the United States as a whole, and would introduce radical changes such as free universal college education, a guaranteed minimum income, guaranteed housing, a pension for the elderly, a personal wealth cap, and a heavily increased inheritance tax for all Americans. Long goes into detail during a radio address in which he introduced the program and its tenets. In the address he also gives details about the wealth redistribution itself. He states that under his program, a family should at least own a homestead not less than one third the average family wealth, no family should own more than 300 times the average family wealth, no family should earn less than one third the average family wealth, as well that no family would earn more than 300 times the average family wealth. He planned to allow retirement and pension payment at 60 years of age and cash payment of the soldier’s

7 Haas
bonus. By putting a cap on wealth which would be subject to special taxation and including the inheritance tax, he could redistribute that wealth to those below the minimum threshold. As can be seen, his national plans did not lack in ambition or scope.

Long’s support for Roosevelt did not last forever however. Long felt that Roosevelt's New Deal program was not providing what had been promised. The New York Times wrote a newspaper article in 1935 on the situation which gives specific details. It writes “Senator Huey Long of Louisiana made the definite announcement here yesterday that he would bolt President Roosevelt and the Democratic convention in 1936 unless the president dropped his New Deal program and proceeded at once to carry out a program for the redistribution of wealth. The Senator charged the president had betrayed his promises to the people and had pursued a policy combining the worst features of “concentrated capitalism, Stalinism and Hitlerism.” Comparisons to dictators such as Hitler and Stalin were also commonly levied against Long. This is not all Long has to say however. He continues, “The President ‘is no good’ and a ‘faker’ and ‘hasn’t a sincere bone in his body,’” Senator Long said in a press interview in which he discussed at length the state of the nation, explained once more his share the wealth plan, and predicted that revolution would sweep the United States unless the economic wrongs from which the people were suffering were righted. “I am opposed to revolution and I don’t think it’s necessary, but I’d rather see 200,000 persons killed than have 40,000,000 starving.” the Senator declared.” His increasing disillusionment with the presidency extended farther than just Roosevelt. He also expressed discontent with the Democratic party itself. He goes on to say “I

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10 New York Times
don’t know when they’re going to hold the Democratic convention. Why don’t they hold the Democratic convention and the Communist convention together, and save money? The Democratic convention will be a New Deal Bolshevist meeting.”¹¹ As well as “Under Roosevelt there is no more Democratic party—there is a New Deal party, a combination of the Stalin and Hitler systems, with a dash of Italian fascism.”¹² Thus, Long had become vehemently opposed to Roosevelt and the Democratic party, despite having ran as a Democrat for all of his elections and in fact as a Senator was currently serving as a Democrat.

He also gives some of his thoughts of the Share The Wealth program which he addressed in the same interview. It reads “He insisted his program would forever end the nation’s economic troubles. Those rich men who might “sabotage” he said, would be dealt with without difficulty, suggesting that some might be “hanged”. “There will be no resistance-only mass prayer, a mass thanks-giving and jubilation when the share-the-wealth program goes into effect,” the Kingfish asserted. “And the millionaires and billionaires will lead the procession.” He also responds to accusations against him. “Senator Long repudiated the idea that his own political program was a type of fascism. He disclaimed also the characterization of dictator, saying “in Louisiana the people rule.””¹³

Not all of Huey Long’s policies or actions were directed at improving the lives of Americans. At the same time his public works programs were being enacted, Huey Long also increased the power of the state government to hold absolute power over Louisiana. He used state legislature to pass new laws that made his power neigh absolute. 1934 marked a crucial year for his attempts to secure power. The New York Times once again has two articles in

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¹¹ New York Times
¹² New York Times
¹³ New York Times
particular that help capture the extent of his grip. One details his moves in state legislature in a newspaper appropriately headed “The “Kingfish” Becomes King”. It writes “To Senator Long the special legislative session which opened in Baton Rouge last Monday night has given more dictatorial powers than most potentates dare to dream of. “...the Senator had favourably reported, by the Ways and Means Committee of the lower house, forty-four bills giving him virtual control over the state of Louisiana”. It goes on with, “the ‘rushing through’ continued on the floor of both houses. All forty-four bills were passed by the House within three hours...”. “Immediately afterward the Senate showed similar willingness to do his bidding.” these new laws that were passed gave Long power over the police, public utilities, the state and city courts, a tighter grip on the election machinery used by Louisiana cities, and a board named by the Governor which could impose property taxes. (It is to be remembered the Governor at the time was an ally of Long) These new laws were not met with organized resistance, except for control over the police. This is where the alliance between Long and the Old Regulars fractures apart.  

