

HUEY LONG AND NORMAN THOMAS: A COMPARATIVE BIOGRAPHY, 1884-
1935

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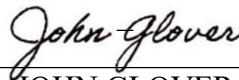
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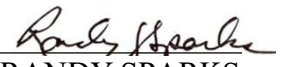
WITH HONORS IN HISTORY

BY



JOHN GLOVER

APPROVED:



RANDY SPARKS
Director of Thesis



ANDY HOROWITZ
Second Reader



T. R. JOHNSON
Third Reader

John Glover: Huey Long and Norman Thomas: A Comparative Biography, 1884-1935

(Professor Randy Sparks, History)

This thesis offers a comparative biography of the Louisiana politician-turned presidential hopeful Huey Long and the Socialist Party of America leader Norman Thomas. The focus is on Long and Thomas's activities during President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first presidential term, especially insofar as the men were rivals. The thesis draws on archival sources obtained from Tulane and Louisiana State University as well as the Louisiana Historical Center pertaining to Huey Long and a collection at the New York Public Library for information on Thomas. Long's memoir *Every Man a King* and Thomas's unpublished autobiography, Thomas's oral history preserved by Columbia University's Oral History Project, and secondary sources provided invaluable information. The first two chapters retrace Huey Long's rise to power in Louisiana and at the national level. Long was a transformational, progressive figure whose rabble rousing and prioritization of economic over cultural grievance upended Bourbon Democratic rule over Louisiana and contributed to the overthrow of the American government's laissez faire, non-interventionist consensus in response to the Great Depression. Chapters three and four follow Thomas's rise from middle-class respectability as a Presbyterian minister to Socialist radical. Thomas rose to a position of dominance over the Socialist Party, the American 20th century's most formidable third party. Thomas's leadership revitalized the Party and positioned it to jockey for influence with Huey Long and FDR during the Depression era. Long and Thomas's rivalry influenced them to pressure President Roosevelt. In as much as Long and Thomas's Socialists shaped the New Deal, they left an indelible mark on American social democracy.

[James Madison] recognized that someday there would be no more surplus space or resources in the North American continent. Near the end of his life he hazarded an informed guess that such a situation would develop sometime near the end of the 1920s, and forecast that the United States would then turn toward some kind of monarchy.¹

¹ William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), location 560.

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I WOULD LIKE TO THANK MY FAMILY, ESPECIALLY MY PARENTS LESTER
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Introduction

“Do you suppose I’m going to turn out to be one of those starry-eyed idealists like my kid brother?” Tyler Spotswood asks his boss’s wife rhetorically in John Dos Passos’s anti-Huey Long novel *Number One*.² For Spotswood, an alcoholic political operator serving a charismatic Huey Long-style politician named Chuck Crawford, to be the Kingfish’s man is to exchange morality for proximity to power. Spotswood’s conscience haunts him, driving him further and further into the depths of the bottle. Spotswood’s conscience takes the form of his younger brother Glenn, a Marxist crusader who suffers a violent death at Francoist hands while fighting with an analogue to the communist Abraham Lincoln Brigade during the Spanish Civil War.³ Publishing his anti-Long novel during the 1940s, Dos Passos, who had been a Communist during the Depression era, fudged the timeline as the Spanish Civil War did not break out until the year following Huey Long’s assassination.⁴ Writing his corrupt, powerful brother Tyler, the Kingfish lackey, from a fascist prison, Glenn’s last words ask Tyler to “not let them sell out too much of the by the people for the people part of the oldtime United States way.”⁵ In Dos Passos’s telling, then, for the intellectual person of conscience during the 1930s, the Depression era was about weighing idealism against opportunism, or Marxism against Longism. A person could oppose capitalism and sleep well at night, or they could make their compromises with mainstream electoral politics as the art of the possible. They could not do both.

² John Dos Passos, *Number One* (New York: Open Road Distribution, 2015), 148.

³ Dos Passos, *Number One*, 188.

⁴ Irving Howe, *Socialism and America* (New York: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Publishers, 1985), 56.

⁵ Dos Passos, *Number One*, 196.

The Dos Passos thesis of the 1930s suggests an inherent tension between principle and praxis while the history of the era reveals Dos Passos's choice to be a false one. The view that every Depression-era Marxist was merely an affectatious, temporarily astray member of the gentry like John Dos Passos permeates the historiography of the Marxist political parties as well as fictional accounts. The overly opinionated white-collar poseur was a fixture on the radical scene, even predominating it. The extent to which a college-educated crop of gap-year Marxists came to dominate the Socialist Party of America, in particular, encourages dismissal of American Marxist history. Were this perception to form the whole picture, historians could safely dismiss the Marxists as having been locked in a discreet, metaphysical struggle devoid of influence vis-à-vis bona fide political players such as Huey Long. Thanks to a significant degree to the efforts of one preternaturally gifted man named Norman Thomas – the indomitable Socialist Party of America leader – Marxist efforts during Roosevelt's first presidential term significantly influenced the political course of the nation.

It is impossible to grapple with the Marxists' indispensable contribution to the New Deal, which fundamentally altered the role of the U.S. Federal Government in American life, without grappling with Norman Thomas's rivalry with Huey Long. The novelists' vision of Huey Long as a morally vacant opportunist forms a persuasive psychological portrait of the man while obscuring the contributions Huey Long, the statesman, made to Louisiana and the nation. Huey Long's lifetime provisions one of history's great vindications of the pragmatist sensibility. For all the wrong reasons – yawning, insatiable greed and vindictiveness – Long cloaked himself in the mantle of people's tribune. He catapulted himself to the rarified heights of Louisianan and, then,

American politics, but he took his constituents with him. His success became their success because he delivered on his promises to an extent that few other politicians have managed. The Kingfish – despite his life’s having been cut short by a reactionary assassin’s bullet – impacted the New Deal more than any other figure outside of the Roosevelt Administration proper. Assessing the Long-Roosevelt rivalry’s formative role in directing the New Deal down a progressive trajectory, scholars have tended to overlook how Huey Long’s rivalry with the American Marxist political parties impacted his relations with the President.

Contrary to Dos Passos’s argument, however, the clearest distillation of this binary opposition between Marxism and Longism was not between the Communists and Huey Long but rather between Norman Thomas’s Socialists and Huey Long. While the American Communists, who were just as opposed to Long as the Socialist Party was, eclipsed Socialist power during the 1930s, the Communists were not as ably led. The Communists had no leader who could rival Norman Thomas’s stature and, therefore, no one they could field against the Kingfish with whom the Kingfish would condescend to spar. Instead, the Communists dispatched writers to Louisiana to gather information and author anti-Long polemics while their press organs continually pumped out condemnations of the Kingfish and his agenda throughout the Long years. These reports, written about by Huey Long scholar Edward Haas in “Huey Long and the Communists,” were an important facet of the conflict between Long and American Marxists during Roosevelt’s first term in the White House.⁶

⁶ Edward F. Haas, “Huey Long and the Communists,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 32, no. 1 (Winter 1991), 30.

In terms of conflict, however, the Communist Party rivalry with Long hardly held a candle to Norman Thomas's rivalry with Huey Long. The bitter interpersonal dynamic, which played out in condemnatory statements to the press and a New York City debate between the two men, lent the Socialist-Longist rivalry a relative cohesion. The Nazis' rise to power coinciding with the Great Depression had American Marxists in a paranoid state by the time President Franklin D. Roosevelt assumed office in 1933.⁷ Senator Huey Long had been a prominent figure since he gained the Louisiana governorship in 1928. By 1933, he became an undeniable force in national politics. Long's creation of a national political organization through his Share Our Wealth clubs in early 1934 positioned him as a presidential contender, a leader whose only rival in terms of popularity on the left was the President himself. Long's quick ascent alarmed Norman Thomas and the Socialists, whose abstract conceptions about what an American dictator would look like, formed through observation of European developments, overlapped significantly with Huey Long's characteristics. Between early 1934 and late 1935, Norman Thomas devoted a considerable portion of his energy to raising the alarm about Longism, successfully challenging the Kingfish to a debate and even planning a tour of the Pelican State to bring his anti-Long case before everyday Louisianans.

For Huey Long, who had an entire state to run as well as senatorial duties to attend to and presidential ambitions to cultivate, the rivalry with Thomas was little more than a distraction. However, the underpinnings of Long's political philosophy were anti-Marxist. Long explicitly conceived of his Share Our Wealth platform as an attempt to rescue capitalism from its own excesses. The Great Depression stemmed, in large part,

⁷ Norman Thomas, "The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas," FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer.

from income inequality. Because the mass of Americans was hurting for funds, there were not enough consumers spending the money necessary to keep the economy stimulated.⁸ Long proposed to redistribute the currency in circulation from the class of wealthy hoarders at the top of the economic pyramid to everyone else. If the government failed to enact his reforms, Long said, then the people, in their desperation, would fall into the hands of Marxists, and therein lay the loss of what Long conceived of as the American way. Regardless of the soundness of Long's prescription for the nation's economic woes, his impetus for action rested on a false premise. In the U.S., there was no powerful, Marxist fifth column waiting to assume power once the capitalists lost their legitimacy though socialist and communist parties held more sway in Europe. The American Marxist political parties, the American Communist Party and Norman Thomas's Socialist Party of America, were diminutive organizations who could only sway elections in a handful of localities such as New York City and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Because the United States lacked powerful Marxist political parties, it was convenient for Long to pretend that Thomas represented a greater threat to his ambitions than Thomas, whose Party's prospects were rapidly diminishing in 1934 and 1935, actually did. It is likely for this reason that Long humored Thomas, accepting his challenge to a debate and trading verbal jabs with him and his Socialist comrades through the press.

Nearly every major scholar of Huey Long and Norman Thomas has felt the need to, at least, touch on the rivalry between the two men. Long's most prominent biographer T. Harry Williams devotes approximately one page to the Long-Thomas rivalry while

⁸ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression Era* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 91.

Thomas's best biographer W. A. Swanberg gives the issue the same amount of attention.⁹ Socialist Party historian Jack Ross, whose political conservatism lends his work a refreshing iconoclasm, has produced the only thoughtful analysis of Thomas's relationship with Long. In his 2015 book *The Socialist Party of America*, Ross plays up the historical overlap between Populism and agrarian Socialism, using this history to downplay the contentiousness of Long and Thomas's relationship. Ross's Thomas is a strikingly passive figure, allowing the Militant faction within his Party to poison his relationship with Long. In Ross's telling, a reluctant Thomas paints Long out to be a fascist to placate his Militant followers.¹⁰ It is true that Thomas strayed from his core democratic socialist principles to shore up support for his leadership from a communistic youth movement within the Socialist Party. However, the degree of Thomas's hostility toward Long, an enmity he maintained even decades after the fact, rules out the possibility that Thomas's animosity toward the Louisianan was insincere. Ross makes too much of the similarity between Populism and Socialism.¹¹ As Irving Howe points out, agrarian Socialists differed from Populists during the Debs era in that the Populists cultivated support from petty landowners while the Socialists focused on sharecroppers and agricultural wage laborers.¹² This delineation was equally true during the Depression era.

Properly characterizing the antagonistic relationship between Long and Thomas has significant implications as it helps situate the men within the political landscape of

⁹ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Random House, 1981), 695.

W. A. Swanberg, *Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 164.

¹⁰ Jack Ross, *The Socialist Party of America: A Complete History* (Lincoln Nebraska: The University of Nebraska Press, 2015), 361.

¹¹ Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 361.

¹² Howe, *Socialism and America*, 10.

Roosevelt's first term. As national figures, Thomas and Long both failed to achieve their fundamental ambitions. Long never received the chance to redistribute the wealth as president. Thomas's dream of a farmer-labor third party, with the Socialist Party serving as an intellectual core and capable of prompting a party realignment by replacing the Democrats, never materialized. Where Thomas and Long fell short, however, the most gifted politician of the era Franklin Delano Roosevelt picked up the baton, successfully co-opting both men's brightest ideas and taking their constituents for himself. In this way, Huey Long and Norman Thomas significantly influenced Roosevelt's first term and helped shape the Second New Deal, which, from a legislative standpoint, ranked among the 20th century's most pivotal four years. The Long-Thomas rivalry shaped the nature of the pressure that both men exerted on FDR.

Through Norman Thomas's indefatigable, lonely advocacy on behalf of the sharecroppers, he pressured the Roosevelt Administration into revising its agricultural policies. In the form of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, the First New Deal's landmark agricultural legislation, New Dealers crafted patently pro-landowner legislation that helped facilitate the sharecroppers' and agricultural wage laborers' disenfranchisement. The AAA's policies contributed to the Depression's expediting the trend in American history toward urbanization and Westernization. A mass exodus of – especially Southern – rural Americans fled the country for nonexistent opportunity in the cities and rural California. The alarm Thomas felt about Huey Long's increasing popularity prompted him to make advocacy on behalf of these people his hobby horse as he feared that this displaced peasantry would prove a fertile breeding ground of Longism. Roosevelt resisted Thomas's advocacy at first. The President needed the Bourbon Democrats to remain

onboard his New Deal coalition and feared that intervening on the issue against Southern planters might push Southerners into Republican arms. That Roosevelt eventually acceded to Thomas's wishes – at least, in part – reflected the increasingly untenable position of Southerners within a progressive-led Democratic Party. The gradual exodus of Dixie from the Democrats resulted in the great party realignment of the 20th century. The Democratic Party that emerged was a party more closely resembling Norman Thomas's vision of an ideologically coherent, progressive major party closely allied with the labor movement.¹³ In a way, then, Thomas helped along his dream of a party realignment, and he might not have done so absent his suspicions concerning Huey Long's fascist intentions.

Norman Mattoon Thomas grew up around the turn of the century in a non-descript Ohio town. He hailed from a line of middle-class Puritans, whose patriarchs had been Presbyterian ministers for generations leading up to Norman. Thomas's disciplined childhood instilled in him the powerful intellect, work ethic, and sense of justice that formed the ingredients for his surprise ascent to the top of the late Eugene Debs's Socialist Party of America. Thomas's earned his bachelor's degree from Ivy League Princeton University at a time when the ranks of the country's ruling class were thinner and less porous, earning him a level of respect and attention from the upper crust that he never relinquished. By the time Thomas gained control of the Party, it was well past its heyday and would, despite Thomas's dedication, never relive the heady days when Debs's constituency encompassed Oklahoma farmers and New York garment-factory workers. Though Thomas, except for a brief moment in 1932, presided over an anemic

¹³ Norman Thomas, interview by Allan Nevins and Dean Albertson, Oral History Project, 1949, 100.

and declining Socialist Party, his unique talents and elite background enabled this minor third party to punch above its weight. Eugene Debs's Socialist Party during the Progressive Era intimidated Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson into co-opting and implementing planks of the Socialist Party platform. Norman Thomas's Socialists successfully pressured Franklin Roosevelt to quit sitting on his hands on the sharecropper issue.

For the considerable influence he exerted, Thomas's biographers have not offered him enough credit. The conventional narrative of Thomas's tenure at the Socialist Party's helm holds that he exerted a misguided, moderating influence on the Party. Thomas's focus on attracting middle-class support to the Party paid dividends during the Hoover years but backfired once Franklin Roosevelt reached the White House and stole middle-class constituents out from under the Socialists through his progressive reforms. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., takes this view, arguing that where Eugene Debs built a working-class Socialist Party, Thomas made a bourgeois one.¹⁴ In his writing about Thomas, Bernard Johnpoll goes further still, saying that Thomas "was moving the Party in the direction of simple progressivism."¹⁵ While Thomas's fundamental goal before 1933 was to make Marxism palatable to educated, affluent Americans, the fact many Thomas scholars tend to miss is that he revised his approach in response to Huey Long and the New Deal. In order to carve out electoral ground for the Socialists in the face of Roosevelt's progressivism, Thomas came the closest he ever came in his life to orthodox Marxism during Roosevelt's first term. As Thomas became more Marxist, he became

¹⁴ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval, 1935-1936* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 177.

¹⁵ Bernard K Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress: Norman Thomas and the decline of American Socialism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 61.

increasingly concerned for the traditional Marxist constituencies, the industrial workers and the non-landowning farmers.

With his scholarly airs, moral pathos, Princeton degree, and marriage to a New York heiress, Thomas's admission to the American elite was relatively frictionless. Huey Pierce Long, who was born ten years after Thomas to a family of relatively well-off North Louisianan yeomen, fought his way to the top. The North Louisiana of Huey Long's boyhood was a hotbed of political unrest against the Bourbon Democrat regime that had dominated Louisiana since the failure of Reconstruction and 19th-century Populism. Huey, the boy, received exposure to agrarian Populism and Debsian Socialism. From a young age, Long possessed a restive intelligence, an innate genius that remained uncultivated by book learning for many years. Huey's intrinsic ability coupled with a deep-seated will to power, a potent recipe for a man who began working toward the presidency as an adolescent. Presented with an opportunity to earn an undergraduate degree from Louisiana State University, Long demurred, preferring to make his own way as a traveling salesman. Hawking his wares door-to-door in the rural South, Long developed a talent for persuasion. Long later applied his mind to law school and worked as an attorney, refining an intellect that few of his contemporaries could rival.

While still a young man, Long channeled his brilliance, ambition, and neo-Populist ethos into a political career. Leveraging the reputation he had built for himself as a litigious, anti-corporate attorney devoted to the common man, Long served a stint as a commissioner on the powerful Public Utilities Commission, eventually campaigning his way into the governor's mansion in 1928. As an upstart leader, Governor Long upended nearly half a century of corrupt Redeemer rule. In a state whose political controversies

had centered around racial and sectarian grievances for generations, Long told his constituents to vote with their pocket books, rewarding them for their support by making the state government more responsive to the mass of Louisianans' economic needs than it had ever been. While Long succeeded in ingraining class-based mass politics in the Pelican State, he continued in the shambolic tradition of Louisiana democracy, utilizing authoritarian methods and amassing an unprecedented amount of power for himself and his cronies.

Long's, who was now known as the Louisiana Kingfish, ambitions had always exceeded the parochial, and he injected himself onto the national scene. As U.S. senator, he became the most progressive force within the Democratic Party. He cultivated an independent power base for himself through shrewd media manipulation and grassroots organization through his Share Our Wealth clubs. He suffered a falling out with President Roosevelt just months into the powerful new president's first term. From then on, Long became FDR's most prominent critic, assailing the New Deal from the left on the Senate floor and in the court of public opinion. Long's Share Our Wealth platform centered around a redistributive tax scheme intended to radically curtail income inequality. As Long professed to uphold capitalism as a cherished American tradition, his justification for this obtrusive government intervention was the existential threat he claimed Marxists posed to the nation. Marxism for Huey Long was often an amorphous, open-ended concept. However, Long's rivalry with the Socialist Party and Norman Thomas lent substance to his fearmongering about the Marxist political threat. The usefulness of a high-profile Socialist Party to Long's political project likely explains why he

condescended to trade verbal barbs and even debate Norman Thomas, who was a figure of minor importance compared with Long.

Between the Kingfish's demagogic broadsides against Socialism and calls to redistribute the wealth, he grew into such a potent threat to the President that Roosevelt opted to take the New Deal in a new direction. In the summer of 1935, the Roosevelt Administration unveiled the "Second New Deal," a much-heralded turn to the left on issues such as welfare, redistributive taxation, and support for the labor movement. The Second New Deal was explicitly a tactical maneuver on the President's part intended to deflate the Kingfish's critique of the New Deal. No one ever found out whether or not the maneuver succeeded in halting Long's momentum as a disaffected Louisiana patrician named Dr. Carl Weiss assassinated the Kingfish in September 1935.

The lack of attention paid to the Long-Thomas rivalry in the historiography on Long has impoverished scholarly understanding of the Kingfish. While there are broadly two schools of thought about Long, the anti-Long orthodox tradition has enjoyed considerably more adherents than the rival revisionist school. While T. Harry Williams's landmark biography *Huey Long* brought the revisionist historians into ascendance for a period, more recently the orthodox historians have resurged in the personages of historians such as Glenn Jeansonne and Richard D. White. Even Alan Brinkley's National Book Award-winning *Voices of Protest* was orthodox to the extent that it centers a view of Long as a reactionary, a neo-Populist politician at a time when accelerated urbanization and industrialization were rendering Populism anachronistic.¹⁶

¹⁶ Michael S. Martin, "We Both Have Reason to Feel Good About the Book": Russell Long, T. Harry Williams, and Huey Long," *The Historian* 69, no. 4 (2007), 708, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.2007.00195.x>.

Focusing on Huey Long's national career and his progressive challenge to Franklin Roosevelt reveals a Kingfish eminently comfortable with modernity. For all of his Jacksonian rhetoric, there is simply little evidence that Long sought to turn back the clock and restore the nation to some imagined yeomen republic. Long, the Louisiana governor and U.S. senator, was a progressive beau ideal. As governor, his signature legislative accomplishments were paying for internal improvements and educational infrastructure through a redistributive tax scheme. As a senator, he championed organized labor and supported the construction of a government-guaranteed economic safety net for everyday Americans.

Huey Long's rivalry with Norman Thomas was a constitutive element of his progressivism. From its inception, progressivism was an anti-Marxist tradition. If Huey Long was concerned that economic inequality was creating an opening for Marxists, then that same concern helped shape the presidencies of Teddy Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Roosevelt, the great progressive presidents. Examining Long's rivalry with Thomas, then, sheds light not only on Long's political project but also on the progressive political project writ large. The lack of a full reckoning with the relationship between early 20th-century American Marxism and progressivism is a gap in the historiography of those decades that is reflective of scholars' underestimating the historical importance of the Marxist political parties. The most simplistic formulation of the difference between progressivism and Marxism was that progressivism sought to have the public sector encroach on the private sector by erecting guardrails and slightly enlarging the government control of resources and infrastructure apropos private ownership. The

Marxists, conversely, wanted to abolish the private sector altogether and essentially replace it with an all-encompassing state.

Another approach historians can take to the Thomas-Long rivalry and, thereby, the divide between progressivism and Marxism more broadly is to ask the question: Whom did these men speak for? On the east bank of the Mississippi River in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the skyscraper state capitol that Huey Long built as a monument to his modernization of the state stands, overlooking a statue of Long with hand outstretched gazing up at the tower. Etched into the statue is one of the Kingfish's most famous quotations from a 1935 Senate Speech. He said, "I know when I am right in my own conscience. I have one language. Its simplicity gains pardon for my lack of letters. Fear will not change it. Persecution will not change it. It cannot be changed while people suffer." Stirring as Long's words were, the quotation raises the question of whom exactly the Kingfish meant by "people." For the most part, he was not referring to the masses of Southern sharecroppers and agricultural wage earners. He could not have meant the unskilled urban laborers, for whom Huey Long accomplished little. The Long and Oscar Allen Administration's reforms in Louisiana included improved infrastructure, hospitals, literacy programs, and the elimination of the poll tax; these measures disproportionately benefitted the state's rural and urban poor. However, the industrial and non-landowning agricultural labor force never formed the backbone of Long's support at the state and national levels. The only major forces that made advocacy for the U.S.'s lowest earners a bread-and-butter issue were the Marxist political parties. In that difference of constituency lay the major distinction between the Marxists on the one hand and the progressives and populists on the other hand.

Neither Huey Long nor Franklin Roosevelt, the great progressives of their day, did as much for the people at the very lowest rung of the economic ladder as they might have though Long was further to the left than FDR was. The Kingfish successfully lobbied to have the New Deal aid more people than Roosevelt initially intended. Norman Thomas dedicated his Depression-era energy to pushing the Roosevelt Administration to add the sharecroppers and industrial laborers to the beneficiaries of the economic recovery effort. Thomas, though he did not leave his rivalry with the President empty-handed, enjoyed less success than Huey Long did. Ironically, by opposing one another, Huey Long and Norman Thomas worked in concert in a way, pulling the New Deal to the left. Thomas's alarm at what he perceived as the Kingfish's fascism pushed the Socialist leader away from his progressive roots toward an orthodox Marxism that necessitated he advocate for the indigent peasants and proletarians. Whether sincere or insincere, Huey Long's opposition to the Marxist political parties provided him with a justification for breaking with the President. Without Long's attacking President Roosevelt, there is reason to suspect that the New Deal might have been a fundamentally less ambitious project, as Roosevelt would not have supported the Second New Deal.

Foregrounding the Socialist Party and Norman Thomas's role as part of a general recapitulation of the Huey Long story enables a reconstruction of the New Deal's teleology. Though revisionist Huey Long scholars have viewed the Kingfish as a progressive force and emphasized his haranguing the Roosevelt Administration from the left, they have overlooked the role the Socialists, in turn, played in increasing Huey Long's concern for economically dispossessed Americans. The Kingfish understood that his marquee plan to radically redistribute the wealth represented an expansion of the

federal government's traditional role. He defended his plan by arguing that the Marxist threat provided Share Our Wealth with an impetus. Speaking of the U.S.'s economic elite, the Kingfish said, "I'd cut their nails and file their teeth and let them live."¹⁷ The implication was that the finance capitalists and industrial magnates were getting off with a light punishment. The prospect of an eat-the-rich Socialist takeover of the U.S. represented an exigent threat. Frequently citing anti-Marxism as his justification, then, Huey Long advocated for his Share Our Wealth reform slate: redistributive taxation, old-age pensions, and pro-labor policy. Franklin Roosevelt, fearing the political mileage Long was obtaining from his Share Our Wealth advocacy, co-opted the Share Our Wealth platform in 1935, ratifying the Kingfish's program in the form of the Second New Deal.

If a line of revisionist historians has sprung up to rehabilitate the Huey Long legacy, the same cannot necessarily be said of Norman Thomas. Though Thomas has not lacked scholarly defenders, Thomas's defenders tend to accede to a debate on the terms of Thomas's critics. Namely, the Socialist leader's apologists accept the criticism that he was a moderate, bourgeois socialist. Thomas scholars tend to agree that he was indistinguishable from a progressive, and, therefore, it was not surprising that the greatest progressive president, Franklin Roosevelt, snuffed out the Socialist Party. This view of Thomas, the bourgeois socialist, flattens the arc of his career and ignores the extent to which the Depression era radicalized him.

In response to the Great Depression and Huey Long's concurrent rise to political preeminence, Norman Thomas reinvented himself as an orthodox Marxist. The rivalry with Long inspired Thomas, whose personal relationship with Roosevelt compensated for

¹⁷ Williams, *Huey Long*, 94.

his relative lack of popularity, to oppose the New Deal's corporatism. Thomas kept his ear to the ground and learned how the Democrat's recovery effort excluded the industrial and non-landowning agricultural labor forces from the ranks of its beneficiaries. The Socialist leader became convinced that Huey Long's fascism would become a siren call to these indigent people. In particular, he grew to wear the dispossessed Southern sharecroppers' cause on his sleeve and eventually influenced the Roosevelt Administration to offer concessions. The Roosevelt Administration's concessions to the sharecroppers were insufficient and surreptitious. However, that the President took any steps at all was largely thanks to the Socialists' efforts. Thomas's, as a third-party leader and American Marxist, life accustomed him to failure, but he was able to hang his hat on the relief he won for the sharecroppers.

