

CHAPTER
15

Section 1

AMERICAN LIVES

Huey Long

Louisiana's "Kingfish"

"Why weep or slumber, America?/Land of brave and true/With castles, clothing and food for all/All belongs to you./Ev'ry man a king, ev'ry man a king."
—Huey Long, recitation at the end of a radio broadcast (1935)

Huey Long (1893–1935) was a skilled politician who used a populist message and political manipulation to win great power in Louisiana. As his popularity grew, he threatened Franklin Roosevelt's hold on the presidency—only to be cut down by a bullet.

Long was a debater in high school. He hoped to go to law school, but had to work. Juggling a job and high school, he earned his diploma. Then he completed a three-year course of law in just eight months. He was admitted to the Louisiana bar at 21. He quickly entered politics, winning election to the state railroad commission.

By 1928 Long was campaigning for governor. Louisiana suffered from underdevelopment. It had only 30 miles of paved roads, no bridges crossed major rivers, and many poor children could not attend school. Long promised to change that: "Give me the chance to dry the tears of those who still weep," he said. He won, and quickly made changes. In a few years, the state had 8,500 miles of roads and twelve new bridges. Children were put on school buses to get to school and given free textbooks once they got there. The free books went to parochial schools too. When that law was challenged in the U.S. Supreme Court, Long himself argued in favor of it and won.

Long achieved these goals while fighting a reluctant state legislature. Some objected to his goals, others to his tactics—which included using money and arm-twisting to convince legislators to vote his way. The legislature moved to impeach him, but key state senators refused to convict and Long was saved. He then won statewide election to the U.S. Senate, quieting his critics.

Long delayed moving to Washington to consolidate his power in the state. Opponents were harassed by government officials or by Long's police. He put judges favorable to him into the state courts. He controlled the state Civil Service Commission and used new laws to give himself power over every official—city, parish, or state—in Louisiana.

In Washington, many saw Long as a comic figure. Loud and brash, he was colorful. He called himself the "Kingfish" after a character on a popular radio show, and stories circulated about his disregard for social manners. About some things, though, Long was serious. For years he had campaigned in Louisiana to "make every man a king." He was ready to bring that message to the nation. At first he supported Franklin Roosevelt, but soon he came to believe that the New Deal did not go far enough.

He began a campaign to win the presidency. Long set up "Share Our Wealth" clubs across the country. He spoke far and wide of his plans to limit a person's income to no more than \$1.8 million and to guarantee every adult no less than \$2,000. He promised free education through college and pensions for the aged. He even wrote a book describing what he would do when president—*My First Days in the White House* (1935). Roosevelt and his aides worried that Long would run as a third-party candidate in 1936 and pull as many as six million votes—throwing the election into the House of Representatives.

In the fall of 1935, Long returned to Louisiana for a special session of the legislature. As he left the state capitol one evening, a man stepped from behind a pillar and shot him. The assassin—immediately shot dead by Long's bodyguards—was a doctor whose father-in-law, a judge, had been forced off the bench by Long. Two days later death claimed the "Kingfish," a man described by writer William Manchester in 1974 as "one of the very few men of whom it can be said that, had he lived, American history would have been dramatically different."

Questions

1. Evaluate Long as a reformer.
2. How did Long's plan to limit incomes violate the free enterprise system?
3. Why did Roosevelt worry about Long?