Mayor Walmsley of New Orleans and leader of the Old Regulars, resisted the creation of a new police board which would take control of the police away from him. City officials were able to stop the board from taking over temporarily by way of injunction. Meanwhile, Long, with the help of Governor Allen tried to increase their control in other ways. When two members of the Orleans Parish Board of Assessors died, the Governor appointed two new Longist members to the board. Officials also resisted this move, stating that the law was clear that those vacancies must be filled by way of a special election. Walmsley also refused to let the new appointees sit. Long was furious. He went on the radio and declared “He would show the Mayor” and that

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“Since the Mayor would not accept two new appointees, he would have to accept a whole new board.” He then announced that the people of New Orleans should listen to only his new board, and ignore the local board. Both boards began setting up offices across the city. As the conflict escalated, both sides went as far to mobilize forces against each other. Huey Long mobilized a force of roughly 600 National Guardsmen, while the Mayor mobilized the New Orleans police force, normally numbered at 900, but was expanded to include 400 new deputies, with the Mayor threatening to raise it up to 10,000. Long did not idly sit by during the standoff however.

Governor Allen ordered the national guard to occupy the office of the Registrar of Voters, ostensibly because of threats of violence against the Registrar staff from disqualified voters. Governor Allen also declared “partial martial law”. The “Kingfish” of Louisiana who asserted that “In Louisiana the people rule” and whose slogan was “Every Man A King” was now in the process of crushing his political opposition by threatening armed conflict inside the state itself. He would ultimately maintain his grip, despite the challenge issued by the Old Regulars. The same person championing the working class was clamping down on every possible power he could. So the question remains, what became of Long, and what legacy did he leave?

Huey Long would not live to run for the presidency. On September 8th, 1935, Long attended another special session of Louisiana legislature, to push through more measures and tighten his grip further. One was to Gerrymander an opponent, Judge Benjamin Pavy. The events are not entirely clear, but the generally accepted version is that Benjamin Pavy’s son, Dr. Carl Weiss, approached Huey Long and shot him at point blank range in the abdomen. Long’s

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15Daniell, F. Raymond. "All Quiet At Front In Louisiana "War."" New York Times (New York City, NY), August 6, 1934.  
16Raymond
bodyguards, recruited from state police after Long had received multiple death threats and a drive by shooting of his home, opened fire of Weiss. Weiss was killed instantly as Long ran to safety. Huey Long died two days later in a nearby hospital on September 10th, 1935. His last words were “God, don’t let me die. I have so much to do.”17

In conclusion, Huey Long had a vision for America’s future he believed would create a greater America, but in his haste to achieve it, he resorted to autocratic means, becoming a dictator of his home state. Most of his public works programs are present even today, the hospitals, roads, bridges, LSU, and state capitol still exist and are being used decades later.
Primary Sources

Another newspaper that had to be cut, It does an excellent job of showing Long's initial support for Roosevelt.

Daniell, F. Raymond. "All Quiet At Front In Louisiana 'War.'" New York Times (New York City, NY), August 6, 1934.
This newspaper gave excellent detail on the standoff between Walmsley and Long, helping to capture the scope by providing statistics and both sides of the argument.

This Article gives good detail on how Long seized power through state legislature and most of it was thankfully able to make the cut.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hphgHi6FD8k.
This speech, given by Huey Long in 1934, was used by me to see how Long himself presented his ideas firsthand. This gave a better perspective on how he would be viewed by a person during the time he was campaigning.

This recording of Huey Long's speech was invaluable in trying to describe the Share The Wealth program and once again proved useful to getting inside the mindset of Long.

Out of all my cut sources, this is the one I most regret being unable to add. In this book written by Long himself, he details his vision for his first 100 days in office if he were elected in 1936. He goes far beyond the Share The Wealth program in this book, and it could warrant an entire new paper. It was still extremely valuable to see his perspective on his ideas.

"Louisiana Ramblers 'Every Man A King--Goodbye Huey Long' historic made after Long was assassinated." Video file, 2:53. Posted by Louisiana Ramblers, August 30, 2016.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4VfjONiX6g.
This song, made after Huey Long's death, helped show me that some were upset by his sudden demise.
Yet another sadly cut newspaper. This details an incident during a party Huey Long attended. As the article states, it is unclear what happened.

This newspaper was very valuable because it shows Long's growing discontent with Roosevelt and the Democratic party, as well as his thoughts on the Share The Wealth program.

Sadly not able to be used in my paper due to word limit constraints, this newspaper gives the reader an excellent look at how Long himself viewed his actions.

Secondary Sources

This source gave a broad overview of Long's life. While not used much in the paper, it was useful early on when I had just begun my paper to give me general information.

This website gives an overview of Huey Long's early life until his assassination. It was used to give me a broad view of his policies and how his life experiences shaped them.

This Website was valuable since it gave very detailed information on Long's construction projects, his death, and a copy of the Share The Wealth proposal

This source is not about Huey Long, rather, it is about the Great Depression. This source was important as the Great Depression had a big role in Long's popularity. It was used by me to provide useful statistics about the Great Depression.

This Website was valuable as it gave me an estimate of how much Long's wealth cap would be in today's money.