Just as Huey Long's political project was reactive to Norman Thomas, Thomas's ideological Marxism took its inspiration from Huey Long. The two men, then, locked into a feedback loop, the end result of which was a more purely distilled iteration of each man: Long, the reformist progressive, and Thomas, the throw-the-baby-out-with-the-bathwater impossibilist. For the Kingfish, the rivalry with the Marxists inspired him to oppose the First New Deal on the basis of its piecemeal nature. Thomas feared that if Roosevelt's reforms failed to reinvigorate the declining nation, then the people, in their fear and desperation, would turn to the Kingfish as a strongman. Thomas pressured the Roosevelt Administration tirelessly to add industrial workers, sharecroppers, and agricultural wage laborers to the beneficiaries of recovery. Roosevelt incorporated elements of Norman Thomas and Huey Long's ideas to into the New Deal. Ironically, then, Thomas and Long, imagining that they were thwarting one another, worked in

concert, leaving their mark on American history in the changes to FDR's approach to governance that they helped to inspire.

Chapter One: Huey Long's Early Life

The ingredients for Huey Long's becoming a great man were the characteristics he obtained during his childhood. Long, the man, likely became Long, the Louisiana Kingfish, out of an attempt to satisfy his deep-seated inferiority complex with an avarice tempered by a sense of social justice. That is not to say that Huey Long possessed compelling altruistic impulses. Rather, it was a matter of happenstance that Long's pursuit of power redounded to the benefit of the toiling classes of Louisianans and Americans whom few politicians had theretofore deigned to serve. The central nuance of Long's character was, then, that he had self-serving reasons for pursuing altruistic ends.

Huey Pierce Long, Jr., was born on August 30, 1893 in in Winnfield, the seat of Winn Parish, a part of the Pelican State in fact, if not in spirit. The Long family's Louisiana did not belong to the "moonlit and magnolia" world of the Mississippi River valley where Gallic planters lived in palatial houses and their sharecroppers and tenants in dilapidated shacks. The Longs were far removed from the cosmopolitan port city of New Orleans and its dominant political machine, the Old Regulars, or the "Tammany Hall of the South."¹⁸ Winn Parish sat in the northern part of the state where plantation agriculture gave way to yeomen farming and Roman Catholicism to Protestantism. Huey Long, the politician, would one day put out a campaign circular that said:

"Then came Huey P. Long! From the red clay piney hills of North Louisiana arose the voice of this young man who had been born in a log cabin, and who was destined to bring more Progress to his native state."¹⁹

¹⁸ Louis Cochran, "The Louisiana Kingfish," *The American Mercury*, July 1932, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

¹⁹ "Louisiana's March of Progress," Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

The circular lends credence to Huey's sister's accusation that he strategically downplayed the family's affluence to appeal to his rural constituency.

The life Huey P. Long, Sr., provided for his children was not as hard scrabble as the phrase "log cabin" suggested. By the time the junior Huey was growing up, his father ranked among the parish's wealthiest landowners.²⁰ Their affluence was sufficient that young Huey, his rebellious streak compounding an aversion to physical labor, could get away with shirking his chores around the farm.²¹ He preferred to spend his time reading romantic tales of heroic men of action by authors such as Alexandre Dumas and Walter Scott.²² His mother provided him with an informal religious education by her frequently reading aloud from the Bible.²³ In his reading, Huey showed signs of the intellectual capability and dilettantish restlessness that would distinguish him as an adult. His brother Earl remembered, "He wouldn't stay still."²⁴ His constant need for stimulation drew him away from his books to outdoor games such as leap frog, marbles, and baseball.

If the Long family's class status was not the source of Huey's later economic radicalism, then one can trace the context for his politics to Winn Parish. The red-dirt farmland of North Louisiana and its cultivators are the source of the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger's condescending epithet for Huey, the "messiah of the rednecks."²⁵ Huey came by the aw-shucks, buffoonish persona he often saw fit to deploy as Governor and U.S. Senator from the culture of the small-holding farmers who formed the backdrop of his youth. The people of Winn were – to borrow Roger Shugg's description in the

²⁰ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 21.

²¹ Huey P. Long, *Every Man a King: The Autobiography of Huey P. Long* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1996), 4.

²² Earl Long Oral History, August 28, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

²³ Julius Long Oral History, August 28, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

²⁴ Earl Long Oral History, August 28, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

²⁵ Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, 55.

Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana – “the non-slaveholding farmers and poor whites on the pine hills and flats.”²⁶ They opposed the South’s secession from the Union before the Civil War.²⁷ Winn became a hotbed of Populist dissatisfaction with the control of the South by Bourbon Democrats after the downfall of Reconstruction. North Louisiana even showed support for the Socialist Party under Eugene Debs. In 1908, with Debsian Socialism nearing the apex of its popularity, a teenage Huey travelled to Mineral Springs, Louisiana to debate a travelling Socialist lecturer.²⁸ Accounts of Long’s family and childhood show that he had exposure to socialist ideas from an early age. As an adult, Long caught flak from socialist relatives due to his feuding with Norman Thomas at a family reunion in Winn Parish.²⁹

Long biographer Glenn Jeansonne suggests that the accounts of Winn Parish’s radicalism are overblown. He points out that the parish would later fall in line for George Wallace, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan.³⁰ The late 20th century Winn Parish that Jeansonne characterizes was far removed from the Winn Huey Long knew around the turn of the century. There can be no doubt that his hometown’s Populist legacy influenced Long’s intellectual development. In his autobiography, he recollects witnessing the local sheriff’s evicting a farmer from his property after the bank foreclosed on it, suggesting that this moment helped cement his contempt for the

²⁶ Roger Wallace Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana: A Social History of White Farmers and Laborers during Slavery and After, 1840-1875* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1939), 44.

²⁷ Julius Long Oral History, August 28, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

²⁸ William Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), location 643.

²⁹ Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 362.

³⁰ Glen Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses: Huey P. Long and the Great Depression* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 376, Tulane University Special Collections, Jones Hall Louisiana Research Collection.

moneyed interests' encroachments on everyday people.³¹ One family member recounted that Huey's childhood would have exposed him regularly to expressions of cynicism regarding elites. The sentiment of "What do these rich folks care for the poor man?" was widely felt.³²

Long's unruliness, mitigated only somewhat by his overriding ambition, carried over into his adolescence. At a high school competition, he won a scholarship to attend Louisiana State University, the school, which he, as governor, would turn into the pièce de résistance of the state's modernization.³³ Though many of his older siblings attended and finished college, Huey felt that the scholarship's not provisioning for living expenses or school books precluded him from taking the opportunity. Impatient as ever and unwilling to adhere to conventional expectations, Long decided there was no time like the present to make a name for himself in the world.

He set out from Winn intent on making his living as a salesman. As a fresh-faced door-to-door salesman, Long experienced success lighting upon and honing a talent for persuasion. He developed his identification with and understanding of rural Southerners, hawking his wares along such routes as the back roads of Arkansas. He sold books, soap, patent medicine, and cooking supplies.³⁴ When some housewife lacked interest in his pitch, Long would barge into her house, roll up his sleeves, and bake a dessert in her kitchen, so there could be no doubt about the value of his goods. He became too successful for his own good, candidly admitting in his memoir to his termination from

³¹ Long, *Every Man a King*, 2.

³² Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 43.

³³ Huey Long, *Every Man a King*, 7.

³⁴ Hamilton Basso, "Huey Long and His Background," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1935, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 2.

one position for embezzling funds from his expense account and working irregularly.³⁵ An appetite for the fast life and ethical unscrupulousness about his means of accessing it became common denominators throughout his life.

Long did make out well from his sales days in at least one respect: It led to his marrying Rose McConnell of Shreveport, Louisiana after she won one of the baking competitions he put on as a salesman.³⁶ Their marriage would not be a happy one; Huey's nature proved too libertine for the discipline of domestic life. It did provide Huey with a legacy in the form of his son Russell, who carried on his father's name in the national political arena. Russell Long, the U.S. Senator, played an instrumental role in the creation of the most important contribution to the Huey Long historiography: T. Harry Williams's *Huey Long*.³⁷

Putting his successes and mishaps on the road behind him, Huey, the prodigal son, submitted to his family's prudent advice. He made ill-fated tries at attending school at the University of Oklahoma and even a Southern Baptist seminary where his pious mother talked him into enrolling. Not cut out for the clergy, Long found himself a non-traditional student at Tulane Law School in Uptown New Orleans, the territory of that Southeast Louisianan elite he had cultivated contempt for as a child. Huey's older brother Julius, a lawyer – later to become Huey's inveterate political enemy – took it upon himself to mentor his wayward younger brother, advancing him funds for law school.³⁸ The support

³⁵ Long, *Every Man a King*, 8

³⁶ Louis Cochran, "The Louisiana Kingfish," *The American Mercury*, July 1932, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

³⁷ Martin, "'We Both Have Reason to Feel Good About the Book,'" 706.

³⁸ Julius Long Oral History, August 28, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

from Julius, taken together with Huey's savings, amounted to \$700, enough to buy him a few semesters of legal training.³⁹

Huey and Rose found a place to rent for less than \$35 per month near Tulane.⁴⁰ There, Huey applied his prodigious work ethic to the unenviable task of cramming four years of law school into one. At this stage, Huey began to express the burning ambition that must have been inchoate in him for some time. He applied a manic desperation to succeed to his studies, often working long into the night while still finding time to write to U.S. Senators. Rose asked about the letters. "I want to let them know I'm here," Huey said. "I'm going to be there myself someday." Rose remembered, "It almost gave you the cold chills to hear him tell about it. He was measuring it all."⁴¹ Long began proving himself equal to his self-regard, combining natural genius with phenomenal will power. According to Rose, "He never forgot anything he read," and he read day and night.⁴² Even when he was sick, he would go about his day's work, not consenting to lie in bed. In this way, Long passed the state's law exam, becoming a licensed lawyer at the age of 21.⁴³

Long counted among his assets and character defects alike an independent spirit that could not countenance external restraints. After Tulane, he entered into a professional partnership with his brother Julius that was not to last. Julius, the more experienced sibling who had helped bankroll his brother's education, saw himself as the

³⁹ Frank R. Kent, "Our Political Monstrosities – Huey Long and His Mates," *The Atlantic*, April 1933, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

⁴⁰ Rose McConnell Long Oral History, March 17, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

⁴¹ Rose McConnell Long Oral History, March 17, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

⁴² Rose McConnell Long Oral History, March 17, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

⁴³ Long, *Every Man a King*, 15.

senior partner and would not abide what he saw as Huey's insubordination. Undaunted, the younger Long started his own practice, operating out of the second-floor anteroom of the Bank of Winnfield in his hometown.⁴⁴ Around this time, the recipe for Long's success - an insistent will to power and ethical ambivalence - gained cohesion with the addition of Long's acting on his populist political sympathies.

"I have never taken a suit against a poor man," he would later say.⁴⁵ Though his law career had gotten off to a slow beginning, he soon experienced victory. In 1916, he took up the case of a widow who was a plaintiff against an insurance company. Long won the case against the firm by stirring up public sympathy on behalf of the woman.⁴⁶ He developed a reputation as a litigator who could take up complaints against powerful companies and win impressive settlements. All the while, he displayed a savvy for media manipulation, acting as the Winnfield correspondence for a Louisiana newspaper in which he highlighted his achievements. He would later claim that his interest shifted to state politics when he was passed up for an Assistant United States Attorney's position in Shreveport due to opposition from his corporate enemies.⁴⁷

Still in his early twenties, Long took his first steps into the byzantine world of Louisiana politics, establishing his reputation as a populist tribune. In 1916, he helped lead a campaign against a state law "limiting the amount of money a worker could recover from his employer for an injury incurred on the job."⁴⁸ He followed up this action on behalf of labor with an early display of what would become a lifelong opposition to

⁴⁴ Long, *Every Man a King*, 17.

⁴⁵ Long, *Every Man a King*, 36.

⁴⁶ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 23.

⁴⁷ Long, *Every Man a King*, 30.

⁴⁸ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 27.

U.S. entanglement in foreign wars. At a time when the beleaguered Socialist Party of America was the only significant faction in the country opposing the First World War, Long came to their aid. The federal government decided to take a hard line against political dissent to the war effort, arresting a range of its opponents from street-level organizers to the Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs. Long's ally State Senator S. J. Harper, "an aging, cantankerous socialist who opposed the war as a financier's plot," stood accused of disloyalty.⁴⁹ Long served as Harper's counsel. He craftily orchestrated an acquittal through the jury pool selection process. Knowing government agents were following him, Long openly met with jury candidates he found undesirable, resulting in the government's removing them for him.⁵⁰

Whether or not Long's becoming involved in politics stemmed from his concern about economic inequality or personal ambition, at the age of 24 he ran for public office. Leveraging the reputation he had cultivated for himself as an opponent of big business, he ran for the North Louisiana District seat on Louisiana's Railroad, or Public Service, Commission and won.⁵¹ The Commission ranked among the state's powerful regulatory bodies as it possessed discretionary authority to establish rules and set rates for the railroad, telephone, telegraph, pipeline, and utility companies.⁵² It proved to be an ideal staging ground for Long to labor away his twenties, establishing his Progressive bona fides. During his tenure as a commissioner, he and his allies secured substantial rate decreases for the consumers of the state. In particular, Long developed an antagonism toward John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company that became an abiding hobby horse

⁴⁹ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 27

⁵⁰ Long, *Every Man a King*, 33.

⁵¹ Long, *Every Man a King*, 38.

⁵² Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 27.

for him throughout his career. He tried unsuccessfully to turn the oil giant's holdings in the state into a public utility, an action that embittered Louisiana's business-friendly elite against Long.

Long's adversarial relationship with Standard Oil became a rallying cry for the organized opposition to Longism for years to come. In the first instance, it precipitated his break with Governor John M. Parker, the Bull-Moose Progressive and Teddy Roosevelt friend who became governor in 1920. Parker's consummately elite profile and ties to the Bourbon restoration after Reconstruction – he grew up a member of Benjamin M. Palmer's, the so-called “orator-priest of the Confederacy,” fashionable First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans – belied his Progressive tendencies.⁵³ Because Parker gained power as a reform candidate, he initially received Long's support. However, Long soon grew disillusioned.

The historiography on Parker's gubernatorial tenure generally suggests that Long's break with Parker was not mere opportunism. Parker managed to get a few reforms through the state legislature, but these measures were highly symbolic. Alan Brinkley writes that the Bull-Moose governor “like all his predecessors within recent memory, lacked both the strength and the will to mount a genuine challenge to the existing political structure.”⁵⁴ In Sinclair Lewis's anti-Long polemical novel *It Can't Happen Here*, Lewis has Long doppelganger Buzz Windrip become president and inaugurate fascism. When such strange bedfellows as Franklin Roosevelt and Norman Thomas organize a united front against him, Windrip derides them as the “Bull Mouse

⁵³ Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 5.

⁵⁴ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 26.

Party.”⁵⁵ Long claimed that his opposition to the governor originated in 1921 from Parker’s allowing Standard Oil lobbyists to author the administration’s policy proposals.⁵⁶ Parker and his allies intrigued to sue Long for libel and have him impeached, but their efforts failed.⁵⁷

Parker’s lackluster track record and closeness to the rich and powerful provided Long with a compelling impetus for his 1924 gubernatorial bid. Because Louisiana’s constitution limited governors to a single term, the field was open for aspirants to the state’s highest office. In the contest that ensued, Long ran as a populist revivalist to win over a constituency that had seen little but demagogic ethnicity-baiting and elite patronization since the 19th century. Long disrupted Louisiana’s decadent status quo, making concrete material grievances the centerpiece of his campaign. Glenn Jeansonne has argued, not without cause, that historians give Long too much credit for eschewing the politics of racial animus. Race was not a factor in Louisiana politics, he says, in the same way that it dominated the discourse in Georgia and Mississippi, giving rise to white supremacist leaders such as Eugene Talmadage and Theodore Bilbo.⁵⁸ Whether or not race played an important role in Louisiana politics, Jeansonne downplays the interminable Anglo-Latin, ethnic tension that made Louisiana’s Redeemer government more entrenched in Louisiana than in any other Deep South State. Its Democratic Party was able to ward off the Populist challenge of the late 19th century with unusual ease for this reason.

⁵⁵ Sinclair Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here* (New York: Signet Classics, 2014), 85.

⁵⁶ Long, *Every Man a King*, 47.

⁵⁷ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 28.

⁵⁸ Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses*, 377, Tulane University Special Collections, Jones Hall Louisiana Research Collection.

Long instigated his mission to revolutionize the state's politics by popularizing a vision of ethnic pluralism in 1924. Matthew J. Schott somewhat tendentially interprets the Long phenomenon as a backlash against Progressivism, reading too much into the rural-urban divide that animated some Long support in the country parishes. Though Long's predecessor in the governor's mansion, Governor Harper, had been nominally progressive, progressivism had not permeated Louisiana to the extent that it had outside of the South. Furthermore, in many ways, Long himself governed as a progressive⁵⁹ However, an analysis of Long's 1924 platform shows that his brand amounted to a kind of populist-progressive syncretism. Through the duration of Long's career, his politics retained an amorphous quality that allowed him to appeal to city-dwelling laborers and farmers, Protestants and Catholics. For the urban proletariat, he pledged to include union representatives on state boards and increase benefits. For the farmers who formed the backbone of his electoral coalition, he offered to build government warehouses where farmers could store their produce, an established populist idea.⁶⁰ He intimated he would make the state's amenities more accessible by providing additional, higher quality roads, toll-free bridges, and free schoolbooks for students, parochial and public alike.

The common denominator for Long's supporters the country over eventually became economic grievance and anxiety over a perceived threat to one's social status. Long carried on in the Populist and Progressive traditions in the sense that his concern was not primarily for the indigent poor but for the petite bourgeoisie. His support came – first and foremost – from the independent farmers, not the sharecroppers, and from craft

⁵⁹ Matthew J. Schott, "Huey Long? Progressive Backlash?", *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 27, no. 2 (Spring 1986): 144.

⁶⁰ Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses*, 39, Tulane University Special Collections, Jones Hall Louisiana Research Collection.

laborers and small business owners, not unskilled, industrial workers. This broad tendency held true during his gubernatorial and senatorial phases though his political project in Louisiana received predominantly agrarian backing at first. Though the U.S. was becoming increasingly urban during this time period, as much as a third of the nation remained rural, and the South was an especially pastoral region.⁶¹

Long's efforts proved insufficient to overcome the malaise of Christian sectarianism that mired Louisiana. The issue of the anti-Catholic Ku Klux Klan – Long was neither pro-Klan nor anti-Klan in 1924 – became the election's central controversy, pitting the northern section of the state against its southern counterpart. Henry L. Fuqua, a northern Protestant, and Hewitt Bouanchaud, whose roots were French, were Long's rivals for the Democratic nomination, the only race that mattered in the one-party South. Long exceeded expectations, placing in third and winning 31 percent of the vote and, more importantly, vindicating his approach by receiving support from all the state's sections.⁶² Fuqua defeated Bouanchaud in the ensuing runoff. Historians agree that the injection of the Klan issue into the race blocked Long's path to the nomination. Long held that his defeat, the only state-wide election he ever lost in Louisiana, stemmed from the rain and muddy roads that kept farmers from the polls.⁶³ Rose Long remembered that Huey put on a suit and began running for the 1928 governor's race the next day.⁶⁴

Long promised to bring modernity to a region that remained underdeveloped compared with much of the country. For all the attention paid to the neo-Populist theory

⁶¹ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 145.

⁶² Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 29.

⁶³ Jerome Beatty, "You Can't Laugh Him Off," *The American Magazine*, January 1933, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

⁶⁴ Rose McConnell Long Oral History, March 17, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

of Huey Long, historians do not often enough dwell on the fact that the tenor of his pitch to Louisianan's was distinctly modernist and progressive. His appeal hinged on technological innovation and the idea of public encroachment on the public sphere as a positive development. To kick off his 1928 campaign for governor, he invoked the myth of Evangeline:

Where are the schools that you have waited for your children to have, that have never come? Where are the institutions to care for the sick and disabled? Evangeline wept bitter tears in her disappointment, but it lasted through only one lifetime. Your tears in the country, around this oak, have lasted for generations. Give me the chance to dry the eyes of those who still weep here!⁶⁵

A later Long machine circular, meant to trumpet "Louisiana's March of Progress," claimed that the state "was literally taken out of the bogs" by paved roads, toll-free bridges, and a skyscraping capitol on the banks of the Mississippi River.⁶⁶

He secured the Democratic nomination for 1928 with a commanding lead of 126,842 votes to his nearest opponent's 81,747.⁶⁷ Long won parishes in the southern, central, and northern regions of the state with the significant exception of New Orleans where he underperformed again.⁶⁸ Hamilton Basso, who achieved fame as a Southern novelist – including two novels inspired by Long, *Cinnamon Seed* and *Sun in Capricorn*, was in 1928 a recent Tulane graduate cutting his teeth as a Louisiana newspaperman. Basso supported Long's candidacy because he agreed with his egalitarian policies. He saw in Long an echo of the Ur-Southern Populist, the South Carolinian "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman, who rose to power on his question to the poor farmers, "How do you like being

⁶⁵ Long, *Every Man a King*, 98.

⁶⁶ "Louisiana's March of Progress," Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

⁶⁷ "Louisiana's March of Progress," Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

⁶⁸ "Compilation of Primary Election Returns," January 17, 1928, Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

ruled by imbeciles and Bourbons?”⁶⁹ Basso, as an urbane believer in the New South, further sympathized with Long’s modernization proposals, but his sympathy was not to last.

The young reporter entered Long’s hotel room on election night and became disillusioned instantly. Long was speaking with a supporter on the phone. Basso overheard him say, “From now I’m the Kingfish. I’m gonna be President some day.”⁷⁰ Basso was one of the first people to observe the contradiction at the core of Long’s character that has fascinated generations of people from Robert Penn Warren to Lyndon Johnson. There seemed to be tension between Huey Long, the man from Winn Parish who despised to see the bank foreclose on a penniless farmer, and Huey Long, the Kingfish of Louisiana. As Long’s grip over the state tightened as he remained in power, much of the support his progressive ideas had engendered from university-educated elites such as Basso eroded. No matter how much they believed in the necessity of his reforms, they could not countenance his authoritarianism.

The Long answer to this quandary was clear: One must not mistake the form of democracy with its function.⁷¹ This answer resoundingly convinced a majority of Louisianans, who elected one Longist government after another for seven years. In the Great Depression context, many people cared more that they received the desired economic end than that the political means to it was unrepugnant. However, the pro-Long line of defense rings hollow in the full light of his disregard for democratic norms.

⁶⁹ Hamilton Basso, “Huey Long and His Background,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 1935, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 2.

⁷⁰ Hamilton Basso, “Huey Long and His Background,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 1935, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 2.

⁷¹ “Huey Long,” Directed by Ken Burns, Arlington, Virginia: PBS, 1986.

By the end of his life, he had countenanced corruption, engaged in election rigging, and amassed more authority in the governor's office than likely any other chief executive possessed in American history. Considering the broken nature of the political system Long inherited and the unmasked contempt his Redeemer predecessors had had for democracy, some degree of political heavy-handedness was undoubtedly necessary to institute reforms. However, even Long's most sympathetic defenders concede that his personal thirst for power and corequisite paranoia about losing it led him to go further than necessary. The charge from his Marxist critics – none more outspoken than Norman Thomas – that he did not do as much with his awesome powers to improve people's lives as he might have also carries water.

Starting out his first gubernatorial term, he set to work at his typical, breakneck speed on disciplining enemies and implementing agenda items. Pressing items on the legislative docket included providing free schoolbooks for children and getting infrastructure construction underway. The Long Administration sought to improve the state's resources for vulnerable groups by increasing funding for the state's school for disabled people, two mental hospitals, and two charity hospitals.⁷² It piped affordable natural gas to New Orleans over the objections of the utility companies. The government payed for these measures through issuing bonds and a progressive tax regime. Long's plan to shift the tax burden away from the middle class to corporations by replacing property taxes with duties on resource extraction precipitated the existential crisis of his career.⁷³

⁷² Long, *Every Man a King*, 107.

⁷³ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 34.

Some historians overemphasize the importance of the 1929 impeachment crisis in shaping his political character.⁷⁴ The temptation is to cast young Huey, who was still in his mid-30s, as a kind of Mr. Smith-goes-to-Baton Rouge, an idealistic reform governor whom the state's Machiavellian political class nearly outmaneuvered. The mistake is to consider the event as formative. Near impeachment did not change Long so much as it threw into sharp relief his formidable talent for self-preservation and the stakes of his political insurgency.

The impetus for the attempted impeachment stemmed from Long's continued rivalry with the oil giant Standard Oil. By the summer of 1929, Long was searching for a way to bankroll his ambitious social program, including, in addition to his medical reforms and schoolbooks, a night school program, which dramatically reduced adult illiteracy in the state. The administration proposed to raise funds through a severance tax on natural resource extraction. In retaliation, Standard Oil's allies in the House brought Long up on numerous impeachment charges, including the charge "that he had attempted to intimidate and browbeat capital honestly and worthily invested."⁷⁵ Achieving a blow against Long that would prove to be his career's nadir, the House convicted him on eight impeachment charges.⁷⁶

After the House reached its conclusion, Long's political future wrested with the Senate. Even close allies were not optimistic about the Governor's chances of weathering the crisis. The mood of the Long camp in the capital grew increasingly grim. One magazine writer painted a dreary portrait of a desperate, embattled governor wandering

⁷⁴ Williams, *Huey Long*, 410.

⁷⁵ Long, *Every man a King*, 138.

⁷⁶ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 35.

the capital building on the night of the House vote, hardly able to get legislators to meet his gaze.⁷⁷ Long's father visited the Governor's Mansion and reported to Julius that he was concerned Huey might attempt suicide.⁷⁸ Erstwhile supporters wrote Long letters, prevailing on him to resign for the good of the state. One New Iberia constituent claimed to have been a Long supporter for nine years but wrote to say he thought the opposition had won.⁷⁹

The conservative establishment underestimated their opponent's political genius. They failed to realize the seriousness of the threat he represented. Through pioneering communications tactics and popular economics, Long achieved what no political upstart in Louisiana had managed to achieve since Reconstruction. He cultivated a state-wide power base independent of the Bourbon Democratic party, the New Orleans machine, and media mainstays such as *The Times-Picayune*. Allies and rivals, who counted Long out in the midst of the impeachment fight, had not yet come to terms with this paradigmatic shift. However, soon there would be no denying that the balance of power had shifted.

Unable to stave off the threat of impeachment through backroom negotiations alone, Long brought his case before the people. The centerpiece of his campaign was an innovative alternative media strategy, involving the printing and distribution of millions of circulars outlining the Governor's defense against the impeachment charges. Long would later claim:

It was all so perfectly coordinated that if necessary, a document prepared by me in the evening could be printed and placed on the porch of practically every home in the State of Louisiana during the morning of the following day.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Jerome Beatty, "You Can't Laugh Him Off," *The American Magazine*, January 1933, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

⁷⁸ Julius Long Oral History, August 28, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

⁷⁹ New Iberia Citizen to Huey Long, 1929, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 37.

⁸⁰ Long, *Every Man a King*, 149.

The response to this direct appeal to the voters was enthusiastic. A. R. Abels, a nephew of a State Senator from Springfield, Louisiana wrote the governor requesting more circulars titled “The Standard Oil Regulars,” as, he said, the constituents were eager for more, and “they explain everything.”⁸¹ An attorney named S. M. Atkinson from Mansfield praised Long’s effort on behalf of the “common yeomen,” saying, “All the cries that the politicized press may belch will not avail them if you get to the people face to face.”⁸²

Long backed up his leafleting with aggressive, in-person campaigning. He followed up on a speaking tour throughout the state with a massive Baton Rouge rally. The Jacksonian pageantry of overalled farmers and uniformed laborers flooding the capital’s streets on behalf of the Governor scandalized the city’s tory residents.⁸³ The spectacular show of influence, coupled with corrupt bargains, persuaded fifteen state senators to sign on to a parliamentary ploy Long devised to keep impeachment from going to a vote in the Senate. The Senators signed on to a round robin signaling they would oppose impeachment, preventing the possibility of Long’s conviction.⁸⁴ In return, Long said that “theirs is the earth and the fullness thereof” of the fifteen Senators.⁸⁵

In a rare moment of written self-reflection – Long was generally loathe to spend his precious time on correspondence and enjoyed few close friendships – he reflected on the significance of impeachment in a letter to Judge Fred M. Odom of Shreveport.⁸⁶ He said, “I became, maybe, a little impatient in my effort to do what ought to be done for all

⁸¹ A. R. Abels to Huey Long, May 8, 1929, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 37.

⁸² S. M. Atkinson to Huey Long, April 20, 1929, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 37.

⁸³ Long, *Every Man a King*, 146.

⁸⁴ Long, *Every Man a King*, 151.

⁸⁵ Long, *Every Man a King*, 171.

⁸⁶ Huey Long to Judge Fred M. Odom, August 29, 1929, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 5.

of [the State's institutions]." This admission was as much of a mea culpa as anyone could expect from the triumphant Governor. He was willing to concede that he had been overzealous in pursuit of his agenda. However, in his view, aggression on behalf of alleviating the people's suffering was more virtue than fault. The opposition had tipped its hand, revealing to Long the lengths they would go to thwart him. They would soon discover that he was prepared to go even further.

Impeachment proved to be the denouement of opposition to the Long machine's reign over Louisiana. The Kingfish's beleaguered enemies would receive a second wind from federal patronage following Long's falling out with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. By 1933, many pundits and politicians thought they were witnessing the writing on the wall spelling out a premature end for Long's meteoric career. The string of political obituaries written for the Kingfish were premature. The opposition never came within reach of dislodging Long's vice-like grip over the state again during his lifetime. The degree of his machine's control over Louisiana prompted widespread fears of creeping authoritarianism, suspicions supercharged by the 1930s European atmosphere of democratic erosion. Long retorted that his state was a "perfect democracy," the first democracy in Louisiana history, because his government was responsive to the popular will.⁸⁷

Gerald L. K. Smith, who would later become Long's most effective itinerant preacher-political surrogate, thought so. Unlike the Kingfish's Southern demagogic contemporaries – race-baiters such as Eugene Talmadge of Georgia and Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi – Long expended much of his seemingly limitless political capital making

⁸⁷ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 39.

his state a more equitable place to live for blacks and whites, Catholics and Protestants. Smith, whose flamboyant oratory H. L. Menken once said made him a “boob-bumper worth going miles to see,”⁸⁸ had had a plum preaching job administering to an affluent congregation in Shreveport. He lost that job when his preaching on economic populist themes and support for Longism proved too much for his conservatively inclined flock.⁸⁹ Smith went to work for the Long machine, eventually becoming an electrifying spokesperson for Senator Long’s Share Our Wealth Society. As a Kingfish underling, Smith was so obsequious as to make even the imperious Long uncomfortable.⁹⁰

Smith tended to fawn over his boss, commending the Kingfish regime for its deliverance of the people from the “bootleg slavery” of Bourbonism.⁹¹ While Smith identified Long with the Populist tradition, as a proponent of the Jeffersonian vision of an egalitarian agricultural society, other contemporaries saw his progressive side too. Harvey G. Fields lamented the loss of Long to the nation, claiming that the common people loved him as the Russian peasant revered Vladimir Lenin.⁹² Lenin had staked out a farmer-labor example in the Soviet Union, defying decades of Marxist orthodoxy by showing humanitarian restraint in agricultural collectivization and forced urbanization. Fields said Long was the amalgamation of “the great commoner, William Jennings Bryan, and honest and fearless Robert M. LaFollette, Sr., the champion of the laboring classes of the farmers of the Middle West.” In other words, the Kingfish was, as a leader,

⁸⁸ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 65.

⁸⁹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 699.

⁹⁰ Williams, *Huey Long*, 700.

⁹¹ Gerald L.K. Smith, “Summary of Greatness of Huey Long,” Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

⁹² Harvey G. Fields, “Memorial Address,” Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

the apotheosis of that peculiarly early 20th-century dream of a farmer-labor coalition that could upset the two-party consensus.

Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., once dismissed the dual instincts in Long – the one looking to the future and the other harkening back to a romanticized past – as incoherent. Schlesinger drew a distinction between the radicals and the demagogues, admiring Long’s tenure in Louisiana as radical while castigating his national profile as demagogic.⁹³ Schlesinger was of the Richard Hofstadter school of thought. Hofstadter admired the Progressives but advanced the now discredited theory that the Populists were a precursor to the popular right wing that emerged in opposition to the New Deal. The Schlesinger thesis vision of a right-wing Long as a kind of fascist analogue in the U.S. overshadows much of the historiography, appearing in neo-orthodox works as recent as Richard D. White’s contribution *Kingfish*. This understanding of Long rests on the mistaken premise that his reforms were negligible and is remarkably blasé about the fact that Long showed few signs of the psychological phases of fascism and popular conservatism. On the contrary, the Kingfish opposed militarism and generally deploying white supremacy as a form of political appeal.

Long enjoyed a remarkable degree of success in enacting his reform agenda for Louisiana. By the end of his life, the state made strides toward alleviating the economic plight of smallholding farmers while the populace as a whole received improved state amenities owing to Long’s progressive overhaul of the public infrastructure. Long and his proxies enacted a debt moratorium, amounting to an intervention against finance capital

⁹³ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 96.

on behalf of the smallholding farmers.⁹⁴ They built thousands of miles of paved and gravel roads and a slew of toll-free bridges. By 1932, Long supporters were traversing the state in cars with bumper stickers boasting “Louisiana Will Lead the World in Good Roads.”⁹⁵ The regime revamped the state’s flagship college, Louisiana State University, part of a Long scheme to manufacture a bourgeoisie to administer Louisiana’s joining the modern world.⁹⁶

They made education more accessible, providing the free textbooks and allowing 175,000 adults to gain literacy through night schools.⁹⁷ Just as Long had managed to do during his stint as a Public Utility Commissioner, Long governments brought rates down, including piping affordable natural gas into New Orleans, a hotbed of resistance to Longism.⁹⁸ They substantially increased the capacity of the state’s charity hospitals. The State under Long cat’s paw Governor Oscar Allen abolished the poll tax, the symbol of Bourbon despotism, which had disenfranchised generations of the state’s poor black and white voters.⁹⁹ During the height of the Great Depression and in line with the Keynesian spirit of the era, Long provided average Louisianans with a lifeline in the form tens of millions of dollars in deficit spending to advance his public-works projects. Long spent nearly forty times as much in one year as Governor Parker had in four.¹⁰⁰ He funded these programs through issuing state bonds and an egalitarian tax regimen, replacing

⁹⁴ Harvey G. Fields, “Memorial Address,” Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

⁹⁵ “Louisiana Will Lead the World in Good Roads,” 1932, Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 10.

⁹⁶ Rose McConnell Long Oral History, March 17, 1960, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

⁹⁷ Richard D. White, Jr., *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long* (New York: Random House, 2006), location 2684.

⁹⁸ Long, *Every Man a King*, location 1707.

⁹⁹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 716.

¹⁰⁰ White, *Kingfish*, location 2686.

onerous property taxes with income taxation. This move shifted the tax burden from smallholding farmers to the wealthy.

Long thoroughly disrupted an iniquitous status quo that had kept Louisiana languishing in political authoritarianism and extreme economic inequality for decades. He was not yet done with the state; Long served as the state's de facto ruler until his 1935 assassination. However, even as he maintained his base of operations in the Pelican State, he pivoted his focus to the nation as a whole beginning in 1930 and especially after 1932. Long's approach to reform had essentially been bifurcated between populism and progressivism if one broadly construes these forces as the economically interested expressions of rural and urban mass politics respectively. Long's transfiguration from a Southern leader into a presidential contender required him to embrace the latter at the expense of the former. In rural, agricultural Louisiana, Long acted as a modernizing force while also prioritizing the interests of his agrarian base of supporters.

Chapter Two: Governor Long Becomes Senator Long

Once Long became a national figure, he could no longer solely act as the tribune of agrarian interests that he once had. While continuing to act as a voice of rural protest against the dislocating forces of modernity, Long, the progressive, also began to advocate for cushioning urban workers against the slings and arrows of the Great Depression that was stretching into its third year by the time he became a senator. Long never strayed far from his roots in the sense that he retained the guise of a neo-Populist farmer whisperer. Senator Long simultaneously demonstrated himself capable of acting the learned, urbane attorney that he was. When he had to put on performances before a crowd, however, he was ever ready to put his aw-shucks Louisiana persona on display. Huey Long rose to political preeminence by hawking his reformist proposals to a credulous public that his everyman pastiche managed to disarm.

By 1930, the Kingfish was preparing to move his act to the national stage. The Louisiana constitution term limited governors to four years in office. As a result, Long challenged incumbent U.S. Senator Joseph E. Ransdell's re-election bid in the 1930 midterm elections. After the impeachment scare, Long enjoyed a grace period. He made peace with the New Orleans Old Regulars, the most organized rival power bloc to the Long machine in the state.¹⁰¹ The most prominent opposition figure was Long's uninspiring Lieutenant Governor Paul Cyr, whom the Kingfish derided as the "tooth dentist from Jeanerette."¹⁰² Long soon maneuvered Cyr out of office, replacing him with the loyalist State Senator O. King.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Long, *Every Man a King*, 227.

¹⁰² Louis Cochran, "The Louisiana Kingfish," *The American Mercury*, July 1932, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

¹⁰³ Long, *Every Man a King*, 249.

The political consensus Long built up after impeachment suffered fractures during his divisive contest with Ransdell. However, the governor eventually overwhelmed Ransdell with the fervor of his support, stimulated by aggressive campaign stumping and the media wing of his machine. In March 1930, Long introduced his de facto state newspaper *The Louisiana Progress* – later rebranded as *The American Progress*, an integral part of his strategy to circumvent the consistently hostile press.¹⁰⁴ Long was a progenitor of the contemporary conception of the outsider politician. He understood that because of the corporate-sponsored fourth estate’s interest in disciplining public figures into a narrow range of respectable opinion, it behooved him to cultivate independent media infrastructure.

During the 1930 midterms, Long’s victory over Ransdell came after he blanketed the state with circulars, broadsides, and copies of his newspaper. One circular made a race-baiting ploy to associate Ransdell with the state’s non-existent black vote and the Republican Party, still anathema in the eyes of white Southerners who associated the GOP with the Union Army and Radical Reconstruction. The circular accused Randell of being friendly with the Republican “negro bosses” of the state.¹⁰⁵ The race-baiting strategy in 1930, while a blemish on Long’s imperfect record on race, was somewhat anomalous, given a full view of his career.

In the effort to restore historical contingency to the Kingfish, one should consider the nuances that set him apart as well as the common denominators that made him a white Southerner of the 1920s and 30s. Louisiana was a state where rigid class and racial

¹⁰⁴ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 37.

¹⁰⁵ “Senator Ransdell and the Negro in Louisiana Politics,” Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 2.

hierarchies had remained entrenched through the politics of ethnic grievance. What distinguished Long was not his occasional willingness to stoop to the level of exploiting racial anxiety. This behavior was the norm across the South, as was Protestant-Catholic rivalry in Louisiana. What made Long unusual was his insistence on prioritizing economic concerns over cultural hysteria, at times, uniting erstwhile enemies across sectarian and racial lines behind a united class interest. The progressive Senator and Robert M. LaFollette's former Presidential running mate Burton K. Wheeler said, "Long has far less racial prejudice in him than any other Southerner in the Senate."¹⁰⁶ That compliment might not have been saying much. Long, who freely used derogatory racial epithets, was nevertheless proud of the material aid his policies, including the homestead exemption and funding for schools and hospitals, brought to the black population. He told an unimpressed African American reporter, "Every Man a King—that's my slogan, That means every man, niggers along with the rest, but not specifically niggers."¹⁰⁷ Such a strategy of racial ambivalence had hardly been attempted in the South since the defeat of the Populists around the turn of the century. Identifying Long's uniqueness for promulgating the politics of race over class helps explain the fever-pitched feelings of his supporters and enemies. Long was a white supremacist by political necessity but one who was willing to go so far as to believe that black people should not have to live in poverty.

Having secured his Senate seat, Long opted to serve out his term as governor, meaning he would not leave for Washington until 1932. Not content to wait until then to receive his share of the national limelight, he burst onto the national scene with his

¹⁰⁶ Edward F. Haas, "Huey Long and the Dictators," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 47, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 150.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Huey Long*, 706.

announcement of a plan to rescue the cotton farmers from economic distress. In the early 20th century, agricultural concerns were considerably more salient politically than in the present day. Though the inextricable processes of industrialization and urbanization were well under way, the remaining farmers in the countryside still constituted a substantial percentage of the overall population. Agricultural interests were especially important in the South where as many as 40 percent of U.S. farm workers lived.¹⁰⁸ The farmers felt the impact of the Great Depression.

In many ways, the Depression was a crisis of cash poorness, and no one had less access to currency than the farmers, who had been suffering from declining prices since the end of World War I. The First World War had been a boom time for American agriculture. War-time production requirements increased demand while the European fighting curbed production. Since the Treaty of Versailles, prices declined due to overproduction, exacerbated by increasing mechanization. This development coincided with the financialization of the U.S. economy. Farmers, faced with little alternative and tempted by the readily available credit of the 1920s, borrowed heavily to afford technological upgrades. With the Depression's onset in 1929, prices for crops including cotton dipped below the cost of cultivating them, and many farmers faced financial ruin and bank foreclosure.

Long's scheme to bail out the cotton producers was characteristic. Accepting the supply-and-demand logic of capitalism as intractable, he – in a move which, ironically, anticipated FDR's controversial Agricultural Adjustment Act – proposed to work within the system, curbing production to raise prices. Long quoted the Scripture saying, "Let the

¹⁰⁸ Williams, *Huey Long*, 47.

land lie barren in days of surplus,” and a special session of the Louisiana legislature met to approve a cotton holiday.¹⁰⁹ He wrote a letter to President Herbert Hoover, the country’s laissez faire president, who had risen to national prominence, in part, due to his management of the federal response to the 1927 Mississippi River flood disaster. Commerce Secretary Hoover had held that federal aid to the many people displaced by the flood should be minimal, a hands-off approach he would bring to bear on the Depression too. Hoover said, “No relief to flood survivors by Congress is desirable.”¹¹⁰ Huey Long had staked his 1928 gubernatorial campaign, in part, on being the friend to the displaced people that the federal government and Herbert Hoover had declined to be. Let the government, Long wrote Hoover, purchase the 1931 cotton surplus and punish freeloaders who might try to take advantage of the holiday with prison sentences.¹¹¹ Following the 1931 summer surplus, no cotton would be planted in 1932, provided that the other Southern states got on board.

With his customary gusto, the Kingfish set to work introducing himself to the South. He started a public relations campaign to convince the region’s cotton growers that he was on their side. The cotton holiday enterprise met with an enthusiastic, albeit mixed, response across Dixie and earned him the rancor of the East Coast media. It demonstrated that the Great Depression had reawakened the populist hope for a leader who could unite the smallholders under a banner of common economic interest. One farmer from Jonesboro, Arkansas – the state the Kingfish was soon to take by storm – wrote to Long saying, “I have heard you speak so much over the radio I feel like I know

¹⁰⁹ Long, *Every Man a King*, 262.

¹¹⁰ Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24.

¹¹¹ Huey Long to Herbert Hoover, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 41.

you and I know you are doing everything you can for the farmers of the South.”¹¹² The letter writer said that the Arkansas cotton farmers had been organizing and were all in agreement about the holiday’s efficacy. He expressed resentment toward city people and thanked Long for his service to the poor, friendless agrarians. The national media’s coverage likely exacerbated the perceptions of an urban-rural divide. One piece in *The Nation* ridiculed the Kingfish for his Bible-thumping and condescended to his constituency, characterizing them as bumpkins.¹¹³

The press fell for the hillbilly caricature of himself Long often saw fit to deploy to taunt his enemies, deflect attention from scandal, or pander to his constituents. British author Rebecca West said of him, “He is the most formidable kind of brer fox, the self-abnegating kind, who will check his dignity with his hat if he can serve his plan by buffoonery.”¹¹⁴ His eccentric style, hardly out of place in the provincial Louisiana context, would shock and offend Washington DC high society. The year 1931 was not even the first time the Kingfish had endeavored to “substitute gaiety for some of the tragedy of politics” by acting the yokel before the press. In his second year as governor, he had caused a minor diplomatic incident by receiving German dignitaries “in a pair of green pajamas, a blue and red lounging robe and blue bedroom slippers.”¹¹⁵

Long’s enemies took this aspect of his personality as uncouthness, of a piece with his lack of deference for democratic norms. In the Depression context of out-of-control economic inequality, his supporters reveled in his willingness to flout the affective signifiers of membership in an effete ruling class. One commentator saw in Long’s

¹¹² “Arkansas Farmer” to Huey Long, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 41.

¹¹³ *The Nation*, September 2, 1931, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 6.

¹¹⁴ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 66

¹¹⁵ Long, *Every Man a King*, 191.

political rise the emergence of a “genuine proletarian. Huey ‘could spot’ the Eastern radicals ‘a Karl Marx and a couple of Kropotkins.’ ”¹¹⁶ The writer conflated the affective models of urban and agrarian radicals. Stylistically, Long was a quintessential populist mass leader. In fact, his persona did not always go over well with urban radicals, though, in his actions, he was the consummate farmer-labor politician.

Owing to Long’s contradictory nature, a holistic analysis of his character has sometimes resisted historians. Faced with the seeming incoherence of his beliefs and actions, they cherry-pick one version of Huey Long or another, holding his life up as an example for emulation or caution, depending on whether or not they sympathize with the revisionist or orthodox schools. Long was a neo-Populist agrarian spokesman, wedded to the foundational myths of the American Republic and determined to fight for the Jeffersonian ideal of yeomen self-reliance. He built roads, so the farmers could more easily bring their goods to market. Governor Long forgave their debts, so the banks would not strip them of their livelihoods. Senator Long championed protectionist economics, so that Louisiana’s provincial bourgeois producers would not live with a free-trade free-for-all.

At the same time, Long was a neo-Progressive, a Keynesian, Roosevelt Democrat more Rooseveltian than FDR himself. Governor Long introduced small-d democratic reforms, abolishing the poll taxes to induce cash-poor voters to protect the state from a Thermidorian Reaction to the state’s modernization. As Senator, he embraced the kind of Progressive reforms traditionally advocated for by urban radicals such as a shorter work week. He made his name synonymous with a levelling vision of wealth redistribution, so

¹¹⁶ Williams, *Huey Long*, 559.

average consumers could possess the purchasing power to get the economy growing again. To the extent that the multitudes Long contained were in conflict with one another – and they undoubtedly were – he served as an exponent of the same farmer-labor incompatibility that had plagued reform efforts for generations. T. Harry Williams came to view Huey Long as the embodiment of a Southern political archetype who chafes against the region’s backwardness but whose identification with the region’s smallholding farmers hamstrings them from unconditionally embracing development. Lyndon Johnson, the greatest Southern radical of all, was a young man on Capitol Hill while Long’s dominance of the upper chamber lasted. He later said of Long, “I never heard Long make a speech that I didn’t think was calculated to do some good for some people who needed some speeches made for them and couldn’t make them for themselves.”¹¹⁷

Not every farmer observing the cotton holiday episode bought the Long shtick. One correspondent was sympathetic but quibbled with the details. He suggested having the government effectively subsidize cotton farming by having it purchase surplus crops. Expressing residual anxiety about the Flood of 1927, he requested that the authorities appropriate the cotton to the flood control committee.¹¹⁸ The cotton farmer’s attitude suggested a radical willingness to subordinate economic agency to financial security, a position born of the trauma of the 1927 flood turned disaster by government recalcitrance. One should not assume, however, that the Flood and Great Depression ended the popularity of Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover-style, free-market economics

¹¹⁷ T. Harry Williams, “Huey, Lyndon, and Southern Radicalism,” *The Journal of American History* 60, no. 2 (September 1973): 268, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2936776>.

¹¹⁸ Natchitoches, Louisiana Farmer to Huey Long, August 17, 1931, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 41.

once and for all. One farmer, replying to a telegram Long had sent to the *Atlanta Constitution*, said “I want to say that when we have a King and Queen we will have to do as they say, but until then no Governor, Elect-Senator or nobody else can prevent me from planting what we want” [sic].¹¹⁹

The mercantilist, Madisonian prophecy of loss of frontier spawning a crisis of settler-colonial democracy was seeming to come to pass. With privation borne of the Depression on the rise and the Hoover Administration seemingly unwilling or helpless to intervene, Americans experienced an existential crisis. Lacking a pressure valve, they could not ignore the country’s internal contradictions. Hoover’s popularity waned even as he doubled down on a conservative vision of a country where the American dream of rugged individuals in fair competition still held true. At the same time, Governor Franklin Roosevelt and the progressive wing of the Democratic Party looked ready to secure the Democratic nomination at the 1932 convention. They promised to carry on in the tradition of their Progressive forebears, FDR’s uncle-by-marriage Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, whose New Democracy had brought the U.S. social reform. Into this mix, Long was well-poised to make his presence felt. In the 1932 presidential election, the Kingfish proved an indispensable ally to FDR, though one the future president held at arm’s length.

“You have got everything that the State of Louisiana can give you,” one Long admirer telegraphed him in January 1932, “so go on to the United States Senate and give your time there. I think the people will make you the President of the United

¹¹⁹ Atlanta Farmer to Huey Long, August 17, 1931, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 41.

States.”¹²⁰ Long concurred. During his life, he never relinquished power in Louisiana. He would intermittently travel home to consolidate authority over the state, neglecting his Senate duties to shore up his machine’s efforts. Though he was no longer governor of the state, no one doubted he remained in charge. He had all but appointed his successor Oscar Allen, an old associate from Winnfield noted for his docility.¹²¹ Though the Kingfish never took his hegemony in Louisiana for granted, the new year found him feeling secure enough to go national with his operation.

By 1932, Long was not the only gifted politician whose star was on the rise. Governor Franklin Roosevelt, the New Yorker-Dutch patrician and only person in the U.S. whose political savvy and deviousness could rival the Kingfish’s, was the odds-on favorite to win the Democratic presidential primary going into the summer. FDR’s nomination was enough of a *fait accompli* that he secured an endorsement from Long, a man not in the habit of subordinating himself to anyone.

The nature of Long’s support was ideological as well as strategic, for Roosevelt carried the endorsement of the Party’s progressive wing. It would not be until later in the 20th century that the Democrats and Republicans would realign as ideologically coherent factions, espousing liberalism and conservatism respectively. In the Great Depression era, the parties remained sectional coalitions – “twedledee” and “twedledum,” Huey Long called them¹²² – though the gradual process had, at least, begun with Teddy Roosevelt’s succession from the GOP and would continue during Franklin Roosevelt’s unprecedented twelve-year long tenure at the helm of the Democrats. Candidate FDR told a member of

¹²⁰ Ben Matthews to Huey Long, January 21, 1932, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 6.

¹²¹ Williams, *Huey Long* 566.

¹²² “Incredible Kingfish,” *Time Magazine*, October 3, 1932, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 43.

his so-called “Brain Trust” Rex Tugwell that his presidency would vanquish the neo-Cleveland, pro-business wing of the Party.¹²³ While Long was initially inclined to support FDR’s New York ally turned rival Al Smith, Long’s newly-found progressive colleagues in the Senate, including Democrats and Republicans such as William Borah, convinced him to get on board with FDR.¹²⁴

Long’s reluctance may have stemmed from the fact that Roosevelt’s progressive appeal was opportunistic. H. L. Mencken captured the perception of the politically chameleon, all-things-to-all-people New York Governor describing him as “an amiable gentleman who would very much like to be President.”¹²⁵ Roosevelt did have some progressive bona fides to recommend him, including his championing of unemployment relief in New York.¹²⁶ At the same time, Roosevelt’s, who was also a deficit hawk and Wall Street ally, economic vision was not the kind of de rigueur commitment to wealth redistribution that Long, who was by this time likely the most left-wing U.S. Senator, would have preferred.

Nevertheless, if Long’s position represented the most leftward edge of mainstream politics, the 1930s Overton Window encompassed yet more radical perspectives. Namely, Norman Thomas’s Socialist Party and the Communist Party flanked the Kingfish’s left. Long’s economic proposals, though visionary, were also reformist. He advocated for an egalitarian seizure of wealth from the wealthy to provide a financial safety net for everyone else. From the Marxist perspective, which was gaining

¹²³ H.W. Brands, *Traitor to His Class: The Privileged Life and Radical Presidency of Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (New York, Doubleday, 2008), 249.

¹²⁴ Williams, *Huey Long*, 287

¹²⁵ Basil Rauch, *The History of the New Deal, 1933-1938* (New York: Creative Age Press, 1944), 23.

¹²⁶ Rauchway, *The New Deal and the Great Depression*, 31

momentum during the early 1930s, Long's Share Our Wealth plan remained fundamentally conservative in that it would not abolish capitalism, the root cause of the nation's ills in the far-left's eyes.

In comparison with the Marxists, Long saw himself as a pragmatic conservative, a self-concept he had in common with FDR. Long and FDR both proposed to save the capitalists from themselves. They saw that American capitalism was in terminal crisis. The government needed to buttress the for-profit system with social insurance against its negative externalities for the economically insecure, or else precarity might drive people into the revolutionary fold. The difference between Long and FDR was a matter of degree. Long's anticipation of the hybridized, economically just capitalism of the future was further reaching than FDR's though Long's political magnetism would pull President Roosevelt toward the left over the course of the New Deal.

FDR's bread-and-butter political tactic was his caginess. Rex Tugwell, after meeting FDR for the first time, commented on his "mobile and expressive face."¹²⁷ Roosevelt made elasticity into an art form, making himself into a cipher that allies and rivals projected into, drawing themselves out in the process. This tendency frustrated Long to no end, but he also found a way to use it to his advantage. If Roosevelt was going to be non-committal, then Long would depict whichever version of Roosevelt suited him before the press. Early on in their relationship, Long went to see FDR at his house in Warm Springs, Georgia, dishonestly implying to reporters after the meeting that Roosevelt had endorsed the Share Our Wealth plan.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 249.

¹²⁸ Williams, *Huey Long*, 619.

Rejecting the nomination of the Farmer Labor Party – Long’s will to power was far too intent to indulge far-fetched, third-party hopes – Long entered the 1932 Democratic Convention intent on nominating Roosevelt.¹²⁹ The Kingfish’s grand entrance into the national Party scene suffered somewhat from a ploy by his Louisiana opposition. The conservatives sent a rump delegation to the Convention to rival the official state delegation under Long and compete for recognition by the Convention credentials committee. The attempt amounted to a rear-guard action by a cowed foe with limited recourse though the conservatives may have hoped that the Kingfish’s everyman charisma would translate poorly to the Convention crowd. At first, Long did appear to be out of his depth. He attempted to outmaneuver the conservatives by buffoonishly having a third, rump delegation show up to the Convention. It was a transparent attempt that aroused contempt from Party officials.

Fortunately for Long and his allies, the Roosevelt team needed every vote they could get and backed the Long delegation’s right to represent their state. National party conventions were less responsive to democratic pressure in 1932 than they would eventually become. During the Depression era, they were still smoke-filled-room affairs where secret deals between party bosses could do more to make or break a candidate’s chances than popular support. As a facet of the political system, the convention was an illiberal tool that effectively insulated the parties from the electorate’s preferences. It ensured that general-election nominees would always be men palatable to elites. Long, when he began plotting his way toward the presidency, never adequately reckoned with the stumbling block the Convention represented in his path to the White House. Party

¹²⁹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 576.

leaders came to revile him for his radicalism and acerbic style. Al Smith, embittered by his defeat in the 1928 general election – a loss he thought stemmed from anti-Catholic bias – was determined to upset Roosevelt through procedural chicanery. If he could deny FDR a two-thirds majority of delegates, then he hoped that the delegates might become so impatient that they would turn to Smith as a dark-horse nominee.¹³⁰ Smith's failure in this endeavor owed in no small part to Long's transcendence of his parochial style. He showed that he could be more than the Kingfish; he could be a statesman.

He delivered an erudite, legally formidable speech before the Convention, arguing in favor of his delegation's right to vote for the nominee. The speech was a coup for Long, helping to cement his reputation as a man to be reckoned with in national politics. T. Harry Williams described the event saying, "This was not the Huey Long they [the people at the Convention] had expected to ridicule—the clown, the Southern demagogue. This was a lawyer talking about law—logically, calmly, almost coldly."¹³¹ The Convention voted decisively to seat the Long delegation. The Louisiana delegation helped swing the Convention in Roosevelt's favor with Long receiving credit for rallying the Dixie states behind FDR.¹³² Long's performance represented a milestone in his evolution from the populist Louisiana governor to the progressive U.S. Senator. If during his stint in Baton Rouge, he had governed as both, then, stylistically, at least, he had presented himself as the man born in the Winn Parish log cabin. That was in largely agrarian Louisiana. Now, setting out to impress the nation firmly in the process of urbanization, he acted the progressive. Even as committed an opponent to Huey Long as

¹³⁰ Brands, *Huey Long*, 243.

¹³¹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 579.

¹³² Williams, *Huey Long*, 581.

Norman Thomas felt compelled to grant the Kingfish both aspects of his personality. Thomas later said of Long that he was a “very interesting demagogue, a clown, a playboy, but nevertheless a great force of native power. He could argue, they say, in dignified fashion...He didn’t always have to clown.”¹³³ Playing up the symbolism of the Convention moment, Long later claimed that William Jennings Bryan, Jr., presented him with a gold fountain pen that had belonged to his father, the great Populist leader.¹³⁴ Clarence Darrow, the celebrated labor lawyer and William Jennings Bryan’s legal opponent at the Scopes Monkey Trial, congratulated Long, calling the speech the best summary of facts and evidence he had ever seen.¹³⁵

Following the 1932 Democratic Convention, Long was eager to bring his plan to redistribute the wealth to the voters, whether or not candidate Roosevelt approved. The political alliance between the two men was shaky from the start but payed dividends for both men through the general election. The Kingfish, as a relentless self-promoter, saw campaign stunting for FDR as a way to augment his own prestige as well as to keep pressure on the candidate from the left. In late 1932, Long phoned Roosevelt, interrupting a lunch the candidate was having with his advisor Rex Tugwell. “God damn it, Frank!” Long said, bellowing into the receiver. “Who d’you think got you nominated?”¹³⁶ He was likely reclining on a bed of pillows, as was his want, or frantically pacing a suite of hotel rooms he had rented at an expensive hotel, surrounded by his retinue.

¹³³ Norman Thomas, “The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas,” FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer.

¹³⁴ Long, *Every Man a King*, 304.

¹³⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 580.

¹³⁶ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 260.

Roosevelt's said, "Well, you had a lot to do with it."

"You sure as hell are forgettin' about it as fast as you can. Here I sit down and never hear from anybody, and what do I see in the papers? That stuffed shirt Owen Young comes to see you." Owen Young was the chairman of General Electric and represented the kind of business interest that Long thought wielded improper evidence over the Democrats. He went on to say, "We won't even carry these states down here if you don't stop listening to those people. You've got to turn me loose."¹³⁷

After the phone call ended, FDR turned to his companion Tugwell and called the Kingfish the second most dangerous man in the US. Long could rise to power, he worried, hawking his wealth-sharing panacea to the masses. It would be a guise, masking his true purpose of amassing power for himself and holding onto it even at the cost of democracy. In terms of the threat he posed to liberalism, Roosevelt ranked Long only behind Douglas MacArthur, the military general. MacArthur had recently, in the Fall of 1932, violently dispersed a group of World War I veterans assembled in the capital. They were the "Bonus Army," veterans who had marched on Washington to demand benefits for their service, which the government had promised but not delivered. MacArthur ordered the assault on the protesters under the direction of President Hoover and over the objections of his more politically savvy subordinate officer, Colonel Dwight D. Eisenhower.¹³⁸ When candidate Roosevelt heard about the Bonus Army incident, he turned to another member of his Brain Trust Felix Frankfurter and commented, "Well, Felix, this will elect me." FDR, a committed deficit hawk, would oppose payment of the

¹³⁷ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 260.

¹³⁸ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 259.

bonus to the veterans over the vocal objections of Senator Long, but Roosevelt did understand optics. When the Bonus Army called on D.C. under his Administration, he sent First Lady Eleanor with supplies and warm words. Norman Thomas thought all along that the Bonus Marchers should get their bonus, not because they were veterans but because they were Americans.¹³⁹

Candidate Roosevelt ultimately benefitted in 1932 from the incumbent president's incompetence and the indefatigable energy of his campaign-trail surrogate Huey Long. Long entered into the general-election campaign season on a political hot streak. His star having shown through at the Convention, he moved to cement his fledgling status as a national player. In August, Long intervened decisively in the Arkansas, home state of his nemesis in the Senate – Joe Robinson – Democratic Senate Primary.¹⁴⁰ Arkansas was also where Huey Long, the attorney, had built a reputation practicing in the Southern part of the state and the place in the South that had – aside from Louisiana – received his cotton-holiday plan most enthusiastically. Long allied with one of his few Senate colleagues with whom he had good relations: Senator Hattie Caraway, a widow who had inherited the seat from her deceased husband and surprised the Arkansas political establishment by opting to run for re-election. No American state had, at that point in time, elected a woman to the U.S. Senate. Long, a shrewd manipulator of Southern sensibilities, played his support for Caraway off as a chivalrous, gentlemanly responsibility. While Long was favorably inclined toward Caraway – he sat down next to her on his first day in the Senate – personally, his calculation was more plausibly

¹³⁹ Thomas, Oral History Project, 72.

¹⁴⁰ Stuart Towns, "A Louisiana Medicine Show: The Kingfish Elects an Arkansas Senator," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40023261>.

opportunistic and ideological. Long wanted to augment his prestige through a show of influence and prowess. He perceived in Caraway a fellow traveler because she voted with the Senate progressives and had voted in favor of Long's quixotic measure to limit fortunes to \$1 million under the Hoover Administration.¹⁴¹

Long and his entourage intervened at the primary's eleventh hour with Senator Caraway trailing behind her male rivals, all heavyweights in Arkansas politics, in the polls and the ballots scheduled to be cast in a matter of days. The state's commentariat were ambivalent or scornful of the Kingfish's presence on their turf. They were surprised that he would expend precious political capital on a lost cause. They underestimated him. Long's Arkansas adventure proved nothing less than a political tour de force. He deployed the state-of-the-art tactics his machine had been pioneering in Louisiana, demonstrating their broad utility. Embarking on a grueling, week-long campaign frenzy, Long invaded the state with his coterie of assistants, advisors, and bodyguards and two sound trucks.¹⁴² The Long machine blanketed the state with two tons of literature, hitting on such populist anxieties as the "Doom of the American Dream."¹⁴³

Long met a punishing schedule of speaking before five towns per day. Ahead of him, one of his sound trucks would enter the town, playing music from its speakers to draw a crowd which Long would eventually arrive to entertain. One photo from the tour that appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* is the preposterous image of the notoriously foppish Long beaming at the camera, dressed in overalls, and flanked by two folk

¹⁴¹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 584.

¹⁴² Long, *Every Man a King*, location 4229.

¹⁴³ Williams, *Huey Long*, 588.

musicians.¹⁴⁴ Long, whose self-indulgent tastes – including alcohol and red meat – sometimes exacerbated a tendency toward pudginess, looks lean here, his neck fat barely distinguishable under his dimpled chin. His auburn, curly hair looks dark and straight under the disfiguring effects of pomade and black-and-white photography. His seated position obscures his height, which, at 5”10’, was above average.¹⁴⁵ The sight of the ultimate political boss in a workman’s uniform is jarring. Another photo from a 1931 Long rally gives the taste of what the gatherings must have been like.¹⁴⁶ Long is an animated speaker in the charismatic fashion of the day. His whole upper body contorts with the conviction of his pronouncements, his arms dramatically flailing about him. He stands on a small, elevated platform with local dignitaries seated behind him. It is Summer, so most of the rural people in the crowd wear white, their top hats and caps shielding pensive, sun-leathered faces from the August day. Men smoke and occasionally nod with approval to Long’s verbal jabs at the rich and powerful while barefooted girls in Summer dresses run underfoot.

Having Long on one’s side in a campaign could be a blessing and a curse, as Senator Caraway was finding out, and Governor Roosevelt soon would. Possibly no politician of the day could more easily captivate an audience, but Long’s instincts for self-promotion could also detract attention from the person who was actually on the ballot. Caraway felt the need to link up with Long and join him on his tour. Her delivery

¹⁴⁴ Raymond Daniell, *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 12, 1938, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 43.

¹⁴⁵ Louis Cochran, “The Louisiana Kingfish,” *The American Mercury*, July 1932, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

¹⁴⁵ “Louisiana’s March of Progress,” Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

¹⁴⁶ Huey Long rally photo, 1931, LSU Special Collections, Huey P. Long Papers, Box 43.

fell flat before the voters at first though she improved as the week elapsed.¹⁴⁷ The campaigning culminated with the largest crowd in the state capital at Little Rock's history – an estimated 25 to 35,000 people – gathered to bear witness to another sensational Kingfish performance. Caraway won the Democratic nomination convincingly, becoming the first woman to ever achieve election to the U.S. Senate in her own right. Long now as good as controlled two votes in the Senate. Long's machine would soon offer a primary challenge to incumbent Louisiana Senator Broussard. Long's proxy candidate John Overton defeated Broussard in September 1932, bringing the number of votes Long controlled in the Senate to three.¹⁴⁸

Flush from his series of triumphs, Long was intent on making his presence felt in the Presidential election, whether Roosevelt wanted his assistance or not. Long, wearing an orchid shirt and pink necktie, payed a call on FDR at his Hyde Park manor. The culture shock of the encounter between the man from the Louisiana hill country and the blue-blooded New Yorker was apparent at their meeting. When everyone sat down together for a meal, Long's table manners were apparently such that FDR's mother said loud enough for everyone to hear, "Who is that awful man sitting on my son's right?"¹⁴⁹ The awkward meeting encapsulated the difficulty with Roosevelt and Long's marriage of convenience. The Roosevelt crowd acknowledged Long as a nominal ally, but their suspicion of him kept the parties at arm's length. Long petitioned FDR's political consigliere Jim Farley for a train to carry the Kingfish on a nationwide, whistle-stop tour

¹⁴⁷ Williams, *Huey Long*, 590.

¹⁴⁸ Jerome Beatty, "You Can't Laugh Him Off," *The American Magazine*, January 1933, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

¹⁴⁹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 602.

in support of the Democratic ticket.¹⁵⁰ Long was angling for an encore to his show-stealing Arkansas performance, and Farley knew it. Trying to appease Long while also relegating him to the sidelines, Farley deployed the Kingfish to the Midwest, a region the Democrats did not fear losing. In the Midwest, Long's political star shone through, and even Farley begrudgingly acknowledged his contribution.

With the Democrats' control of Washington secured, Long was ready to engage in Senate business in earnest and prevent the new administration from walking back their progressive commitments. In the U.S. Senate, however, Senator Long would never be a popular man. Not a man prone to close personal friendships to begin with, Long's personality was too domineering, his ambition too overriding to lend itself well to the collegial, backslapping ways of the Senate. Fortunately for the Kingfish, he had not come to Washington to make friends but to bury the Kingfish, in a sense, and reinvent himself as Huey Long, the statesman destined for the nation's highest office. In that vein, he set to work distinguishing himself as the most outspoken, energetic member of Senate's bipartisan, progressive bloc. At first, his attendance to his senatorial duties was neglectful. During the waning days of the Hoover presidency, he was often gone from Washington, micromanaging Louisiana or campaigning for political allies.

On his first day, Senator Broussard, the senior senator from Louisiana – whom Long's machine would soon replace – refused to introduce his state's political boss before the body. It was a tradition in the Senate for the senior senator from a state to introduce his junior counterpart. With Broussard's demurring, the Democratic Senate caucus leader Joe Robinson – a physically imposing Bourbon politician from Arkansas –

¹⁵⁰ Williams, *Huey Long*, 600.

took his place.¹⁵¹ If Long and Robinson ever enjoyed good relations, however, they did not last. For Long, the conservative Robinson, with his subservience to his home state's business interests and elite planters, epitomized the Democratic Party's inadequacy. Long scandalized the Senate gentlemen by de facto accusing the Democratic leader of corruption on the Senate floor and reading off the client list of Robinson's private law firm which included forty-three powerful corporations. The Kingfish resigned from his committee assignments rather than be dependent on Party leaders for favors.¹⁵²

As with nearly every facet of his career, historians disagree about the nature of Long's Congressional career. Alan Brinkley, who takes a broadly sympathetic view of the Senator, emphasizes the moderate aspects of his political presentation. Brinkley envisions Huey Long, the neo-Populist who wanted to turn back the clock to the 19th century to prevent the modern world from encroaching on American pastoral life. This understanding of Long is one-dimensional in light of Long's gubernatorial and Senate accomplishments. In Louisiana, after all, Long was the one who built the highways, connecting town and country. He retired the baroque state capitol and replaced it with a skyscraper, that totem of the industrial world. In the Senate, he doubled down on his populist and progressive tendencies. Brinkley points out that Long hypocritically supported protectionist tariff measures to shield his state's petroleum industry at consumers' expense while opposing federal appropriations for African American education through Howard University.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Long, *Every Man a King*, 285.

¹⁵² Williams, *Huey Long*, 561.

¹⁵³ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 55.

While these actions exposed the limits of his radicalism, they belied the Kingfish's otherwise progressive voting record. The contemporaneous, left-leaning publication *Plain Talk Magazine* gave Long flying colors for his voting for the "public interest."¹⁵⁴ The magazine arrived at this determination based on Long's support in the 73rd Congress for the 30-hour work week, workers' right to organize in non-company unions, the veterans' bonus, and for the government's guaranteeing to pay farmers' production costs. Long opposed the regressive sales tax and agitated to shift the burden of utility taxation from consumers to producers. More than any issue, Senator Long's, at times myopic, support for wealth redistribution acted as his hobby horse. It was Long's increasingly hostile challenge to the Roosevelt Administration from the left that ended up embittering the President against him and inaugurating the final phase of the Kingfish's career.

Huey Long successfully navigated the transition from regional to national politician. He gambled early on, staking his reputation on risky, high profile political contests, and these calculations paid off for him. Members of the political and media establishment who had looked down their noses at the consummate provincial Huey Long learned quickly that they underestimated him at their own peril. Long ingratiated himself with the Roosevelt camp while also cultivating an independent power base. He did not have to cooperate with the establishment press or kowtow to party bigwigs as other senators did. Long established the stakes of his national career from the offset of his senatorial tenure. He would be a relentless advocate for government intervention as a means of achieving a more egalitarian distribution of income and resources. Long made it

¹⁵⁴ "Senate Batting Average [How HL voted on 'people's rights]," *Plain Talk Magazine*, September 1933, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

clear that he was willing to support the President if the President cooperated in working toward this end. The Kingfish was not going to submit to the Democratic chain of command, however, unless he thought there was something in it for the American people and, thereby, for him.

Chapter Three: Norman Thomas's Early Life

During the 1928 campaign cycle, Norman Thomas was in his mid-forties and nearing the height of his powers. Following the death of Eugene Debs, the legendary blue-collar activist turned perennial Socialist Presidential candidate, the Party anointed Thomas as his successor. Thomas – given his Princeton pedigree, Puritan bloodline, and background in the Presbyterian ministry – was not an obvious choice to lead American Socialism, and he would prove to be a controversial one. In 1928, he was campaigning when he came across Sinclair Lewis, the famous novelist, in New York City. Lewis, a liberal intellectual, was exactly the sort of person for whom candidate Thomas held the most appeal. Thomas, the ultimate “respectable rebel” – Thomas was at home in East Coast high society and the picket lines of industrial labor strikes – had a knack for bringing college-educated progressive types into the Socialist fold.

Lewis interviewed Thomas for background for his novel, Norman Thomas being an Ivy League-educated, bestselling author's idea of a labor activist. After their meeting, Thomas sent an associate to call on Lewis to gauge his interest in joining the Party. Lewis and his wife took the Socialist Party man to a bar. Lewis got so intoxicated while discussing the details of his labor novel that the Party associate ended up taking Mrs. Lewis out to dinner, leaving Sinclair to stumble home.¹⁵⁵ Lewis never finished his novel, but some years later, flush off his Nobel Prize, he wrote his anti-fascist novel called *It Can't Happen Here*, a liberal jeremiad on the dangers of Huey Long. Thomas read the novel and approved of it.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 116.

¹⁵⁶ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 202.

Years before *It Can't Happen Here*, Lewis wrote the book that launched his literary stardom: *Main Street*, a novel detailing the hypocrisy of small-town American life. Thomas used the novel and others like it as a touchstone to describe his childhood. “What a setup for the modern psychologically minded biographer and novelist,” he wrote of his middle American childhood in juxtaposition with his radical adulthood.¹⁵⁷ The Marion, Ohio of his youth might as well have been Munice, Indiana – the town traditionally used by scholars as a bellwether of small-town America. Thomas meant the comparison as a warning to would-be biographers. The popular imagination carried then – and still does today – an image of the black-sheep radical, the maladjusted contrarian born to affluence but turned to fringe ideology as compensation for some character defect.

Given Thomas's middle American upbringing in a middle-class, Protestant family, it was far from predictable that he would one day take over that radical, predominantly immigrant institution, the Socialist Party of America. At the same time, it would be a mistake to suppose that Thomas's becoming a Marxist was rebellious. On the contrary, Thomas's Socialist Party affiliation fulfilled the values that his puritan, Republican parents instilled in him: love for the stranger, unmitigated dedication to a cause greater than one's self, and relentless discipline. Thomas inherited from his arch-Presbyterian family a disembodied, metaphysical orientation toward the world. Norman retained through the course of his life a fundamentally ethical approach to conflicts. This trait led the Ivy League-educated intellectual to dedicate his life to the quixotic task of turning the U.S.'s economic hierarchy into a level playing field. In Thomas's dedication

¹⁵⁷ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 1946, Reel 72, Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library, New York, New York, 5.

to acting on a sincere, philanthropic belief that Americans were capable of being more fair to one another, he came to offer an antithesis to the picaresque, anti-heroic pose that Huey Long struck. The Marxist conclusions that set Norman Thomas on his collision course with the Kingfish were a long time coming.

Norman Mattoon Thomas, born in 1884 in Marion as the eldest of six children, was by no means a horny-handed son of toil. His Socialist career stemmed from a WASPY sense of noblesse oblige, not from resentment. On both sides of the family, the young Norman's forefathers were Presbyterian ministers. His father and both grandfathers were not wealthy men, but they were learned doctors of divinity, well-respected and pillars of their communities. Thomas's paternal grandparents immigrated from Wales and settled in Pennsylvania. His paternal grandfather Thomas was the minister of a Presbyterian church nestled in a picturesque village more New England in character than Mid-Atlantic.¹⁵⁸ Some of Norman's early memories were of family reunions at his grandparents' home in Pennsylvania, the cohort of grandchildren gathered around the stern patriarch in his rocker.

The Mattoons, representing Norman's mother's side, were of old Puritan stock, having immigrated to the British colonies sometime in the 17th century. His mother's father had graduated from the seminary at Princeton before embarking on missionary work in Thailand, née Siam, with his wife. In 1944, a middle-aged Norman appreciated Margaret Landon's bestselling novel *Anna and the King of Siam* – later adapted into an Academy Award-winning film – for its favorable representation of the Mattoons, his grandparents.¹⁵⁹ The Mattoons went on to be President and first lady of Bible

¹⁵⁸ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 16.

¹⁵⁹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 19.

University, the Presbyterian college for African Americans in Charlotte, North Carolina, a fact from which their social crusading grandson drew pride.

Norman's own parents, both the children of clerics, were religiously severe, albeit kindhearted, people. Norman's father preached a Calvinistic strain of Protestantism from his pulpit and at home. He "frowned on playing cards, marbles for keeps, dancing and theatre going."¹⁶⁰ Norman would, in later years, reject his parent's theology but retain a smidgeon of their dogmatism. Aside from the sectarianism of his eventual Socialism, it was only his upbringing which could have allowed him – who ranked among the 20th centuries most persistent advocates for civil rights and liberties – to write this passage in his unpublished autobiography:

I am so old-fashioned as to be glad that I lived in a home, a time, and an environment in which sin, yes and moral vices, were realities to be forgiven and cured but not condoned. I suspect that not only immediate environment but the America of my youth was actually freer from homosexuality, as well as more silent about it than today."¹⁶¹

Norman's parents held themselves to high moral standards, leading abstemious, devout lives while seldom looking down on anyone else for being less disciplined than they were. The adult Norman – singularly industrious, altruistic in every action, known for never taking a drink during Prohibition because it was against the law – was, likewise, seldom a condescending man. While Norman inherited much of his parents' character, his Protestantism was more liberal, eventually developing into a kind of secular humanism. The Marion, Ohio of Norman's youth reflected the cold Puritanism, mitigated by interpersonal generosity, of his family life. People respected the Sabbath. There were

¹⁶⁰ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 5.

¹⁶¹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 6.

no dances at his high school because it was thought that dancing encouraged immorality.¹⁶²

The town could feel overbearing to a sensitive, brilliant mind like Norman's, but it was also a community in the 19th-century sense. Marion was a town of about 12,000 people, the industrial center of an agricultural county. Among its prominent citizens in Norman's youth was a charming, albeit not particularly ingenious, newspaper publisher named Warren G. Harding. The medium-sized Ohio town was precisely the sort of place a folksy reformer like Huey Long liked to harken back to during the Great Depression era. Indeed, Norman's boyhood was not devoid of the Populist influence Long encountered. William Jennings Bryan, stumping for his 1896 presidential bid, stopped in Marion. Bryan's charismatic speaking style struck the young Norman though Thomas's parents were committed Republicans. Marion combined industrial-age prosperity with a size small enough for kinship and patronage networks to prevent it from degenerating into the extreme forms of privation characteristic of urban centers. Marion factories built the steam shovels that dug the Panama Canal. The sons of inherited wealth were the factory bosses, but they knew their workers by name and took an interest in their lives. Norman seldom, if ever, witnessed indigent poverty until he moved to New York City after college.¹⁶³

Growing up in such placid circumstances, Norman inherited the sensitivity and intellectual curiosity that would develop into his Socialism from a near-fatal, childhood illness that held him back in life until age twelve. From this occasionally bedridden period, he developed his bibliophilia and an inferiority complex when he re-engaged with

¹⁶² Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 5.

¹⁶³ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 4.

peers following his recovery. I was “too tall, too awkward, too self-conscious, probably tending to compensate by an interest in studies.”¹⁶⁴ Norman’s social rejection was short-lived, his natural poise and ability soon endearing him to his classmates. By the time Norman graduated high school, he was class president.

At the age of sixteen, having already completed high school, Norman moved with his family to Lewisburg, Pennsylvania after his father accepted a teaching position there. The primary consequence of the Thomas family move for Norman – who was reaching an independent age – was that it brought him to an unfortunate freshman year at Bucknell University, the local higher education institution in Lewisburg. Thomas, possessed of considerable work ethic and intellect, was above the second-rate Bucknell and soon discovered it. Showing that there was more Puritanism in him than he was willing to admit in retrospect, Thomas also disapproved of the endemic academic dishonesty at Bucknell. With five younger siblings for his family to support on his father’s preacher’s salary, however, his chances of being able to transfer somewhere more desirable were not ideal. Fortunately for the ambitious Norman, an uncle offered to partially bankroll his enrollment at Princeton, historically the most prestigious Presbyterian university in the U.S.¹⁶⁵ The support was insufficient to cover all Norman’s expenses, but through obtaining a scholarship, frugality, and part-time work, he was able to transfer into Princeton as a sophomore and earn a degree there.

For one of Thomas’s odd jobs at Princeton, he worked as a salesman, a job he despised. Thomas’s lack of compatibility with a door-to-door sales position contrasts sharply with Huey Long, who was a born salesman. Conversely, Thomas was destined

¹⁶⁴ Norman Thomas, interview by Allan Nevins and Dean Albertson, Oral History Project, 1949, 6.

¹⁶⁵ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 25.

for the ministry while Huey Long's brief stint in divinity school was abortive. The two men represent diametrically opposed composite characters in the American mythos. There is Norman Thomas, the earnest, scholarly Puritan, a quintessential Yankee with Mayflower ancestry. Thomas biographer W. A. Swanberg called him "that bird many people now believe all but extinct, an honest politician."¹⁶⁶ There is Huey Long, the goofy, sophistic grifter figure, capable of selling anything to anyone and only looking out for himself. It is fitting that Huey Long was on a path to becoming President while Thomas came to occupy a position in American life akin to its conscience. He stood athwart the nation in the 1930s and 40s saying "Stop!" as it hurdled toward global empire and lackluster social democracy.

Thomas had his work cut out for him during his sophomore year. Having come from Bucknell, he had a great deal of remedial work to do to catch up with his peers while also struggling to make ends meet. Not one to shirk from responsibility, Thomas's rocky sophomore year gave way to some of the happiest years of his life. He never earned anything less than top marks while distinguishing himself socially and extracurricularly. Similar to Huey Long, he was a gifted orator and debater, earning accolades by winning a competition against the Harvard team. Providing a glimpse of the elite circles that he ran in, his debating partner was Raymond B. Fosdick, later president of the Rockefeller Foundation. Thomas said of his time at Princeton that "it opened a lot of doors for [him]."¹⁶⁷

This claim certainly bore out in his later life. While he drew contempt from some for his rejection of capitalism, Thomas had the ear of numerous American presidents who

¹⁶⁶ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 511.

¹⁶⁷ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 26.

served during his lifetime. He was often a darling of the elite liberal media. At Princeton, Thomas received election to the Colonial Club, a social club in which membership was seen as a shibboleth denoting membership in the ruling class. Remembering his Club membership, Thomas would utilize a talent for understatement saying, “I did not have any particular class-consciousness in the Socialist sense.”¹⁶⁸ Thomas, having come of age on his parents’ Presbyterianism and laissez faire economics courses at Princeton, generally considered himself a progressive as a young man. Testifying to the degree of his political evolution, by 1933, Thomas had harsh words for the Princetonian intellectual environment. An undergraduate at the New Jersey College for Women, who had heard a Princeton political science professor give a speech denouncing socialism, sent Thomas a letter asking for him to reply.¹⁶⁹ Thomas replied with uncharacteristic venom, tinged with misogyny, saying the professor “of Princeton enjoys a far higher repute lecturing before women’s clubs than he does as a political science professor.”¹⁷⁰ It would take decades for Norman Thomas, the undergraduate who took pride in his aptness at Ivy League networking, to become Norman Thomas, the Socialist leader who railed against inherited wealth and privilege.

He did not, for example, denounce his membership in the Colonial Club until years later when former President Grover Cleveland’s son led a revolt against the upper-class system at Princeton shortly before World War I. The most important man Thomas encountered in college was the talented, pretentious Princeton University President

¹⁶⁸ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 6.

¹⁶⁹ Emily May Phelps, letter to Norman Thomas, November 10, 1933, Reel 2, Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library.

¹⁷⁰ Norman Thomas, letter to Emily May Phelps, November 22, 1933, Reel 2, Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library.

Woodrow Wilson. Young Thomas counted Wilson first among his professors and took every class from the man who would successfully challenge President William Howard Taft's conservative Republicanism and bring the progressive movement back to the White House. Thomas credited Wilson with "chang[ing] the not wholly undeserved reputation of [the then single-sex] Princeton as 'the best country club for boys in America'" and recognized his brilliance. However, he also picked up on Wilson's Achilles Heel: arrogance. Thomas winced at seeing Wilson publicly humiliate a professor for an ignorant remark. Thomas's Princeton class drew Wilson's ire by protesting an iron fence he built around the president's mansion. Many years later, Thomas encountered Wilson's daughter Jessie Wilson Sayte at a wedding reception where she snubbed him saying, "You're part of the class that was so cruel to Father." Though Thomas's economics were far from socialist as an undergraduate, he looked back on Wilson's ideas as "g[iving] politics a rather narrow definition almost to the exclusion of economics."¹⁷¹

In the first instance, Thomas's intellectual drift toward the left began with his work for the Presbyterian Church in New York City. He was a pastor's assistant at a New York church. The dark economic realities of life in the big city shocked and appalled the young man from Marion, Ohio. Immediately after college, he took a job with the Spring Street Parish, a Presbyterian administrative district that encompassed slum-like tenement apartments housing working-class immigrants.¹⁷² In the early 1900s, it was more common for non-governmental organizations, especially religious institutions, to perform the kind of social services that municipal governments often dole out today. Presbyterian neighborhood centers provided stop-gap economic welfare to New York's desperately

¹⁷¹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 30.

¹⁷² Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 45.

poor. For the compassionate, freethinking Thomas, his time at Spring Street proved to be formative. The writings and oral testimony Thomas left about his life tend to be expository. As a man who cherished his “private life because it was private,” he was careful to limit the public’s access to his interior life.¹⁷³ In the case of the poverty he saw in New York, however, his descriptions are vivid. He said:

I have visited some of these [abominable slums], sitting gingerly on a broken wooden chair and watched cockroaches and worse vermin make irregular patterns on the grimy, broken plaster of the walls while I talked to a sick woman on a filthy bed around which dirty toddlers played.¹⁷⁴

While Thomas was witnessing the privations the people his parish served endured, he gradually became disillusioned with the Presbyterian Church’s efforts to alleviate their suffering. As Howard Quint notes in his observations on the emergence of the Social Gospel Movement and its relationship with Socialism, the Protestant clergy had seldom acted as a voice for the economically disenfranchised in American life. Northern church leaders had been at the forefront of abolitionism but rarely turned the same critical eye to the exploitation occurring in their own region. Over time, the genteel Presbyterians’ – generally, by Thomas’s admission, a “stuck-up” brand of Protestantism – milquetoast aid to the poor drew him toward a more radical interpretation of Christianity. On his way to ideological socialism, Thomas never underwent a Road to Damascus moment. During mid-to-late years of the 20th century’s first decade, he persisted in his moderate-to- progressive outlook. At Spring St., a parishioner exposed him to a publication of the Socialist Labor Party and its professorial leader Daniel De Leon. De Leon and his

¹⁷³ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 1.

¹⁷⁴ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 46.

Socialist Labor Party were increasingly facing irrelevance next to the rising popularity of the Socialist Party of America under the dynamic leadership of Eugene Debs. Thomas was unimpressed with the Socialist Labor Party's ideas. His attention was on following in his father and grandfathers' footsteps by attending the seminary and becoming an ordained minister.¹⁷⁵

Before starting graduate school, the second experiential precursor to his socialism occurred on a trip around the world. Thomas's then supervisor, the Spring St. minister, suffered from a mental illness that a contemporary clinician might diagnose as depression. In the early 20th century, mentally ill people of means often travelled under the somewhat dubious medical notion that a change of scenery might lead to recovery. The pastor took Thomas along on his get well-journey. They left for East Asia by way of the Pacific Northwest in July 1905. From Japan, Thomas travelled West for the better part of a year, reaching his ultimate destination Europe in March 1906. On the eve of World War I – the acme of European global domination - Thomas began at the colonial periphery and narrowed his way to the imperial metropole. The experience embittered him against imperialism and white supremacy. His American college education, which taught him that British dominion over areas such as India and China was humanitarian, did not comport with the reality he saw. He grew sympathetic to Indian nationalism after “on a Calcutta street car, I saw a British civilian strike a native guard – we'd say a conductor – across the shoulders simply because the seat where he wanted to sit was dusty.” In Shanghai, a park sign that said “Dogs and Chinese not allowed” enraged Thomas. When the Socialist Party in the U.S. became one of the only organized political

¹⁷⁵ Howard H Quint, *The Forging of American Socialism: Origins of the Modern Movement* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953), 103.

factions in the Western world – on either side – opposed to World War I, Thomas was inclined to agree with Eugene Debs that the war represented imperial competition.¹⁷⁶

Upon returning to the US, Thomas enrolled at the Union Theological Seminary. He did so over his parents objections because of the divinity school's reputation for leftist theology. The ideas of Dr. Walter Rauschenbusch, an influential Social Gospel theologian, reigned at Union. Thomas would later say that the two most important intellectual events in his socialist development were reading Rauschenbusch and witnessing a debate over socialism between the Catholic Monsignor John Ryan and the labor lawyer Morris Hillquit, a leading Debsian Socialist.¹⁷⁷ His conversion was “unorthodox from a classical Marxist viewpoint.”¹⁷⁸ The other significant event that occurred at Union was Thomas's meeting the New York City debutante Frances Violet Stewart, the woman he would marry. She was deeply involved in the Presbyterian Christ Church's charity work treating tuberculosis patients. The two bonded over their shared interest in community service. When Thomas grew sick one day, Stewart insisted on nursing him, telling him she could take care of him more easily at her family home. Thomas said he would only go to her home if she agreed to marry him, and Violet assented. The two were married in September 1910, Norman's last year at the seminary.¹⁷⁹

No point better illustrates the personal contrast between Huey Long and Norman Thomas than a review of their family lives. By all accounts, Norman and Violet were

¹⁷⁶ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 51.

¹⁷⁷ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 69.

¹⁷⁸ James C Duram, “In Defense of Conscience: Norman Thomas as an Exponent of Christian Pacifism during World War I,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 32.

¹⁷⁹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 53.

devoted to one another. As a chronic overachiever and public figure, Norman always suffered from too many demands on his time. His most accomplished biographer W. A. Swanberg writes that his work ethic was so feverish he would multitask through unusual feats of focus such as penning a newspaper column while also carrying on a telephone conversation.¹⁸⁰ Long and Thomas shared an insatiable work ethic. Whereas Long's energy was fundamentally oriented inwardly, Thomas's spartan willingness to give of himself stemmed from identification with causes and comrades in a shared struggle. The Kingfish's productivity was of the manic-depressive variety. His bursts of extraordinary creativity balanced against self-seeking drinking and womanizing binges. Long attempted to reform himself following a series of public relations disasters in 1934, adopting a penitent, born-again abstemiousness before the public.¹⁸¹ There is reason to suspect that this shift was more optical than substantive. Thomas's remarkable work ethic, by contrast, had an ascetic, self-abnegating staying power. His recreation was wholesome. He would lighten the load of a busy campaign season with a trip to the theatre with Violet or a family vacation to the Thomas's summer home at Long Island where he enjoyed gardening, his only hobby outside of reading.¹⁸² Thomas and Long faced the same burden of genius. The former made his family feel loved, his children feeling that "his repeated and long absences were somewhat compensated for by the fact that he had the capacity for being all father when he was with them."¹⁸³ By contrast, Huey's brother Julius said, "I do not know of a man, any human being, that has less feeling for his family than Huey P.

¹⁸⁰ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 127.

¹⁸¹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 78.

¹⁸² Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 127.

¹⁸³ Murray B Seidler, *Norman Thomas: Respectable Rebel* (Binghamton, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1961), 101.

Long.”¹⁸⁴ Thomas found his domestic responsibilities regenerative. Long, in his interpersonal self-absorption, found them oppressive.

Through his marriage to Violet, an uptown girl and heir to a substantial inheritance, Thomas ensured the noblesse oblige of his eventual socialism. Her inherited wealth insulated the couple from the kind of privations Norman’s break with respectability would have otherwise invited. Thomas never had to endure hunger or freelance to make ends meet in the way that, for example, Karl Marx did when he was not living off of Friedrich Engels’s family money. He was free to pursue his causes from a philanthropic remove. For many of his critics on the left, this affluence only further discredited him. In the eyes of the Communists and Trotskyists who vied with Thomas for influence during the 1930s, Thomas’s social democratic vision of the cooperative commonwealth was already suspiciously milquetoast for the stock it placed in bourgeois legality. Thomas, though he would occasionally posture otherwise, was – at his core – an incrementalist, parliamentarian reformer. He expressed discomfort about the cognitive dissonance required to champion socialism while living off of generational capital. He and Violet ultimately concluded that as long as the money freed them up to agitate for social justice, then they were directing it toward a worthy cause. One wonders what Norman made of the Lewis novel *It Can’t Happen Here*’s protagonist, the fiction Norman said he appreciated. The protagonist Doremus Jessup – a blue-blooded New England newspaper editor – flirts with a united front with the Communists after the Huey Loong doppelganger’s fascist takeover of the U.S. Jessup ultimately rejects the idea, doubling down on his liberalism. At the same time, he anguishes over the thought that if

¹⁸⁴ Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, 51.

he had economic skin in the game, he would be “less detached about the Sorrows of the Dispossessed” and less hung up on methodological prudence.¹⁸⁵

For all of the hay Thomas’s critics made of his affluence and belief in democracy, few Americans labored as strenuously or persistently on behalf of the economically dispossessed. The industrial laborers, left behind by progressives and craft unionists, and the sharecroppers and agricultural wage earners, ignored by Populists and smallholding Farmers’ Alliances, found a champion in Norman Thomas. Thomas acted as their tribune at a time when men like Huey Long and Franklin Roosevelt seemed to merely have sympathy for the middle class’s plight. Thomas’s advocacy for blue-collar America and socialism picked up following his graduation from Union Seminary and employment as an ordained minister.

His post-graduate place within the Presbyterian Church was fraught from the start. The Church’s conservative establishment was concerned that up-and-coming, progressive clerics like Thomas had wandered too far from orthodoxy. A decade into the 20th century, the Presbyterians were in the midst of an existential crisis rooted in generational conflict over the Bible’s literal validity and Calvinist theology. Before his ordination, Thomas underwent interrogation before a committee of senior ministers, who grilled him on his agreement with such sacred cows as the Virgin Birth and Resurrection. Though Thomas was a liberal Presbyterian – later to become an apostate – he weathered the inquisition and received confirmation as a clergyman. Norman was enormously proud that his father – strict Calvinist, though he was – participated in his formal ceremony. His parents were

¹⁸⁵ Lewis, *It Can’t Happen Here*, 47.

characteristically disapproving of his liberal direction but unwilling to impose their beliefs on their son.¹⁸⁶

In 1911, Thomas earned the position of pastor of the East Harlem Presbyterian Church, a position he held for seven years. He continued the practice of social work he had cultivated as a pastor's assistant and seminary student. He became chairman of the American Parish, an administrative designation the Presbyterians gave to the relief work they were doing in a number of working-class, immigrant neighborhoods in New York City.¹⁸⁷ Thomas's participation in labor organization during this time helped precipitate his increasingly socialist inclinations. In 1909 and 1910, he had witnessed a series of needle-trade strikes. The New York needle-trade unions were traditionally a stronghold of the Socialist Party, as they would remain until the New Deal lured them into the Democratic Party fold. In the 1910s, the mainstream labor movement was identified with the progressive factions of both major parties. Partially for this reason, Thomas sympathized with the Bull Moose Progressives in 1912 though his vote would go to his former college professor then and again in 1916.¹⁸⁸

Thomas, the fledgling labor activist, soon found himself on the frontlines of the perennial competition between craft and industrial unionism. Left-wing factions within the Socialist Party were dissatisfied with the American Federation of Labor (AFL) because they thought the AFL was only interested in organizing skilled laborers – in Marxist terminology, labor aristocrats. Socialist Party leaders, including Eugene Debs and the incendiary syndicalist “Big Bill” Haywood had helped found the Industrial

¹⁸⁶ Norman Thomas, *Norman Thomas's Autobiography*, 59.

¹⁸⁷ Norman Thomas, *Norman Thomas's Autobiography*, 61.

¹⁸⁸ Norman Thomas, *Oral History Project*, 20.

Workers of the World (IWW) during the previous decade for this very reason. Thomas found himself, to an extent, agreeing with the IWW point of view. Though Eugene Debs and the Socialist Party were instrumental in the IWWs founding, Debs later broke with the IWW for its countenancing violence and dual-unionist tactics. Dual unionism refers to the gauche practice of attempting to organize a workforce that already has union representation. As part of his responsibilities with the American Parish, Thomas helped run work rooms for the unemployed. During a wire-factory strike involving immigrant laborers, Thomas recalled an AFL organizer saying:

The IWW and the priests have it right; you have to crack the whip over these Hunkies. My wife says she can tell what kind of wops I've been talking to by the smell of my clothes.¹⁸⁹

Thomas came to see that the Socialists – there were no Communist parties in the U.S. before World War I – were the among the few political factions in American life dedicated to uplifting the most country's most downtrodden proletarians.

Another instrumental factor in his radicalization was his experience of government repression and imperialism during the First World War. The Socialist Party of America was among the only organized political factions in the Western world, much less American life, to oppose World War I from its offset and through its duration. President Wilson, who – as Thomas knew first hand – had thin skin and tended to assume bad faith from opponents, saw to it that the Socialists paid dearly for their principled stand. State repression of the Socialists under the Wilson Administration helped bring the Debsian era to an end. The Party, at less than two decades old a fragile coalition, soon declined precipitously, culminating in a period of disorganization and inactivity during

¹⁸⁹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 64.

the 1920s. Only the combination of Norman Thomas's committed stewardship and New Deal upheaval would breathe life back into the beleaguered Party.¹⁹⁰

Socialist roots in North America date back to the mid-to-late 18th century when Mother Ann Lee brought Shakerism to New York. The great proletarian prophet, a product of the slums of the "Cottonopolis" Manchester, inaugurated a utopian, anti-capitalist, and transatlantic tradition.¹⁹¹ The utopian tradition often had European roots but was fundamentally oriented toward the New World. Étienne Cabet, who once ranked among the most popular working-class leaders in France, started the Icarian utopian movement. Robert Owen too, the international celebrity and industrial magnate, blew through his fortune trying to construct an alternative to capitalism on the American frontier. When Marx and Engels were codifying their theories during the mid-19th century, they conceived of their ideology as being in continuity with and as a partial rejection of utopian socialism. Similar to how Marx claimed to build on Hegelian philosophy by turning it on its head through dialectical materialism, he would correct utopian socialism's eccentricities by coming up with scientific socialism. The utopians had been naive in thinking that socialism's appeal was self-evident and that capitalism's stakeholders would voluntarily relinquish power. The path to power, the scientific socialists held, was through the class struggle as a means of assuming power over the body politic.

The Americas went from being the centerpiece of the socialist psychic landscape to receding to the periphery. The utopian dream of America lapsed into a waking

¹⁹⁰ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 66.

¹⁹¹ Chris Jennings, *Paradise Now: The Story of American Utopianism* (New York: Random House, 2016), 23.

nightmare for socialists. Marx rejected the idea of the New World as a tabula rasa, offering a cyclical view of historical development. In other words, socialism was not obtainable without first passing through the capitalist mode of production. Only once the U.S. had thoroughly industrialized and urbanized would the workers develop class consciousness and seize the means of production. Further, the young U.S. would have to overcome the three operative words in its history: free real estate. As long as the frontier existed as a safety valve, then the contradictions inherent to American capitalism would take longer to become obvious. The Americans would lag behind their European antecedents. This view would hold sway in Socialist circles until Gilded Age monopoly capitalism seemed to vindicate Marx's theories of capital accumulation, and European observers began hypothesizing that the revolution would emanate from the U.S. again.¹⁹²

In the meantime, scientific socialism slowly gained traction in the U.S. Its influence began with the wave of German immigration that followed on the heels of the 1848 revolutions across Western Europe. Many Germans settled in the Great Lakes region. Through to the Thomas era, American socialism was a disproportionately foreign-born movement, a characteristic that stymied its growth. The most famous of these socialist Germans was August Willich, a Prussian aristocrat and military officer turned personal rival to Marx. Willich earned distinction as a Union Army General during the Civil War, ordering his infantry regiment to storm Missionary Ridge, breaking the Confederate siege of Chattanooga, Tennessee. Reflecting their view of the U.S. as a backwater, European socialists moved the First International's headquarters to New York

¹⁹² R Laurence Moore, *European Socialists and the American Promised Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 52.

City in 1872, seeking to avoid the embarrassment of having it end on their side of the Atlantic.¹⁹³

The postbellum period saw the coalescing of a socialist strain in American politics, but it would not become nationally competitive before the 20th century. German-American Lassalleans created the Social-Democratic Party of North America 1874.¹⁹⁴ This Party became the Socialist Labor Party under Daniel De Leon's high-handed leadership, his tenure beginning in the early 1890s. The Socialist Party leader and Thomas's rival Morris Hillquit wrote, "The Socialist Labor Party was founded at a time when socialism in this country was an academic idea rather than a populist movement."¹⁹⁵ Hillquit was surely correct, but perhaps a more generous interpretation is that De Leon was ahead of his time. The dogmatically Marxist, academic socialism the Socialist Labor Party championed could not have hoped to have gained a wide constituency in still largely agrarian 19th-century America.

In *Marx against the Peasant: A Study of Social Dogmatism*, David Mitrany writes of the avant-garde, prescient nature of Marx's prognostications. He correctly saw that industrialization was rendering independent farming obsolete; it would inevitably give way to large-scale land enclosure, mechanization, and a traumatizing dislocation of the rural labor force to the cities. This process would roughly unfold across most Western countries, but it would take decades longer than Marx anticipated. This delay spawned a socialist-populist divide in electoral democracies, or a progressive-populist divide in the U.S. case. It led to the Bolshevik Revolution – which ironically transpired in

¹⁹³ Seidler, *Respectable Rebel*, 32.

¹⁹⁴ Ira Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement 1897-1912* (New York: Greenwood Press, Publishers, 1968), 8.

¹⁹⁵ Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971), 294.

overwhelmingly agrarian, Tsarist Russia – to become revisionist. Lenin had little choice but to concede, “We have not forgotten that the proletariat is one thing and small production another. We must admit the need for concessions.”¹⁹⁶ Unfortunately for the American socialists’ popularity, Daniel De Leon was no revisionist. De Leon insisted on forecasting the liquidation of the yeomanry in a context where Populism was gaining cachet. In the late 19th century, the smallholding farmers and independent businessmen of the Midwest and South were organizing in granges, alliances, trade unions, and antimonopoly and people’s parties “in desperate attempts to reverse the direction of post-Civil War social and economic development.”¹⁹⁷ The Populist Movement, broadly defined, culminated in William Jennings Bryan’s nomination by the Democratic Party in 1896.

American socialism needed an indigenous tinge and to develop the ideological flexibility to appeal to disaffected rural people. Hence, the Socialist Party of America formed in 1901 under the inspired leadership of Eugene Debs. Debs had risen to prominence during the Pullman strike of the mid 1890s, one of the most disruptive labor protests in American history.¹⁹⁸ The American Railway Union’s strike came to an end when President Grover Cleveland sent in federal troops to force the workers to relent. Debs received a six-month prison sentence for his role in the affair; during his time behind bars, he found solace in an edition of Marx’s *Das Kapital*. Vladimir Lenin, observing the incident from abroad, wrote, “I am not surprised that this fearless man was

¹⁹⁶ David Mitrany, *Marx against the Peasant: A Study in Social Dogmatism* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 63.

¹⁹⁷ Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement 1897-1912*, 43.

¹⁹⁸ Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy’s Prisoner: Eugene V. Debs, The Great War, and the Right to Dissent* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008), location 140.

thrown into prison by the American bourgeoisie . . . The greater the brutality and bitterness they sow, the nearer is the day of the victorious proletarian revolution.”¹⁹⁹

Debs, a blue-collar hero and devout Christian, was well-suited to lead the new Socialist Party. Debs scholar Ernest Freeberg writes, “The Debsian Party perhaps retained more popular appeal because it deployed the type of evangelical furor and certainty described in the British context by E. P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class*.”²⁰⁰

The newly minted Socialist Party gained traction, appealing to urban workers of recent European extraction in cities such as Milwaukee and New York and finding agrarian appeal in regions such as the Southwest. Scholars Lawrence Goldwyn and James Green argue about the difference between Populism and agrarian Socialism. The socialist historian Irving Howe synthesizes their debate saying, “Populists drew their support from small farmers mostly while Southwestern Socialists tended to be more big tent drawing support from laborers and renters too.”²⁰¹ This distinction, drawn from the early 20th century, would certainly hold true during the Depression era. The neo-Populist Huey Long operated from his base constituency of Louisianan smallholders while Thomas tried to organize the sharecroppers and agricultural wage earners. The Debsian Party was a broad coalition, “succeed[ing] in wrenching itself out of that narrow-spirited hermeticism which marks the life of the sect” and had relegated the Socialist Labor Party to irrelevance.²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner*, location 1391.

²⁰⁰ Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner*, location 685.

²⁰¹ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 10.

²⁰² Howe, *Socialism and America*, 11.

Occupying the Party's right wing, Victor Berger led the German-Wisconsin Socialists, who were content to advocate for incremental change and allied with the craft unionist American Federation of Labor. On the left, there was "Big Bill" Haywood and the Industrial Workers of the World. They pushed for a radical syndicalist vision, bordering on anarchism, calling for a "general strike, the assumption of political power by the [nationwide] union, and the establishment of a socialist economy."²⁰³ Debs remained aloof from intra-party strife, serving as a figurehead and unifying force. He had little to do with the bureaucracy and did not use his influence to shape Party platforms. This restraint on Debs's part has earned him flattering comparisons with Thomas, who did engage in factionalism as head of the Party. Debs also receives credit for presiding over a Party that was more working-class in character than Thomas's supposedly bourgeois iteration of it. While socialism has always held a particular appeal to white-collar intellectuals and artists in the U.S., there is reason to suppose that the Debsian party was less genteel.²⁰⁴

By 1912, Debs received 879,000 Presidential votes while the Party's membership soared to 118,000 members. 80,000 of those votes came from Texas, Arkansas, and Louisiana, testifying to Debs's popularity in places like Huey Long's hometown of Winnfield. The Party claimed fifty-six mayors, over 300 aldermen, state legislators, and a congressman.²⁰⁵ The year 1912 was the Party's zenith before Thomas's time. Socialist appeal largely levelled out during the Wilson years and declined during the early 1920s. State repression and major party co-optation constrained its growth. The Progressive

²⁰³ Betty Yorburg, *Utopia and Reality: A Collective Portrait of American Socialists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 6.

²⁰⁴ Kipnis, *The American Socialist Movement*, 199.

²⁰⁵ Seidler, *Respectable Rebel*, 42.

response to early 20th-century socialism confirms Mark Twain's axiom that history does not repeat itself but does rhyme. Teddy Roosevelt viewed Debs's large following as a threat.²⁰⁶ In Teddy's 1912 Bull Moose bid for the White House, he purposefully took Socialist and Populist planks as his own, calling for "women's suffrage, the right of referendum and initiative, the direct election of senators, stricter regulation of the economy through food and drug laws, a minimum wage, and a ban on child labor."²⁰⁷ President Wilson's progressive first term enacted a graduated income tax, the pro-labor Clayton Act, a child-labor law, populist measures, and the direct election of senators.²⁰⁸ The progressive establishment's outmaneuvering of the Socialists during the 1910s presaged how FDR would ward off his leftist challengers during the 1930s.

Debs spearheaded the Socialist Party's opposition to American involvement in World War I. His personal association with pacifism turned him into the most high-profile political prisoner of the Wilson Administration at a time when the federal government was aggressively jailing its critics. Debs's trial for sedition was the occasion of his giving his most well-known oration. Debs rose to address the court at Canton, Ohio and said:

Your honor, years ago I recognized my kinship with all living beings, and I made up my mind that I was not one whit better than the meanest on earth. I said then, and I say now, that while there is a lower class I am in it, while there is a criminal element I am of it, and while there is a soul in prison I am not free.²⁰⁹

Debs served time in an Atlanta prison for over two years, running for president and earning nearly a million votes from behind bars in 1920, a campaign Morris Hillquit

²⁰⁶ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 19.

²⁰⁷ Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner*, location 234.

²⁰⁸ Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner*, location 232-234.

²⁰⁹ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 44.

called “the last flicker of the dying candle.”²¹⁰ The movement to free Debs coalesced into an organization that would become known as the American Civil Liberties Union.

Socialist resistance was perhaps fiercest in the agrarian Southwest. Several thousand Native American poor farmers formed an armed resistance group that local authorities put down violently.²¹¹ The Native Americans called themselves the Working Class Union, a group that became a precursor to the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the Socialist Party offshoot that Norman Thomas championed during the 1930s.²¹² By 1919, the Party had retained a surprisingly substantial membership of 118,000 members though almost half of this number was foreign born.²¹³ By 1920, the number had declined to 26,766.²¹⁴ The Party received a further blow with the international communist-socialist split following the Bolshevik Revolution.²¹⁵ The Communist International rebuffed the American Socialist Party’s application for membership. Bourgeois, pro-democratic parties were not welcome. The Russian Revolution revitalized international enthusiasm for Marxism, but the American Socialists would not reap the benefits of that second wind. Instead, they gained a new rival in the form of the nascent American communist movement; by 1922, the Communist movement was formally separate from the Socialist Party in the U.S.²¹⁶

Norman Thomas’s membership in the Socialist Party dated back to the Debs era too though he did not become its leader until the late 1920s. Thomas’s initial takeover

²¹⁰ Freeberg, *Democracy’s Prisoner*, location 3891-3893.

²¹¹ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 43.

²¹² James R. Green, *Grassroots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest 1895-1934* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1978): 420.

²¹³ Seidler, *Respectable Rebel*, 53.

²¹⁴ Seidler, *Respectable Rebel*, 57.

²¹⁵ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 48.

²¹⁶ James Weinstein, *The Decline of Socialism in America 1912-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 272.

represented a repudiation of the Party's Debsian tradition and even a reversion to De Leonism. Whereas Debs had sprung from the labor movement and worked to build a Socialist Party à la the U.K. Labor Party, Thomas, like De Leon, came from the intelligentsia. Thomas's task as Party leader was to rebuild the Party following the devastation that the World War I era had wrought. He attempted to rebuild the party in his own image – that is, as a party of middle-class progressive types. Thomas's strategy of building a Socialist Party of genteel, bleeding-heart progressives built the Party up following its post-World War I slump. The strategy also earned Thomas many enemies within the Party who thought that Thomas was leading the Socialists astray from its Debsian roots. Ultimately, Franklin Roosevelt's domination of the progressive electoral lane forced Thomas to abandon his strategy and flirt with orthodox Marxism. It was Thomas's left-wing Socialism which he developed during Roosevelt's first term that led that led him to challenge Huey Long. His Marxist convictions caused him to label Long a fascist.

Chapter Four: Pastor Thomas Becomes a Socialist

After World War I's conclusion and through the Republican-dominated Roaring 20s, Thomas served the Socialist Party, rising through the ranks and becoming an increasingly prominent spokesman. Thomas's fast rise befitted his ability and the Socialists' deficit of competent leaders. In 1928, he became the Party's uncontested presidential nominee, a nomination that precipitated his more than two decades as Party leader. Though Thomas held onto fixed moral convictions which governed his actions and abhorred opportunism, he was politician enough to channel his supporters' wishes and to adapt his tactics to circumstances. What Thomas perceived as the hollow, uneven prosperity of the 1920s convinced him that the American two-party consensus required upending. Emerging out of the 1920s as the Socialist leader, Thomas operated based on a vision of a Party capable of educating affluent Americans. He sought to have the Socialists instill into the public consciousness the necessity of government intervention on behalf of proletarians and peasants in their perennial battle against plantocrats and plutocrats.

On occasion, Thomas allowed himself to indulge the still more ambitious hope that the disparate, inchoate forces on the American left would join together into a farmer-labor party. He hoped that this farmer-labor party would be capable of replacing the pro-business Democrats with an ideologically progressive, labor-friendly major party. These mutually reinforcing ambitions characterized the hope behind Thomas's rise through the ranks and initial years as head Socialist. The sheer ambitiousness of Thomas's hopes for the future were representative of Marxist hubris prior to fascism's emergence on the popular stage. Thomas took it for granted that the increasingly democratic nature of

American politics would result in the left's ascendancy. The rise of Huey Long eventually compelled him to discard this assumption and adopt a reflexively Marxist political style to counter the threat to representative government.

His over three decade-long involvement with the Socialist Party began at World War I's tail end. Even as the Wilson Administration's illiberal censorship of the Party's press organs and imprisonment of its spokespeople thinned the Party's ranks, Pastor Norman Thomas took heart from the Debsian example. In 1918, he officially applied for membership in the Party saying, "I think these are days when radicals ought to stand up and be counted."²¹⁷ His sympathies had been Socialist for some time though the civil libertarian in him resisted taking the full plunge into membership. Thomas harbored a suspicion of state power and worried that the socialist emphasis on collectivization necessitated such an augmentation of the government's prerogatives that it might result in civil liberty infringement. He said, "I have a profound fear of the undue exaltation of the State and a profound faith that the new world we desire must depend upon freedom and fellowship rather than on any sort of coercion whatsoever."²¹⁸ Ironically, considering his Christianity, he likewise suspected Marxist fanaticism, finding the socialist tendency to invest their ideology with sacrosanctity off-putting. "Temperamentally," he said, "I wasn't enamored of its propaganda literature and didn't like to submit myself even to moderate [Party] discipline."²¹⁹ Ultimately, the belief that capitalism was the root cause of the nation's ills overrode his reservations. Once he accepted that incremental reform

²¹⁷ Harry Fleischman, *Norman Thomas: A Biography 1884-1968* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 1969), 66.

²¹⁸ Fleischman, *Norman Thomas*, 66.

²¹⁹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 68.

was Sisyphean as long as the profit motive remained society's organizing principle, then logic necessitated his membership in the Socialist Party.²²⁰

During the First World War era, Thomas's joining a quasi-illegal political party was hugely disruptive to his life and career. As Gerald L. K. Smith could not support Huey Long and minister to his uptown Shreveport congregation at the same time, Thomas forfeited his social currency in bourgeois New York circles. Ever industrious, his war years passed in a flurry of activity. While maintaining his position at East Harlem Presbyterian Church and chairing the American Parish, he stayed on as secretary of the local school board and became involved with the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation and American Union against Militarism while he and Violet reared their young children at home.²²¹ He partnered with the Civil Liberties Bureau, the precursor of the American Civil Liberties Union that was agitating for Debs's release from the federal penitentiary. Thomas's empathy for the conscientious objectors was a personal as well as intellectual commitment. The War upended the lives of two of Thomas's brothers. Ralph Thomas braved the French battlefields and suffered a serious wound. Evan Thomas faced a prison sentence rather than serve and went on a hunger strike from his jail cell.²²² Norman, the graduate of Union Seminary and Social Gospel devotee, believed that warfare and Christian tenets were fundamentally at odds. He wholeheartedly supported his brother's – and everyone else's – right to refuse their martial service to the government.

After he publicly announced his socialism, Thomas became less busy for a time. Morris Hillquit, the champion of the Jewish-New Yorker Socialists, ran for Mayor of

²²⁰ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 22.

²²¹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 67.

²²² Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 75.

New York in 1918 on a program of expanding municipal services to the poor. Though historians often talk of the Socialist Party's perennial irrelevance, they do not often enough shine a light on the Party's contributions to the American city. Urban Socialists pioneered support for public services such as sewage and housing, influencing their implementation and sometimes directly putting them into place. The German-American Socialist redoubt of Milwaukee was at the cutting edge of municipal innovation for decades. Left-wing Marxists derided this reformism as "Sewer Socialism," an epithet the Wisconsin Socialists wore as a badge of honor. The Sewer Socialists controlled Milwaukee under a "program of municipal ownership of public utilities, municipal banking, a six-hour day for city employees, and city marketing of milk and fuel."²²³ Socialists never took power in New York City – despite their decades-long, electoral viability there – but they helped provide the impetus for Republican Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's vanquishing Tammany Hall and reforming the local government. New York politics was near and dear to the transplant New Yorker Norman Thomas, who had been alarmed at corruption in the city's government and poverty in its streets since he moved there after graduating college.

Hillquit's mayoral campaign was sufficiently inspiring that it prompted Pastor Thomas to endorse the Socialist ticket. The ramifications were immediate. The Presbyterian hierarchy asked him to change his position. When he refused, they accepted his resignation without going so far as to demand it. Thomas felt that his duty to his church commanded him to resign as his new-found notoriety was hamstringing fundraising efforts. He resigned from the American Parish and his position with the local

²²³ Seymour Martin Lipset and Gary Marks, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2000), 206.

school board as well as his membership in the Philadelphia Society at Princeton and his adjunct teaching position at Columbia Teacher's College. Compounding the professional setback, Norman and Violet felt the proverbial cold shoulder from many of their former friends. They would soon forge new relationships through their commitment to Socialist praxis. Violet's family wealth – and business career – supplemented Norman's income loss.²²⁴

Not one to remain idle, Thomas filled his newly free time with activism, adding on to his advocacy work on behalf of the conscientious objectors with Christian Socialist journalism.²²⁵ Despite the toll government repression took on the Socialist Party, the Marxist cause writ large benefitted from the Bolshevik Revolution. It lent socialism a sense of vitality that prompted – disproportionately immigrant – Americans to flock to the Socialist banners. Thomas was not immune to revolutionary fervor, heralding the Romanov downfall and eventually Leninist economic experimentation with central planning. Thomas's regard for the Soviet Union – which eventually devolved into disaffection – was microcosmic of the general Marxist schism between democratic socialists and communists. Initially, his enthusiasm was such that he and Violet hosted Bolshevik representatives at their New York home. Soviet domination of the Third International – emerging after World War I's decimation of the Second – and their refusal to admit the Socialist Party of America shook Thomas's faith. He would not emerge as the strident anti-communist he became until the late 1930s. He developed, in Frank A.

²²⁴ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 69.

²²⁵ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 122.

Warren's words, "a quasi-Trotskyist critique: a belief that Russia was a worker's state badly corrupted by political dictatorship and bureaucracy."²²⁶

In 1918, Thomas came out against the Allied intervention in 1918 on behalf of the counterrevolution in Russia. His article in *World of Tomorrow* protesting the U.S.'s military involvement prompted government backlash. The leading Wilson lieutenant charged with muzzling Socialist criticism – aside from Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer – was Postmaster Albert S. Burleson. Burleson relished using his control of the Postal Service to censor the Socialist press, decimating its circulation. In retaliation to the *World of Tomorrow*, the Postmaster said that "[Thomas] was worse than Gene Debs and that he would not merely try to stop the paper but to send [him] to jail as well."²²⁷

Thomas, facing journalistic ruin and a brush with the criminal justice system, leveraged his elite connections. He was friends with Nevin Sayre, a man active in the Fellowship of Reconciliation and *World of Tomorrow* as well as the brother of President Wilson's son-in-law.²²⁸ Sayre obtained an audience with Wilson on the grounds that he – Sayre – had recently hosted Wilson's daughter, and the President wanted to hear an update on his family. Sayre pressed Wilson on the government's threat to prosecute Thomas. The President, perhaps remembering the brilliant undergraduate who had taken all of his course offerings, showed clemency and let Thomas off with a warning. He told Sayre to remind "Norman Thomas that a noted Englishman had once declared there could be an 'indecent display of private opinions in public.'" Wilson lifted the bans on *World of Tomorrow* along with the liberal magazine *The Nation*. In Thomas's recollection, it was

²²⁶ Frank A Warren, *An Alternate Vision: The Socialist Party in the 1930's* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1974), 138.

²²⁷ Norman Thomas, *Norman Thomas's Unpublished Autobiography*, 75.

²²⁸ Norman Thomas, *Norman Thomas's Unpublished Autobiography*, 73.

the only occasion during the War years when Wilson intervened on the side of civil liberties.²²⁹

Woodrow Wilson was not the only President with whom Thomas carried influence on behalf of the targets of wartime prosecution. Wilson's successor Warren G. Harding could hardly have differed more from prickly, professorial Wilson. In addition to his earnestness, the progressive President believed that the verdict of the Gilded Age was a mandate for the government to take an increased share of responsibility for prosperity. Thomas, who had known of the Marionite newspaper publisher while growing up in Marion, did not think much of the man. "He looked like a statesman," Thomas said, "especially when dressed up. Which was perhaps, his misfortune...he might have died happy...if he hadn't been so handsome."²³⁰ Harding, who was something of a playboy, received the Republican nomination in no small part due to his willingness to kowtow to big business interests. Despite Wilson's progressive ethos, however, Harding was less blasé about treading on civil liberties. Harding lacked Wilson's self-seriousness and vindictive streak. He was willing to release the political prisoners if public opinion supported their freedom.²³¹

Thomas's advocacy work on behalf of the conscientious objectors earned him two audiences with President Harding.²³² Harding, a Potemkin President in Thomas's view and an empty vessel of powerful, vested interests, encapsulated the faux prosperity of the Roaring 20s. The decade's blithe consumer and investor confidence inflated the nation's worst credit bubble, giving off an appearance of success belying hollowness. Despite the

²²⁹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 73.

²³⁰ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 4.

²³¹ Ernest Freeberg, *Democracy's Prisoner Dissent*, location 3915.

²³² Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 77.

men's differences, Harding was a backslapping politician at heart, and he appreciated the opportunity to reminisce with a fellow north-central Ohioan. At one of their meetings, the President was glad to report to Thomas that he had commuted the sentence of a falsely accused German-American. He was "a victim of spite of some relatives," Harding said, "no more disloyal than old Frits [a German Marion resident] – you remember him, Norman, in Marion?"²³³

Thomas's hobnobbing with the likes of the President – however much the newly converted Socialist had to hold his nose to endure it – showcased an elitist streak in his socialism. Unlike the stereotypical left-wing intellectual, no one could ever accuse him of being an armchair radical. The Princeton alumnus – vested with a summer home and independence from an employer via inherited wealth – envisioned the cooperative commonwealth as a ruling-class concession more so than a proletarian conquest. Thomas's activities during the early 1920s substantiate the charge of bourgeois socialism. The man who had been largely apolitical during his own collegiate days concentrated much of his energy on activating college student's social consciousness. This activity centered around the League for Industrial Democracy, an educational advocacy groups with close ties to the Socialist Party's intelligentsia. The League, née the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, started in 1905, the project of such luminaries as the Socialist novelists Jack London and Upton Sinclair and that great progressive attorney Clarence Darrow.²³⁴

Participation in LID activity formed a core component of Thomas's praxis for the duration of his socialism. He worked variously as a high-ranking member of its administrative structure and as one its principal spokespeople, doing the work of

²³³ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 79.

²³⁴ Seidler, *Norman Thomas*, 73.

traveling to college campuses and dazzling students with his impressive oratory and syllogisms on behalf of collectivizing the economy. Thomas's work on American campuses paid dividends over the years, helping to draw into the party cadres of eager, young idealists. This stream of white-collar Socialists, further, assured Thomas's eventual ascendancy over the party. College degree-wielding Socialists naturally looked to Thomas – with his Ivy League pedigree and literary accomplishments – as their leader. This trend presaged the Party's disastrous, factional struggles during the 1930s. Many older Socialists, with less ethereal ties to labor, looked upon the Thomasites – not wholly unjustly – as a galivanting bourgeoisie-in-waiting. Of Thomas's biographers, Bernard Johnpoll stands out for being the most critical of Thomas's leadership along these lines. Johnpoll writes, "It would be unfair to ignore Thomas's activity for the working class, but this involvement was primarily in defense of civil liberties and came basically out of a feeling of *nobles oblige*."²³⁵ W. A. Swanberg criticizes Johnpoll for blaming "Thomas excessively for the decline of a Socialist Party which was self-destructive in its sectarianism and hopelessly divided in its responses, first to the New Deal."²³⁶ While Johnpoll's critique is compelling, it also flattens the arc of Thomas's career. Thomas became militant in response to the Great Depression and the authoritarian threat he perceived in the rise of Huey Long.

In the 1920s, Thomas was further to the right, but, then, so was the country. It was a delirious time during which the political and journalistic classes were content in believing the American Dream alive and well. Thomas's genteel leftism was nearly as radical a force as the country offered. He concentrated on his LID work, which, aside

²³⁵ Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress*, 47.

²³⁶ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 495.

from student organization, involved working with the unemployed, helping with strikes, lecturing on the LID circuit, and publishing educational materials.²³⁷ Thomas supplemented this work with journalistic ambitions and involvement with the Socialist Party proper. At Oswald Garrison Villard's invitation, Thomas edited the left-leaning magazine *The Nation*.²³⁸ His stints in full-time journalism proved ill-fated; he said that both he and Villard were relieved when he left *The Nation* to serve as a LID executive director after one year. In 1921, he resigned from *World of Tomorrow*, having lost his Christian faith. He "believed that the labor and Socialist movements had replaced the church as the moving force for internationalism and brotherhood."²³⁹ Thomas never recuperated his religious faith though - to his Socialist status's detriment - he did not renounce his clerical ordination until after his mother's death out of respect for her feelings. In 1923, he became editor-in-chief of the *New York Leader*, successor to the *New York Call*, a Socialist Party press organ. The venture received \$100,000 from the Garland Fund endowed by Charles Garland. Garland had been heir to a substantial fortune and renounced his inheritance, denouncing the principle of inherited wealth and donating it toward anti-capitalist endeavors. When the newspaper went belly up in a matter of weeks, Thomas - whose familiarity with failure was more a reflection of his quixotic goals than his work ethic - called it the "most humiliating disappointment of my life."²⁴⁰

Following up on his participation in Morris Hillquit's New York City mayoral campaign, Thomas began in earnest his decades-long labor on behalf of the Socialist

²³⁷ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 87.

²³⁸ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 77.

²³⁹ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 30.

²⁴⁰ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 83.

Party. He began as a relatively minor figure, but it was not long before his star was on the rise. He was one of the Party's few native-born intellectuals. After Debs's historic presidential campaign from his Atlanta prison cell in 1920, the Party declined rapidly, making Thomas a big fish in a shrinking pond. In 1920, Thomas gave speeches and campaigned on Debs's behalf. In the election's aftermath, anti-Socialist hysteria reached a low point when the New York State Assembly – where Franklin Roosevelt started his political career – refused to seat a number of newly elected Socialist representatives. Thomas travelled to Albany to testify on their behalf.²⁴¹

His electoral leadership role in the Party began in 1924 when he – as did Huey Long – made an unsuccessful gubernatorial bid. By the mid 1920s, the Party was significantly diminished vis-à-vis the heady days of the previous decade. However, 1924 saw the crystallization of that early 20th century chimera: a nationally viable farmer-labor challenge to the stagnant, two-party consensus. The 1924 coalition, which coalesced around Senator Robert M. LaFollette's presidential bid, included progressives under the Conference for Progressive Political Action, the Socialists, and organized labor. LaFollette hailed from the former Populist stronghold of Wisconsin and had a proven farmer-labor-friendly voting record in the Senate. His running mate Burton K. Wheeler was a leading member of the Senate progressive bloc and would later become a Huey Long ally in that body. In an unprecedented move for the politically agnostic AFL, Samuel Gompers and the AFL gave LaFollette their imprimatur. Thomas, Debs, and the other Socialists hoped that the makeshift alliance would develop into a third party along the lines of the British Labor Party, amounting to – in the U.S. – the first formal,

²⁴¹ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 37.

comprehensive political union between the leftist factions and organized labor. LaFollette dashed their hopes when he opted to run as an independent.²⁴²

For Thomas, the eventual formation of a farmer-labor party was the lodestar of his stewardship over the Socialist Party. He recognized the inherent difficulties of amassing third-party challenges, given American democracy's limitations. The lack of proportional representation and winner-take-all manner of selecting Congressional representatives meant that the Socialists could capture a significant proportion of the vote total and still lack a voice in government.²⁴³ The corrupt vote-counting system whereby electoral integrity depended on partisan poll watchers meant that there were constant fears of ballot-box rigging. Because of the Socialist Party's relative poverty and lackluster organization, Republican and Democratic poll watchers sometimes discarded Socialist votes. Given these handicaps and others, Thomas and his comrades admitted the uphill nature of their struggle. Thomas alternated between utopian and pragmatic self-conceptions of the Socialist project. Before Franklin Roosevelt's veritable shoehorning of the left by 1936, Thomas tended toward practicality. He hoped that Socialist momentum would help usher in a farmer-labor party – with the Socialists positioned at its intellectual core – whose popularity would prompt a party re-alignment. Thomas hoped that Socialist leadership would ensure the party's commitment to Marxist sacred cows such as collectivization and pacifist internationalism. Having learned from 1924, Thomas eventually concluded that

²⁴² Seidler, *Norman Thomas*, 65.

²⁴³ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 93.

the Socialists should only enter a farmer-labor party on a “federated basis” to prevent a “liquidation” of the Party.²⁴⁴

Once it became clear that Roosevelt’s victory over the left was complete by the late 1930s, Thomas reverted to utopianism, investing in the Socialist Party a kind of religious meaning. The Socialist Party and Norman Thomas came to own the periphery, offering the nation their lonely vigil to a road not travelled. Late in his life, Thomas, sounding like the cleric he once was, said, “America would have been poorer without the Party’s witness.”²⁴⁵ Thomas became America’s gadfly, insistently reminding of it of the unrealized cooperative commonwealth.

The Socialist Party’s siphoning resources to the 1924 LaFollette ticket proved to be a Pyrrhic endeavor. As for Thomas, he supported LaFollette wholeheartedly though he came to have mixed feelings about the wisdom of inter-party coalitions after the fact. Ever the reluctant statesman, Thomas accepted the Socialist Party gubernatorial nomination for New York at the 1924 Convention though he had not angled for it.²⁴⁶ He accepted due, in part, to help “create a farmer-labor party in which the Socialist Party would be the intellectual ferment.”²⁴⁷ His opponent was Al Smith, the Franklin Roosevelt ally, rival, and 1928 Democratic Presidential nominee, who, even then, was setting out to prove that the Democrats could be progressive. Attesting to Thomas’s comparatively moderate Socialism before the New Deal, he came to tacitly approve of Smith’s governorship for its relative friendliness to labor and respect for civil liberties.²⁴⁸ As he

²⁴⁴ Warren, *An Alternate Vision*, 146.

²⁴⁵ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 171.

²⁴⁶ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 89.

²⁴⁷ Fleischman, *Norman Thomas*, 100.

²⁴⁸ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 91.

consistently did even with his most long-shot bids for office, Thomas took his gubernatorial bid seriously while also supporting the Socialist Party's up-ballot candidate LaFollette. The effort resulted in – proportionally – one of the most successful independent presidential bids in American history with LaFollette securing around 5,000,000 million votes.

The Socialists' myopic support for LaFollette decimated their organization. Norman Thomas devoted many years of his adult life to campaigning for public office yet never held a single government position. He was willing to expend the effort primarily because campaigns kept the Party alive. They galvanized its membership, providing Party locals with focal points around which to rally support. Because the Socialists – for the first time – did not run a presidential candidate of their own in 1924 and neglected to adequately aid their down-ballot candidates, the Party suffered. The result was a post-1924 enthusiasm deficit and organizational disarray, culminating with Eugene Debs's death a few years later. Though LaFollette's immediate 5,000,000 votes were gratifying, the organization behind his run vanished in the election's aftermath. No farmer-labor party emerged, leaving the Socialists to wonder whether their sacrifice had been in vain. Socialist participation in the LaFollette campaign demonstrated the advantages and pitfalls of united-front action against the two-party establishment. If the Socialists united with other radical factions, then they could achieve a degree of relevance that otherwise evaded them. This relevance came with the risk of the Socialist Party's being subsumed into a radical amalgamation and losing its integrity. In 1924, they came as close to achieving meaningful power as they ever had, yet they were still considerably far removed from carving out a role in government. During the 1930s too when FDR began

actively courting radicals to join the New Deal coalition, Socialists could hope to participate in the business of governing but at the cost of compromising their principles into oblivion.

In many ways, Thomas's 1924 gubernatorial run turned into the next several decades of his life. "I acquired a responsibility for the Socialist Party as a party which I have never felt able honorably to drop."²⁴⁹ Given Thomas's industriousness, his Cincinnatus-like regret that he might have preferred a quiet life at home stretches credulity. He coupled a compulsive work ethic with deeply felt concern for suffering. Thomas's Socialist leadership was a marriage of convenience. The Party needed an independently wealthy work horse to compensate for its weakness. Thomas needed an outlet in which to channel his energy and an ideological heuristic to provide his social criticism with a framework. For all his suspicion of dogmatism, a man who spent his life serving one ideologically coherent institution after another – the Presbyterian Church followed by the Socialist Party – could hardly escape doctrine.

With Eugene Debs's health fading – his 1920 Presidential run marked the denouement of his career – the Party, needed a vigorous leader to uplift it from its "dormant period."²⁵⁰ Thomas himself recalled that "fortunes were at a low ebb in 1925."²⁵¹ The period lasting from the 1924 Presidential election until the next cycle essentially saw Norman Thomas auditioning for the role of Party leader. He ran for important and minor offices. Some of his campaigns – including his running to be a New York state senator from the Lower East Side in 1926 and city alderman in 1927 – were so

²⁴⁹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 89.

²⁵⁰ David A Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America: A History* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 182.

²⁵¹ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 32.

marginal as to suggest that Thomas harbored realistic expectations of election.²⁵² This practicality indexed the gradual pace of Thomas's development into the figure he came to represent from 1928 onward. He was yet a far cry from the perennial presidential candidate, the Socialist Party's sacrificial offering braving certain defeat to shore up the Party and educate the public. The man whose name became synonymous with American socialism – in all its stubborn optimism and obscurity – might have been some dutiful, low-level official, a consummate Sewer Socialist.

His most notable campaign during this period was his 1925 New York City mayoral campaign.²⁵³ Morris Hillquit's World War I-era mayoral bid had helped galvanize Thomas's socialism in the first instance. He would bring his politics full circle with run a of his own for the highest office in the nation's chief city. Thomas had been appalled by poverty in the city – maintained by the corruption inherent to its machine politics – going back to his days as a pastoral assistant at the Spring St. Church. In 1932, he published a co-written book with Paul Blanshard – later to abandon the Socialist Party ship to become Mayor LaGuardia's Commissioner of Accounts – titled *What's the Matter with New York?*²⁵⁴ In 1925, Thomas was years out from writing that book but was already brimming with ideas about solutions to the city's ills. Outraged that the city was permitting rampant congestion to drive up property values as a means of increasing tax revenue, Thomas proposed a ceiling on property taxes.²⁵⁵ He proposed worker representation on municipal administrative boards, public ownership of transit, public housing, and racial integration of the public-sector workforce. He proposed to make city

²⁵² Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 109.

²⁵³ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 29.

²⁵⁴ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 130.

²⁵⁵ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 30.

life more accessible to blue-collar workers through investment in publicly-owned amenities and democratization of New York City government to make it more responsive to people's needs. Thomas conducted a grass-roots campaign centered around door-to-door canvassing and open-air meetings. He campaigned for mayor vigorously despite the additional obstacle that corruption presented to his election. On election day, Socialist watchers weathered physical abuse as rival party watchers sometimes forcibly ejected them from polling places.²⁵⁶ There was not even solidarity between Socialists and the Republican – a minority party in New York – watchers because the Republican watchers were often Democratic stooges, complicit in Tammany Hall's election rigging in exchange for municipal patronage.²⁵⁷

Thomas's various Empire State campaigns during the mid-to-late 1920s sufficiently enhanced his prestige so that, in 1928, the Socialist Party nominated him for President. For some, Thomas's nomination exemplified a weak-kneed liberal takeover of the Party. Bernard Johnpoll writes that Thomas shepherded the Party away from Marxism and working-class politics toward "simple progressivism."²⁵⁸ W. A. Swanberg concurs, citing an endorsement from the newspaper of Thomas's alma mater. The *Daily Princetonian* wrote, "He believes that any except the most gradual change would be disastrous."²⁵⁹ While the college newspaper overstated his moderation, in 1928 and for some years after, Thomas did not articulate the kind of overarching criticism of the

²⁵⁶ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 38.

²⁵⁷ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 97.

²⁵⁸ Johnpoll, *Pacifist's Progress*, 61.

²⁵⁹ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 110.

American economy that he later deployed. Thomas himself did not deny this characterization, explaining that he was not yet “solidly Marxist.”²⁶⁰

His right-wing Socialism was as much tactical as it was ideological. Thomas perceived that the gridlock between the two major parties was intractable in as much as there was no appreciable difference between them.²⁶¹ The inanity of the major party campaigns frustrated Thomas, who thought that Prohibition was a distraction and Al Smith’s Catholicism a non-issue. “We made our campaign on the issue that the roaring capitalist prosperity of the Coolidge era had not conquered poverty,” he said.²⁶² In this estimation, Thomas proved to be correct in the short term though his assessment was not prescient regarding FDR’s rise to the Presidency. Positioning the Socialist Party as a progressive alternative to the Democratic-cum-Republican moderate consensus paid dividends, bringing the Party to its acme under Thomas in 1932. Thomas would later say, “I might have been more successful if I had been a little more of a fanatic or demagogue.”²⁶³ Considering the strategic catch-22 Thomas found himself in, it is not clear that he was correct in this self-assessment. The moderate strategy floundered once President Roosevelt credibly laid claim to the progressive mantle for himself, pulling the rug out from under the Socialists. Grasping for relevance, Thomas pivoted left but found that the Communists already occupied that flank. Capitalist democracy’s management proved to have more dexterity than many radical leftists anticipated. The 1930s proved to be an inopportune time for third-party social democrats. In reviewing the Socialist Party’s

²⁶⁰ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 46.

²⁶¹ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 166.

²⁶² Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 113.

²⁶³ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 105.

trajectory, one should not view their decline as a *fait accompli*, but neither would it do to downplay the nigh-on intractable obstacles they faced.

When Thomas accepted the Socialist Party's nomination for President, their offer included both challenge and opportunity. The Party was decimated, claiming as few as six thousand, mostly non-English-speaking members by 1929.²⁶⁴ The paltry resources offered Thomas the opportunity to rebuild the Party in his own image, transfiguring the unruly, blue-collar, and farmer-labor Party of Debs into the Party of Thomas, consisting of college-educated idealists. Observing the cracks in the façade of 1920s prosperity in the form of four million unemployed, he saw an opportunity to broaden the Socialist base by making it palatable to middle-class liberals.²⁶⁵ To that end, Thomas eliminated the old Socialist initiation rite that new members had to affirm their belief in the class struggle.²⁶⁶ He admitted that there was possibility for societal improvement in mere reform, later bemoaning "the old Marxist absolutism."²⁶⁷

He went about advancing his vision of a revamped Socialist Party with customary gusto. He campaigned in every state but four.²⁶⁸ In traveling around the country delivering speeches, Thomas leaned on the experience and networks he had cultivated as a LID spokesperson. Thomas's reputation as a sought-after campus orator preceded him. Though the Socialist Party was perpetually strapped for cash, NBC's policy of offering all candidates equal radio time allowed Thomas to reach a national audience directly. As he would throughout his career, Thomas dazzled crowds wherever he went. No matter

²⁶⁴ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 49.

²⁶⁵ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 111.

²⁶⁶ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 116.

²⁶⁷ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 165.

²⁶⁸ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 113.

how charming or convincing the electorate found the Socialist candidate, the task of disabusing it of the pragmatic notion that the Socialist ballot was a protest vote was steeper. After the campaign numerous compliments from Democrats and Republicans prompted Thomas to say, “Thank you for the flowers, but I wish you hadn’t waited for the funeral.”²⁶⁹ Thomas received only 267,420 votes, making 1928 the Party’s worst showing to date – they had not fielded a candidate of their own in 1924.²⁷⁰ Herbert Hoover won election with 21,000,000 votes to Al Smith’s 15,000,000.

Winning outright had never been Thomas’s goal. He said:

I was committed to the belief that the Socialist Party was more likely to be pioneer, teacher, inspiration, spearhead – call it what you will – for a mass party than itself to become it. I have never – even in 1932 – abandoned that belief.

Thomas’s position of fostering middle-class appeal and insisting on the necessity of a farmer-labor party was contradictory. That is not to say he abandoned organized labor when he became a national politician. His running mate in 1928 was James H. Maurer, President of the Pennsylvania AFL.²⁷¹ Still, he wanted separation between the labor movement and Socialist Party, calling for union support but denying the unions’ control. Thomas was no syndicalist, and he made no bones about criticizing an organization like the AFL for its craft unionism or mafia ties and racketeering practices. Stylistically, at least, his cozying up to urban intellectuals could not have earned him points with rural Americans.

The period encompassing the Herbert Hoover Administration was the high point of the Socialist Party under Norman Thomas. The Hoover years were “the Indian summer

²⁶⁹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 119.

²⁷⁰ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 112.

²⁷¹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 106.

for the Socialist Party.”²⁷² Hoover’s nonchalant response to the Depression made the two-party consensus look broken, even as the Depression’s dragging on led people to question capitalism’s inevitability. During the Hoover Administration, many people were jaded enough with the American system to cast about for an alternative, but they were not yet ready for Marxism-Leninism. American communists had not yet received the impetus for extra-democratic methods that Hitler’s takeover of Germany – and neutralization of two of the world’s largest communist and social-democratic parties – and Spanish Civil War-era Francoist terror would offer them.

Thomas’s arrival at the Socialist Party’s helm, then, in 1928 was auspicious timing. Before the devastating stock market crash, Thomas had argued that American prosperity was a bubble ready to burst. He wrote that, in 1929, income inequality was so steep that 16,400,000 families were earning below \$2000 per year though there was enough money in circulation for every family to have a base income of, at least, that much.²⁷³ If anyone thought Thomas’s pessimism made him a crank in early 1929, by the end of the year few could deny that the economic situation was dire. By December 1929, the stock market lost a third of its value.²⁷⁴ While stockholders constituted a relatively small percentage of the population, the financiers’ losses created a crisis of confidence for average consumers. The economy tanked after they took their money out of circulation, sending the nation into a downward spiral that culminated in nearly a quarter of the population’s being out of work by FDR’s inauguration. President Hoover’s response was reminiscent of his handling of the 1927 Mississippi River flooding. Senator

²⁷² Shannon, *The Socialist Party of America*, 235.

²⁷³ Norman Thomas, “Why I Am a Socialist,” (New York: League for Industrial Democracy), 4.

²⁷⁴ Eric Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal: A Very Short Introduction* (London: Oxford University Press, 2008), 18.

Robert Wagner, the man who authored President Roosevelt's pro-labor New Deal legislation, said in 1931 that Hoover had "clung to the time-worn Republican policy: to do nothing."²⁷⁵ Thomas, in 1932, wrote President Hoover "to assail a policy which left the unemployed to 'subsist on patriotic oratory.'"²⁷⁶

As far as Norman Thomas and the Socialists were concerned, the Democrats promised little more intervention. Thomas dedicated himself to shoring up the Party structure, remaking it into an effective vehicle capable of provisioning the public with an alternative. The Party gained an asset in the form of its wunderkind chairman, Thomas acolyte Clarence Senior. Senior was emblematic of Thomas's new Party. He was Midwestern gentile, college-educated and former LID. He came to the Party brimming with altruistic energy, willing to forego the corporate ladder to work for the Socialist Party for peanuts. The Jewish-New Yorker Party faction, which had dominated its structure, called Senior and his ilk the "Kansas goyim."²⁷⁷ Senior, working in close partnership with Thomas, dedicated himself to nursing new Party locals.²⁷⁸ From 1928 to 1932, Party membership nearly doubled from 9,500 to 17,000.²⁷⁹ Thomas would never be the figurehead that Eugene Debs had been content to be. Thomas was almost micromanaging in his attention to Party minutiae and diligence about answering nearly every letter that reached his mailbox, whether or not it came from a Party leader or a stranger flirting with the idea of joining the Socialists. Thomas's leadership style would prove to be problematic. His interventions in intra-party disputes caused him to identify with factions

²⁷⁵ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 23.

²⁷⁶ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 125.

²⁷⁷ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 115.

²⁷⁸ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 52.

²⁷⁹ Warren, *An Alternate Vision*, 3.

to such an extent that his leadership became partisan. However, his style initially buttressed the Party's organization, providing it with adept management at a time when opportunity and preparedness overlapped.

Electoral, Thomas's most substantial campaign during the Hoover years was his 1929 run for New York Mayor. Thomas campaigned in cooperation with the League for Independent Political Action, a progressive Farmer-Labor coalition à la the LaFollette coalition.²⁸⁰ The League modelled itself on the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party, a third party that had successfully elected two U.S. senators and three congressmen. The League for Independent Political Action was perhaps more the brain child of intellectual elites than it was a bona fide farmer-labor alliance. It had the backing of such 20th-century luminaries as John Dewey, W. E. B. DuBois, Oswald Garrison Villard, James Maurer, and Reinhold Niebuhr. The elite support indexed the continuing middle-class nature of Thomas's base.²⁸¹ Nevertheless, Thomas said that his 1929 campaign benefitted from "unusual zeal."²⁸² The Socialists, with their LIPA support, waged a vigorous grassroots campaign that earned Thomas 176,000 votes. This vote total placed Thomas in third place behind Mayor Jimmy Walker, whom Thomas had little use for, and LaGuardia, with whom Thomas enjoyed cordial relations.²⁸³ The vote total was four times Thomas's 1925 vote count and greater than the vote total for Morris Hillquit's 1917 campaign that inspired Thomas's initial socialism. LIPA also supported Thomas's 1930 bid to represent Brooklyn in the U.S. Congress, an effort that earned him 21,983 votes.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 121.

²⁸¹ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 119.

²⁸² Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 127.

²⁸³ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 118.

²⁸⁴ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 122.

These electoral showings counted as gains in relation to the Party's troubled preceding decade. They were not sufficient to keep Norman Thomas from suffering from pangs of existential doubt. The time with friends and family he sacrificed in pursuit of unsuccessful causes was enough to make him wonder if he was making the right decision.²⁸⁵ Thomas, similar to Huey Long, suffered from – to use a colloquialism – main-character syndrome, the delusion that his actions could shape the world. Norman Thomas did not, as Huey Long did, imagine that the world revolved around him, but he did let his incredible industriousness mislead him into delusions of grandeur. This point is especially important to emphasize in a biography, which is, in many ways, the crassest form of history writing because it incentivizes the historian to overemphasize the individual as opposed to structures and events. Thomas suffered from the burdensome belief and concomitant anxiety that the Socialist Party's viability hinged on his personal choices. In fact, the fact that the Socialist Party was so reliant on one man indicated its impending decline.

The endless hand-wringing over Socialism's impotence during the first half of the 20th century is a distinguishing characteristic of Socialist Party of America historiography as historians of American socialism – with important exceptions such as Jack Ross – tend to be socialist sympathizers themselves. In light of 21st-century developments, the tenor of this historiography needs revision. By the 2010s, due to factors such as the Cold War's demise and the 2008 financial crisis, democratic socialism experienced a rehabilitation as an American political force in its own right, eclipsing even the Debsian era. Considering these developments, the old fatalism constantly reposing some variation of the question –

²⁸⁵ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 120.

what makes the U.S. constitutionally incongruent with Marxist politics? – seem overly reductive. Given the relative comprehensiveness of early American socialism’s failure, socialist historians indulged an ahistorical form of essentialism that obscured alternative possibilities. As for 20th-century Socialists themselves, for a moment in the run-up to the 1932 election, they allowed themselves to believe that their moment had come.

Thomas’s 1932 Presidential campaign marked the high watermark of his Socialist career. It was also the culmination of his moderate posturing. He would have to re-envision his appeal after Roosevelt’s New Deal prompted a Socialist crisis of identity. The roots of FDR’s progressive turn were apparent during the election. Candidate Roosevelt said the tory Republican Party worsened the economic crisis because it “sees to it that a favored few are helped, and hopes that some of their prosperity will leak through, sift through, to labor, to the farmer, to the small business man.”²⁸⁶ It was still possible to dismiss Roosevelt’s progressive espousals – unborn out as they were – as factional pandering and to expect him to follow in his predecessor’s footsteps, or to do very little as president. Thomas banked on this expectation as his viability hinged on support from the kind of college-educated reformers and intellectuals whom a progressive Democratic Party would attract.

Thomas did attract them by the hundreds of thousands in 1932 though not to the extent that his Party dared hope. The Socialist National Executive Committee projected 2.5 million votes for Thomas, a show of force that would have translated into approximately 5 percent of national votes.²⁸⁷ Thomas’s campaign season correspondence,

²⁸⁶ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 252.

²⁸⁷ Thomas for President Committee News, 1932, Reel 56, Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library.

the various and sundry letters he was so diligent about replying to, offers insight into the nature of his support. A minister from a small industrial parish wrote complaining of a dilemma reminiscent of Gerald L.K. Smith's Shreveport treatment. The minister's Thomas-inspired radicalism created a rift between him and his parishioners. He requested a signed photo of Norman Thomas to hang on his wall, hoping it would affect "in the first instance leading people to socialism by more tact and patience, or in the second instance, 'stepping out' like jeremiahs and mincing no words.'"²⁸⁸ Even in that heady year 1932, the Socialist insistence on obstinate third partyism alienated would-be supporters. A 23-year-old Ph.D. student – and member of the Thomas demographic if ever there was one – wrote to the Socialist candidate. The student said he could not risk hurting the lesser of two evils considering the two-party binary by casting a Socialist ballot.²⁸⁹

With his support among the middle classes fermenting, Thomas waged an ambitious campaign. He "was forty-seven, in his prime, his silvery hair receding, his blue eyes alternatively benign and fiery, his clothes usually baggy."²⁹⁰ After his mother's death the year before, Thomas had severed the last ties between himself and the Presbyterian Church.²⁹¹ The towering, lean Thomas with his professorial bearing – mitigated by his capacity for ministerial oratory – was poised to step fully into his role. His campaign style was the antithesis of the Huey Long-style emotional harangue. Thomas could be professorial in his speechmaking, toing the line between didacticism and pedantry though the experienced campaigner and former sermonizer was not above

²⁸⁸ Letter from a minister, Reel 2, Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library.

²⁸⁹ William Levin, letter to Norman Thomas, November 8, 1933, Reel 2, Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library.

²⁹⁰ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 134.

²⁹¹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 109.

thinking about oratory as a craft. He put a meticulous amount of thought into considerations such as hand gestures, voice inflection, and delivery pace, and his oratory won him renown as much for its form as its function. The acclaimed essayist Irving Howe became a Thomasite Socialist militant in the early-to-mid 1930s and recalled the effect hearing the great man had on him. Howe said:

Young people had begun to fear the Depression was no mere aberration but signaled a deep social sickness. Hearing Thomas made me suppose that some new force had entered my life, a possibility that I might now understand the ugliness and chaos everywhere about me and perhaps I might even do a little toward a remedy.²⁹²

Howe said, “To vote for Norman Thomas during the years of my socialist youth seemed akin to being flooded with grace—or at least sprinkled.”²⁹³ Though Thomas abhorred demagoguery, he was not without a certain *je ne sais quois*. As to his baggy clothes and receding hair line, politicians in the decades before phenomena such as televised presidential debates were far less concerned with appearing physically attractive.

Before Thomas could share the wealth, he knew he needed to redistribute the grace. The Socialist war chest in 1932 amounted to about \$43,000, a meagre sum.²⁹⁴ It was enough to hire people on the ground to build up field organizations.²⁹⁵ It was not enough to hire Thomas a retinue to accompany him and his wife on their treks across the country. They travelled to cities across the U.S. by themselves, giving speeches to thousands of people at a time. Thomas spoke to teeming audiences at Indianapolis, Philadelphia, and Madison Square Garden in New York City.²⁹⁶ Thomas spoke at the

²⁹² Howe, *Socialism and America*, 52.

²⁹³ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 33.

²⁹⁴ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 135.

²⁹⁵ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 66.

²⁹⁶ Norman Thomas, *Socialism and America*, 53.

fairgrounds in Jackson, Michigan. “A sudden cold wind swept over the platform,” he said, “making the chairman’s teeth chatter so that he shook the flimsy structure. The cold shortened my speech and almost cost me my voice,” but Thomas soldiered on to more campaign stops.²⁹⁷ The Socialists raised funds by charging for admission at Thomas rallies. The candidate would speak and take questions from the crowd second. He wanted to end the Depression by subsidizing consumers as well as producers – President Hoover had, by this time, supported the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, a government agency subsidizing large firms to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars.²⁹⁸ Thomas’s platform included increased funding for public works, a shorter work week, agricultural relief, unemployment insurance, the elimination of child labor, old-age pensions, slum clearance, low-cost housing, higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy, and the nationalization of basic industries.²⁹⁹ Thomas’ biographer Swanberg points out that all of these proposals saw ratification in the coming years save for the nationalization of industries. This fact was a point of pride for Thomas, a rejoinder to the charge that his labors had been quixotic.

Thomas’s energetic campaigning and the Socialist platform were enough to earn him 900,000 votes, a far cry short of the millions the Socialists hoped for but still Thomas’s most impressive showing to date.³⁰⁰ Roosevelt won resoundingly with 23,000,000 votes to the incumbent Hoover’s 15,000,000.³⁰¹ Thomas clung to the belief, advocated for by the muckraking journalist Paul Anderson, that the Socialist vote count

²⁹⁷ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s unpublished autobiography, 110.

²⁹⁸ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 33.

²⁹⁹ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 135.

³⁰⁰ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 57.

³⁰¹ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 137.

would have been 2,000,000 had it not been for fraud. Thomas's post diagnostic of the election was that – surprisingly – Americans were not ready for a general revolt against capitalism but rather identified specific features under capitalism as being the issue.³⁰² This critique was ironic, considering the later criticism against Thomas from the left that he was too accommodationist. Certainly, this impression was more valid in 1932 than it would be during the Great Depression years. The Socialists, by Thomas's own admission, enjoyed limited support from organized labor.³⁰³ They were, however, elated by a historic AFL decision during that election cycle to reverse their traditional opposition to a labor party.³⁰⁴ For Thomas, the illusory hope that capitalism would reform itself was a panacea. The false hope President-Elect Roosevelt provided would inevitably disillusion the masses when the Democrats failed to ameliorate the Depression. At that point, Americans would, in their longing for economic security, forget their liberty and turn to a strongman. For Thomas, this fear crystallized in the personage of the Louisiana Kingfish Huey Long, a boogeyman who would oppress Thomas's imagination for years to come.

The moderate Socialism that Thomas had promulgated as a means of normalizing Marxism in the eyes of educated Americans became untenable. The moderating pressure that Thomas had exerted over the Socialist Party had paid dividends, culminating in candidate Thomas's seven-figure vote total in 1932. The Socialist success in 1932, however, was an index of public doubts about Franklin Roosevelt, reflecting people's skepticism about what kind of president the New York patrician would prove to be. Roosevelt answered those doubts resoundingly during the first hundred days of his

³⁰² Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 69.

³⁰³ Norman Thomas, Oral History Project, 67.

³⁰⁴ Thomas for President Committee News, 1932, Reel 56, Norman Thomas Papers, New York Public Library.

presidency alone. Roosevelt's success was Norman Thomas and the Socialists' undoing. They tried to reinvent themselves as a radical Marxist party, only to find that the Communists had already occupied that electoral lane. As always with Thomas, however, the pivot to the left was not merely tactical but also a matter of principle. The rise of Huey Long, whom Thomas became convinced was a fascist, provided Thomas with a sense of urgency. Anti-fascist Americans needed to find a way to lift the country out of the Depression before Long could find a way to take over the country.

Chapter Five: Huey Long and the New Deal

In the 1932 election cycle's aftermath, the man who took center stage was not Norman Thomas or Huey Long but Franklin Roosevelt. To give a general history of the era would be to relegate the burgeoning contender Long and the also-ran Thomas to ancillary roles though they both played crucial parts in shaping the New Deal. Roosevelt, the actor and chameleon politician, was malleable. He was an opportunist and a man fixated on big-picture objectives who was less concerned about how to obtain them. Without Huey Long breathing down FDR's neck, there might have been no "Second New Deal," Roosevelt's belated attempt to "add labor to the beneficiaries of recovery" and the most momentous development in the history of the American labor movement.³⁰⁵

Without Norman Thomas's unrelenting agitation on behalf of the sharecroppers – which strained his personal relationship with the President – the Roosevelt Administration might not have assented to what few concessions it did on the sharecroppers' and agricultural laborers' behalf. From 1933 onward, when Huey Long and Norman Thomas were not squabbling with the President, they were at loggerheads with one another. At least, Thomas was; he turned criticizing Huey Long for being a budding fascist into a cause célèbre. Huey Long, who was more focused on effecting national change than theorizing about it, often – though not always – had weightier subjects on his mind.

Huey Long's entry into national politics was ill-timed. He hoped to leverage his unique bona fides as a mass leader into an insurgent takeover of a decadent Democratic Party. Franklin Roosevelt, though his elite background permitted him to obtain power without having to pander to average Americans, beat Huey Long to the punch. Though

³⁰⁵ Badger, *The New Deal*, 139.

Roosevelt tried to crowd out all of his challengers to the mantle of American progressive champion, Long was too adept a politician to be summarily dismissed from the competition. From 1933 to 1935, he challenged Roosevelt's First New Deal from the left. Long upbraided the president for forgetting his promise to redistribute the wealth and accused him of siding with the capitalist speculators and tight-fisted bosses over indebted farmers and down-and-out workers. Norman Thomas's prominence as a Marxist politician, further, provisioned Long's critiques with urgency. It was not just that the New Deal was failing Americans. The President, Long contended, was delivering Americans into the arms of the profane, would-be dictatorial Marxists.

The national economy was in dire straits when President Roosevelt took office in the Spring of 1933. Presidents during the early 20th century had to wait until the Spring to begin serving out their terms as opposed to the Winter inaugurations contemporary presidents enjoy. Addressing the nation as president for the first time, FDR said, "Plenty is at our doorstep, but a generous use of it languishes in the very sight of supply."³⁰⁶ Roosevelt was describing the peculiarity of the Great Depression in that it was, in the first instance, a crisis of demand rather than supply. In World War I's wake, the US's standard of living skyrocketed. Over the course of the Roaring Twenties, for instance, Americans bought so many cars that there was an average of one car per household compared with one car per three households previously.³⁰⁷ Increasingly extreme usury bankrolled this consumer bonanza with installment plans for a new automobile touting interest rates as high as 30 percent. The 1920s were a decade of reckless financial speculation and accumulating debt. The only way to keep the debts – which few people would be able to

³⁰⁶ Rauch, *History of the New Deal*, 57.

³⁰⁷ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 13.

afford to pay – from coming due was to sustain the money flow. As long as consumers kept purchasing, the bubble continued to expand.

The Stock Market crashed, losing a third of its value, in November 1929 not long after the Federal Reserve raised interest rates in an attempt to make it more expensive to borrow. Many people who had come to view the Stock Market as a bellwether of general economic well-being took the crash as a distress signal, halting their spending and precipitating the crisis. Mass unemployment and bank closures ensued, so that many people could not obtain basic staples though production kept pace. The net result was a peculiarly capitalist crisis, a “paradox in the midst of plenty.”³⁰⁸ Because production kept pace, farmers had enough to eat but no cash to meet their mortgage payments. Many Sun Belt farmers especially faced bank foreclosure and joined the great migration West. Only, there was no West anymore in the sense there once was, and little awaited them in California, save zealous sheriffs’ deputies and labor camps.³⁰⁹

The so-called “Okie” influx into California helped to lay the groundwork for the erstwhile Socialist Party stalwart and novelist Upton Sinclair, whom Lenin described as “an emotional socialist without theoretical grounding,” to wage his historic End Poverty in California campaign. Sinclair pleaded with Norman Thomas to allow him to caucus with the Democrats, so that he could have a fighting chance electorally.³¹⁰ Thomas, who called Sinclair’s plan “patent medicine,” fell out with his friend Sinclair over the latter’s End Poverty in California campaign.³¹¹ Sinclair resigned from the Socialist Party in

³⁰⁸ James Thomas Gay, “Norman Thomas: ‘Tribune of the Disenfranchised,’” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1989): 33, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40023322>.

³⁰⁹ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 16.

³¹⁰ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 115.

³¹¹ “Sinclair Plan Bad, Thomas Says,” *The Times-Picayune*, September 4, 1934, 11.

protest, securing the Democratic nomination but failing to capture the governor's mansion. The Republicans' defeat of Sinclair relied on enterprising mass-media manipulation and class warfare-tinged agitprop. Historian Kathryn Olmsted has argued in a recent monograph that origins of contemporary, popular conservatism date back to the coalition that defeated Sinclair.³¹²

The urban workers' plight was similarly dire. Many workers faced eviction and relegation to squatter status in slums that came to be called "Hooverilles" colloquially though the phenomenon blighted Roosevelt's presidency as well. With nearly a quarter of the nation's labor force unemployed – not to mention the issue of underemployment – the Great Depression affected more people than just the working class. Many current and former white-collar workers faced economic repercussions too. There was a widespread fear of losing one's status. This terror was the backbone of Huey Long's Share Our Wealth movement. In a 1935 radio address, the Kingfish said, "In 1916 there was a middle class—33 percent of the people—who owned 35 percent of the wealth. That middle class is practically gone today."³¹³ One aspect of the Depression practically no politician cared to draw attention to was its disproportionate effect on racial minorities and working-class women. With the labor supply so far eclipsing employers' needs, hiring managers had leeway to fill positions as they saw fit. By and large, they fell back on their biases, preferring to hire white men.³¹⁴

³¹² Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Right Out of California: The 1930s and the Big Business Roots of Modern Conservatism* (New York: The New Press, 2015), 4.

³¹³ Huey Long NBC Speech, "Our Blundering Government (And Its Spokesmen)," March 7, 1935, LSU Special Collection, Huey Long FBI Papers.

³¹⁴ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 43.

President Roosevelt's heralded turn to the left – a move his contemporaries perceived as a tactical offensive against Senator Long – was not in evidence in 1933. The first New Deal was less redistributive than its comparatively radical second act. However, few people save Marxists and Huey Long thought that FDR's first batch of New Deal legislation was anything less than a radical departure from the past. It marked a "socialization of concern,"³¹⁵ Wilsonian progressivism – as Richard Hofstadter argued in *From Bryan to FDR* – brought to its logical conclusion, given the carte blanche the Depression gave the incoming Administration.³¹⁶ Given Roosevelt's pragmatic approach to government, it is difficult to generalize the New Deal without running up against exceptions. Considering his exceptional vision and drive, FDR was unusually improvisational. Still, it bears repeating that President Roosevelt ultimately accomplished exactly what he set out to achieve, to turn the Democratic Party into an ideologically consistent, progressive party.³¹⁷ By the time FDR was done with the Democratic Party, it was well on its way to becoming a stand-in for expansive government in the name of militarism abroad and augmented social democracy domestically.

A flurry of legislative activity accompanied Roosevelt's March 1933 inauguration, an ambitious legislative agenda that has few parallels. In the first Hundred Days alone, Congress passed and President Roosevelt signed fifteen major pieces of legislation.³¹⁸ These measures increased consumer purchasing power, reigned in unbridled competition, constrained finance capital, and promoted Southern and Western economic development. With the Glass-Steagall Act, the government attempted to insure

³¹⁵ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 77.

³¹⁶ Rauch, *The History of the New Deal*, viii.

³¹⁷ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 272.

³¹⁸ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 352.

the middle class against further years of insecurity. The Act provided a degree of insurance for bank depositors, a concession that Senator Huey Long helped wring from a reluctant Senate.³¹⁹ Glass-Steagall was a supplement to the Emergency Banking Act, passed five days after Roosevelt's inauguration. The Banking Act sought to provide relief to the banks, many of which were failing. It increased federal power to regulate banking and established the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to increase depositors' confidence that their savings were not in jeopardy.³²⁰

Senator Carter Glass, one of the authors of the bill, was an elder Virginian statesman who was sufficiently renowned for his financial acumen that Roosevelt offered him the treasury secretary position.³²¹ Glass demurred, preferring to make his mark in the legislature, but perhaps had occasion to regret these sacrifices following his run-ins with the Kingfish. Reflecting Long's theatrical disdain for Senate mores, he would make a speech ribbing a conservative senator such as Carter Glass. Then, away from the public eye, Long would assure the target of his diatribe that the attack was not personal. According to Harry S. Truman, the acrimony between Glass and Long grew so extreme that Glass responded to one of Long's attempts to make nice by saying, "Huey, you're the worst son of a bitch in the Senate, and if I can get my knife out, I'm going to cut your heart out."³²² Long's opposition to Glass-Steagall reflected his senatorial style, which oscillated between clear-eyed parliamentary maneuvering and grandstanding. Long managed enough deft manipulation of Senate proceedings to help see his favored

³¹⁹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 634.

³²⁰ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 58.

³²¹ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 291.

³²² Harry S. Truman, November 24, 1959, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

amendment passed. Long left behind a considerable record of achievement in Congress's upper body.

Roosevelt supported the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, an agency charged with creating work for young men who lacked dependents and whose families were drawing unemployment relief. The CCC employed hundreds of thousands of young American men for six-month enrollments.³²³ The Corps was one component of the – at times – byzantine array of federal bureaucracies set up to put Americans back to work under the New Deal. Besides the CCC, over the course of Roosevelt's first term, there emerged the Civil Works Administration, the Public Works Administration, and the Works Progress Administration. Similar to how the Long machine put Louisianans to work in the Pelican State through ambitious investments in internal improvements, Roosevelt's federal government sought to subsidize the jobs market. The emphasis on employment over social insurance emphasized the relative conservatism of FDR's approach as well as the background of many frustrated job seekers. The government did not want to create an unqualified social safety net. Roosevelt believed that economic privation – or the threat of it – was a desirable feature of the capitalist system in that it incentivized people to work and perform unpleasant tasks. The Great Depression affected swaths of downwardly mobile, formerly prosperous Americans. Among the millions of frustrated job seekers, then, there were many people who were culturally unprepared to accept handouts.

The programs experienced successes and setbacks. The PWA exemplified a more cautious approach to unemployment relief than the CWA. The PWA received

³²³ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 63.

\$3,300,000,000 and operated as more of a grant fund under Harold Ickes's auspices. Ickes preferred to work with local partners who organized projects themselves and received funding from the PWA, thus involving as little federal intervention as possible. The CWA, established over half a year later in January 1934, devised a more direct approach. Under its director Harry Hopkins, the CWA put 4,000,000 Americans to work. The program suffered from criticisms that its low wages undercut union standards, an impression not aided by the fact that many detractors saw these government programs as make-work endeavors. President Roosevelt, ever the fiscal conservative and worried that his slate of policies had doubled the federal expenditure, ordered Hopkins to fire the 4,000,000 workers.³²⁴

For all of the first New Deal's reluctance to engage the government in the business of taking responsibility for the peoples' economic well-being, the federal government did take a few decisive steps in the direction of "socializing concern." Two critical pieces of legislation passed in May 1933 evidence Roosevelt's progressive commitments. The Federal Emergency Relief Act provisioned \$500,000 in block grants to the states to go toward direct unemployment relief.³²⁵ The New Deal involved the federal government in unemployment relief at a time when the federal government had virtually no role in providing assistance.³²⁶ FDR's Tennessee Valley Authority policy was so progressive that even Norman Thomas glowingly praised it. Thomas said, TVA "is the most nearly socialistic [New Deal policy]. Here is an evident attempt to plan in

³²⁴ Rauchway, *The New Deal and the Great Depression*, 64.

³²⁵ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 64.

³²⁶ Badger, *The New Deal*, 224.

terms of use rather than profit.”³²⁷ TVA attempted to bring electricity to the South. Furthermore, it did so by creating a public option for electricity, effectively plugging in the state as a patchwork solution to one of capitalism’s negative externalities. The private power companies had declined to bring electricity to rural Southerners, not seeing profits in taking on the responsibility. TVA set up interstate public power corporations that electrified homes for half the private price.³²⁸ The government later cross-applied the TVA model to a national scale by setting up the Rural Electrification Administration in 1935. TVA additionally authorized state authorities to experiment with flood prevention, erosion control, irrigation, reforestation, and hydroelectric power generation.³²⁹

One way historians have attempted to reconcile FDR’s commitment to the profit motive as the organizing principle of the American economy and his support for TVA is through the concept of countervailing power.³³⁰ The theory refers to a kind of Montesquieu-esque conception of providing an institutional means for internecine rivalry to play out and establishing a more level playing field for that competition. Roosevelt wanted to turn the US, a nation divided by regional origin, into a country divided by ideological differences of opinion. He saw that a stumbling block in his plan was that the South and the West languished behind the Northeast and Midwest in economic development. The TVA was a way of vaulting the agrarian South and West into the 20th century. Roosevelt hoped that “by adding to the votes of the Solid South those of Eastern laborers and unemployed and Western farmers, that party [the progressive one to emerge

³²⁷ Norman Thomas, “A Socialist Look at the New Deal 1933-1934,” Tulane University Special Collections, Tulane University Rare Books Collection.

³²⁸ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 91.

³²⁹ Brands, *Traitor to His Class*, 338.

³³⁰ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 94.

in the New Deal's wake] could recreate the great coalition which had elected Jefferson and Wilson."³³¹

The most significant exponents of FDR's fostering countervailing powers were the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act – which also laid bare the approach's limitations. NIRA precipitated, besides infusing \$3,000,000,000 into the economy for public works, the cartelization of key sectors of the American economy.³³² Under the auspices of the National Recovery Administration, the Roosevelt Administration directed the businesses comprising industries to cooperate, setting industry-wide standards for such considerations as wages and prices. The NRA and its leader, the recovery czar General Hugh S. Johnson, represented a degree of central planning over the U.S. economy with few analogues in American history save for the Wilson Administration's World War I-era interventions. Johnson, who had graduated from West Point in the same class as Douglas MacArthur, was a loose cannon whose alcohol-fueled emotional instability belied his administrative ingeniousness.³³³ The NRA set to work establishing industrial boards whose principal object was to “eliminate unfair competitive practices in particular industries, lay down wage and hours standards, and guarantee workers the right of collective bargaining.” In line with President Roosevelt's emphasis on countervailing power, not just business leadership but also union and consumer representatives theoretically claimed seats on the NRA boards. Giving organized labor and consumers a seat at the table at the commanding heights of the economy was more of an aspirational goal than one the Administration was keen to see to

³³¹ Rauch, *The History of the New Deal*, 22.

³³² Norman Thomas, “A Socialist Look at the New Deal 1933-1934,” Tulane University Special Collections, Tulane University Rare Books Collection.

³³³ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 14.

fruition. It is undeniable, however, that the NIRA's guaranteeing labor's collective bargaining rights boosted union membership while the NRA boards experienced success eliminating retrograde labor practices.³³⁴

The Agricultural Adjustment Act essentially put Governor Huey Long's 1931 cotton-holiday plan into effect. In 1933, farmers constituted 30 percent of the nation's labor force.³³⁵ American farmers' economic well-being was contingent on volatile crop prices. During the First World War and after, prices remained high due to depressed production and disruption to the supply chain stemming from the European conflict.³³⁶ The agricultural crisis of the Great Depression was born of overproduction. The Great Depression's ramifications were global, curbing international demand even as American "urban demand collapsed."³³⁷ Roosevelt's response to the farmers' plight was comparable to the aid he provided to the industrialists: He introduced government-directed central planning into the agricultural sector. The Roosevelt Administration identified unfettered competition as the proximate cause of low crop prices. Farmers oversaturated the market with their staples because it was in an individual, independent farming enterprise's interest to maximize output. In doing so, the farmers exacerbated overproduction but, absent widespread cooperation, could not disrupt the negative feedback loop of self-interest trumping the public good. The Agricultural Adjustment Act gave the federal Department of Agriculture authority to negotiate with farmers' conferences to collectively curb production. In some instances, the conferences even agreed to surreptitious production decreases, wastefully destroying fields of crops and

³³⁴ Badger, *The New Deal*, 76.

³³⁵ Badger, *The New Deal*, 145.

³³⁶ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 45.

³³⁷ Badger, *The New Deal*, 15.

slaughtering surplus cattle. The legislation invested the DOA with the power to enforce the law through inspection, assuaging fears that some farmers would exploit the system.

When the sheer speed and ambition of Roosevelt's first several months in office caught even the Socialist Party – no spring chickens concerning the business of criticizing bourgeois reformism – flat-footed, the New Deal failed to overawe the Kingfish. Long distinguished himself as the White House's least sparing critic from the left in Congress. Senator Long had a bone to pick with nearly every piece of New Deal legislation. Senator Long's opposition to the New Deal lacked the ideological coherence of Roosevelt's Marxist detractors. The President and Long shared the fundamental goal of reforming the capitalist order to prevent a socialist overhaul of it. Describing Norman Thomas's stubborn refusal to back FDR – even in the face of organized labor's near-complete defection to the New Deal's banners – historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., suggested that “Thomas's efforts were, in part, to give his party identity.”³³⁸ This critique of Thomas – while holding water – can more convincingly be cross-applied to Huey Long. Roosevelt wanted to reinvigorate the original, indomitable Jacksonian Democratic coalition of Western and Southern farmers and Northern laborers; Huey Long, by his words and behavior, evidently shared this goal. Both men – to the extent that either one could lay claim to ideological succinctness – were amalgamations of progressive and populist aspiration. Huey Long's opposition to Roosevelt, then, was vulnerable to charges of rank opportunism. Regardless of the Kingfish's motivations, his Congressional stands against President Roosevelt succeeded in pulling the New Deal to the left. Furthermore, Senator Long's myopic insistence on liquid wealth redistribution as America's path out

³³⁸ Gay, “Norman Thomas: ‘Tribune of the Disenfranchised,’” 347.

of the Depression was anathema to the President. FDR came to save the rich from themselves, not to eat them.

Along these lines, Senator Long criticized AAA for Roosevelt's reluctance to deflate the currency.³³⁹ Long, along with his Midwestern, neo-populist Senate allies, advocated for abolition of the gold standard in favor of fiat currency. The inflationary result, they hoped, would relieve debt-ridden farmers by rendering it cheaper for them to pay off their creditors. Long assisted in the Senate inflationists' success in browbeating Roosevelt into accepting an amendment, which granted the President authority to issue currency backed by silver or no precious metals.³⁴⁰ Senator Long agitated for federal land banks, possessing the means to bail out distressed farmers.³⁴¹ Long's criticism of AAA, then, was that in declining to solve the farm foreclosure issue, the legislation prioritized the interests of powerful agricultural interests not necessarily aligned with the smallholders. He pointed out the Reconstruction Finance Corporation's bailing out powerful corporations and wondered why it could not do the same for the yeomen.³⁴² Long proposed to foot the bill for his proposals through a capital levy, worrying that "we are going to have a perfect soviet system of government unless we will adopt the sound, sane, capitalistic structure of limiting these surplus fortunes from stagnating the whole country."³⁴³ Long worried that the reason for FDR's reluctance to redistribute the wealth was the President was captive to special interests.

³³⁹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 631.

³⁴⁰ Williams, *Huey Long*, 631.

³⁴¹ Senator Huey Long, March 3, 1933, 73rd Congress, Congressional Record: 5481.

³⁴² Senator Huey Long, February 27, 1933, 73rd Congress, Congressional Record: 5098.

³⁴³ Senator Huey Long, February 27, 1933, 73rd Congress, Congressional Record: 5101.

Long's concern applied just as well to the Roosevelt Administration's industrial policy. Aside from being instrumental in pressuring the Democrats to compel the federal government to provide insurance to depositors, Long had little appreciation for NIRA. Long harangued Roosevelt's corporatism. He claimed that "every fault of socialism is found in this bill, without one of its virtues."³⁴⁴ Long was opposed to state capitalism not because he was for anti-capitalist collectivism but because he sometimes saw fit to claim a preference for limited government. This implausible preference coming from the Senator whose *raison d'être* was wholesale wealth redistribution spoke to the inherent incoherence of Long's populist-progressive syncretism. The Jeffersonian days when the government which governed least best served the interests of independent farmers were clearly gone. Though Long occasionally saw that it was to his rhetorical advantage to pretend that they were not, his policy positions suggested that he knew very well they were. Historian Anthony J. Badger sums up Long's relationship to the New Deal, saying he "supported the New Deal when it spent money, agreed to currency inflation, and protected smaller banks, but opposed it when bankers and businessmen appeared to wield too much influence."³⁴⁵ In short, Long fought to expand the Democrats' recovery efforts, so that they would benefit a broader swath of Americans. According to Long, Roosevelt saw the government as having a sort of fiduciary responsibility to the economy's principal stakeholders including bankers, business magnates, and wealthy planters; he differed with the Republicans in that he thought an expansive government would best serve this upper class's interest. Long wanted the government to serve the shrinking

³⁴⁴ Williams, *Huey Long*, 635.

³⁴⁵ Badger, *The New Deal*, 294.

middle class too to safeguard the independent farmers, local banks, and petty merchants from further losses.

Overall, Long supported just half of the new President's legislative agenda, enthusiastically backing TVA, the repeal of Prohibition, and some tax and tariff proposals.³⁴⁶ He helped lead the charge for the McCarran Amendment that established "prevailing wages on public-works projects."³⁴⁷ Long, William Borah, and the progressive Senate bloc derailed FDR's push to have the U.S. join the World Court. For his part, the President tolerated Senator Long's outspokenness for a time, but his patience soon wore thin. Long insisted that his assault on Roosevelt's legislative agenda merely amounted to constructive criticism. In January 1933, a reporter asked Long, who had just left a meeting with the President, if the White House would crack down on him. The Kingfish said, "He don't want to crack down on me. He told me, 'Huey, you're going to do just as I tell you, and that is just what I'm agoin' to do.'"³⁴⁸ By June, Roosevelt was ready to publicly break with the Kingfish. Long's secretary later claimed that the final straw came in the form of Senator Long's sponsoring a bill offering the veterans their long-awaited bonus.³⁴⁹ Long publicly accused Roosevelt of opposing paying World War I veterans.³⁵⁰ Conceivably, FDR was betting that Long's star would fade from the public eye. In March, the President said, "Individual psychology cannot, because of human weakness, be attuned for longest periods of time to constant repetition of the highest note in the scale."³⁵¹

³⁴⁶ White, *Kingfish*, location 3198.

³⁴⁷ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 5.

³⁴⁸ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 54.

³⁴⁹ Earle J. Christenberry, July 11, 1957, LSU Special Collections, T. Harry Williams Papers, Box 19.

³⁵⁰ Senator Huey Long, April 28, 1933, 73rd Congress, Congressional Record: 2529.

³⁵¹ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 10.

If the Roosevelt Administration expected the Kingfish to go away, they were sorely mistaken. Senator Long was more committed than ever to carving out a piece of the national spotlight for himself. He became the first senator to attempt to bring his message directly to the people utilizing radio broadcasts.³⁵² Long proved to be as masterful as a broadcaster as he was spellbinding on the campaign trail. Down to his voice inflection and ability to emphasize key words and phrases, he was a natural radio communicator. Kingfish NBC broadcasts became a staple of the Depression-era airwaves, allowing him to rail against the Roosevelt Administration for selling out the American people to economic elites. Though Roosevelt's popularity was generally unassailable from 1933 on, Long did manage to pinpoint minor fissures in the New Deal coalition. Morris A. Bealle, the publisher of *Plain Talk Magazine*, wrote Senator Long on May 31 to say, "If Roosevelt's hit-or-miss, both-sides-of-the-road, economic policies do not click, the Long Plan can take its author to the White House."³⁵³ It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that Long's criticisms made an appreciable dent in Roosevelt's support. People who admired Long were also inclined to support the President.

Nevertheless Roosevelt was deeply concerned about the threat Huey Long posed to him. "These are not normal times; the people are jumpy and ready to run after strange gods," the President fretted about Huey Long and Father Coughlin, the popular radio priest, whose colorful antipathy for elites and economic egalitarianism drew comparisons between him and Long.³⁵⁴ FDR's close advisor Jim Farley summoned Long to an audience with the President where he informed the Kingfish that the Long machine in

³⁵² Williams, *Huey Long*, 629.

³⁵³ Morris A. Bealle to Huey Long, May 31, 1933, LSU Special Collections, Huey Long Papers.

³⁵⁴ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 243.

Louisiana would henceforth no longer receive federal patronage.³⁵⁵ This meeting drew battle lines between the men. Their relationship only degenerated from there. If Long's tone toward Roosevelt, a fellow Democrat and the Party's leader, had been insubordinate previously, it grew positively insolent after the Summer of 1933. Long called FDR "Prince Franklin."³⁵⁶ In Huey Long's speculative work of fiction about what he planned to do as president, he vindictively declared that Franklin Roosevelt would have a job as his Secretary of the Navy, a jab Norman Thomas called "one of the cleverest, most arrogant and demagogic of Huey Long's performances."³⁵⁷ Roosevelt, not one to wear his heart on his sleeve, let his lieutenants do his mudslinging for him and let his actions speak louder than his words. Roosevelt carried through on his threat to give Long's enemies in Louisiana federal patronage. FDR's public-facing silence on the subject of the Kingfish belied his almost irrational fear of the man. The President ordered his Treasury Department to investigate the Long machine for tax fraud. Roosevelt's paranoia grew, eventually prompting him to contemplate such extreme measures as sending federal troops in Louisiana to depose the Longists and directing a federal boycott of the Pelican State.³⁵⁸ Though the President espoused a principled justification for his opposition against Long – relating to his exotic perception of the Kingfish as a homegrown Hitler or Mussolini – even pro-Roosevelt historians concede that his principal motivation was political gain.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 639.

³⁵⁶ Williams, *Huey Long*, 813.

³⁵⁷ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *The Socialist Call*, December 7, 1935.

³⁵⁸ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 250.

³⁵⁹ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 55.

Whatever FDR's motivation for breaking with Huey Long, in the short term, the White House's offensive appeared to make progress. The latter half of 1933 proved to be the low ebb in the arc of the Kingfish's national career. T. Harry Williams called it a "dramatic downturn in his prestige and power."³⁶⁰ The President's disavowal of the Louisiana leader seemed to declare open season on Long; his newly emboldened enemies saw an opportunity to strike at him while he was down. In August 1933, Long disgraced himself at a raucous party in Long Island, emerging from the bathroom with a black eye.³⁶¹ His enemies in the media seized the initiative. An editor at *Collier's Weekly*, a publication Senator Long had recently decried for its ownership by a J. P. Morgan executive, started a fund to provide a medal to the person who punched out the Kingfish.³⁶² Long's local opposition, which had been largely impotent since Governor Long's escape from impeachment, took heart from the President's example, and rebelled against the Kingfish's stranglehold over Louisiana politics. In December 1933, the Old Regulars of New Orleans opted to dissolve their alliance with the Long machine, a crisis on the home front that devastated Senator Long.³⁶³

In addition to anti-Long militia violence, the opposition appealed to the federal government to intervene against the Long machine on legal grounds. Certain quarters of the old Bourbon ruling class never wised up to the seismic change Huey Long wrought on Louisiana politics and contrived to be rid of him through old-fashioned Southern terror inspired by the overthrow of Reconstruction in the state. They compared Long and his followers to "carpetbaggers" and formed shotgun clubs and private militias with

³⁶⁰ Williams, *Huey Long*, 654.

³⁶¹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 648.

³⁶² Williams, *Huey Long*, 652.

³⁶³ Williams, *Huey Long*, 671.

ambitions of civil insurrection as their predecessors had once violently overthrown Republican state government after the Civil War.³⁶⁴ One paramilitary group, the Square Deal Association, brought their opposition to Long to an issue at the so-called Battle of the Airport. The ease with which the state government's forces mopped up the militiamen made the Square Dealers look pitiful in the eyes of the state.³⁶⁵

The opposition had a more promising avenue of attack against Long in the form of inspiring federal investigations into the Long machine for its authoritarian behavior. It is important to stress the point that Long's authoritarianism was, in no way, a break with the state's history.³⁶⁶ What distinguished the Kingfish from his predecessors was not his dictatorial methods but that he harnessed state power on behalf of the mass of Louisianans as opposed to the ruling class. However, even as revisionist a historian as T. Harry Williams argues that Long was gratuitously dictatorial, and his means to accomplishing his agenda became corrupt ends in and of themselves.³⁶⁷ Long amassed so much authority under the auspices of the state police that the FBI declined to cooperate with Governor Allen's government for fear of onlookers thinking the FBI was cooperating in the formation of a police state.³⁶⁸ Governor Long engaged in blatant nepotism, nakedly doling out state patronage to members of his extended family.³⁶⁹ He and his associates established a dummy corporation from which they funneled money from the state's coffers into their own pockets. The election of the Long machine

³⁶⁴ Williams, *Huey Long*, 668.

³⁶⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 790.

³⁶⁶ Jeansonne, *Kingfish*, 376.

³⁶⁷ Williams, *Huey Long*, 751.

³⁶⁸ R. Whitley to Herbert Hoover, August 17, 1934, LSU Special Collections, Huey Long FBI Papers, Box 2.

³⁶⁹ Jerome Beatty, "You Can't Laugh Him Off," *The American Magazine*, January 1933, Louisiana State Museum Historical Center, Collected Magazine Articles about Huey Pierce Long, Box 1.

candidate John Overton to the U.S. Senate was so corrupt that it prompted a Congressional investigation. The Long machine used its expansive war chest to hire dummy candidates to run for election, so they could stack polling places with their lackeys, prompting concerns about whether honest ballot counting was taking place.³⁷⁰ Long's underlings compelled all state employees to give 10 percent of their salaries to go toward filling the machine's treasury.³⁷¹ The ultimately Roosevelt-directed IRS investigation into the Long machine yielded three indictments of top Long lieutenants, including machine leaders Abe Shushan and Seymour Weiss and pro-Long Congressman Joe Fisher.³⁷² Before Huey Long's death, the IRS pointed its crosshairs at him for his ownership of stock in the his machine's dummy corporation though T. Harry Williams asserts that Long himself was never in danger of facing criminal liability.³⁷³

The media's lampooning of Long, coupled with his state-level opposition's receipt of federal patronage, appeared to have brought the Kingfish to his knees by the close of 1933. 1934, then, became a rebuilding year for Long. One newspaper stated that "Huey the Kingfish' has been slowly trying to turn into 'Senator Long of Louisiana.'"³⁷⁴ An aspect of this self-reinvention was temperamental. Long "dropped his playboy routine," no longer partying in DC-area clubs with his bodyguards until the wee hours of the morning or brawling in dingy, bar bathrooms.³⁷⁵ Additionally, in February 1934, Senator Long began investing in the sort of nationwide political infrastructure that

³⁷⁰ Honest Election League of New Orleans, "Memorandum Brief," Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

³⁷¹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 612.

³⁷² Williams, *Huey Long*, 798.

³⁷³ Williams, *Huey Long*, 826.

³⁷⁴ "Huey Long Plans Third Party Race for Presidency: Senator to Campaign in 1936 on Anti-Roosevelt Platform," LSU Special Collections, Huey Long Papers.

³⁷⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 678.

signposted his presidential ambitions for all to see: the Share Our Wealth societies. On February 23, the Kingfish delivered one of his patent NBC addresses, outlining the economic proposals of his new organization and defending them philosophically.³⁷⁶

The philosophical tenor of Long's Share Our Wealth rhetoric spoke to the nature of the movement's prescription for the nation's economic ills. The leading Share Our Wealth scholar, historian Alan Brinkley, has argued that Share Our Wealth economics typified Long's naivete or demagogic insincerity. According to this criticism, Long, the neo-populist, sought to turn back the clock on decades of industrialization and urbanization. He emerged as the tribune of the beleaguered farmers, still 30 percent of the population, the last substantial population segment that pined after a centrifugal, Jeffersonian power structure. Long gave voice to this perspective, claiming that he was out to preserve the American way of life and the ideals contained in the Declaration of Independence. As much as he saw himself as inheritor to the lineage of Jefferson, Jackson, and Bryan, Long's cloaking himself in the rhetoric of agrarian republicanism made palatable the implicit embrace of modernity that Share Our Wealth evidenced.³⁷⁷

Long's Share Our Wealth platform was the most radical and progressive policy package during the New Deal era to the right of the Marxist parties at a time when national support for Longism eclipsed support for the Marxist parties many times over. Despite the frequently repeated, misleading characterization of the program as single-issue politics, Share Our Wealth encompassed a bundle of proposals unified by the organizing principle of increased central government in the name of egalitarianism. The

³⁷⁶ Williams, *Huey Long*, 696.

³⁷⁷ Share Our Wealth pamphlet based on a radio address by Huey Long, February 23, 1934, Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

most important proposal was a simultaneous limit on poverty and wealth to be achieved through a capital levy. The federal government under a President Long would institute a wealth tax, taxing all wealth in excess of \$3,000,000-\$4,000,000 at a rate of 100 percent and redistributing the dividends.³⁷⁸ Given Long's homestead idea – that the government should guarantee every American family \$5,000 and debt-free home, radio, and car debt – the core plank of his platform was essentially a wealth redistribution scheme and universal public housing and transportation plan wrapped into one provision. The idea clearly positioned Senator Long to Roosevelt's left. Roosevelt funded the first New Deal through a regressive consumption tax, one that Senator Long railed against for the burden it placed on working and middle-class Americans.³⁷⁹ Other planks of the Share Our Wealth platform included “adequate” old-age pensions – which Gerald L.K. Smith acknowledged was an intentional rip-off of Dr. Francis Townsend's plan³⁸⁰ – and capping work-week hours to put more people back to work.³⁸¹

Long's Share Our Wealth proposals were more radical than the ideas of his mainstream rivals. Long conceived of his program as a hail-Mary attempt to wrest a hybridized form of capitalism from the jaws of incipient socialism. Long wanted to revitalize the middle class, arguing that a complacent, sizable petit bourgeoisie was the only dependable bulwark against a Marxist takeover. In 1916, he claimed, a middle class amounting to 30 percent of the population, owned 30 percent of U.S. wealth.³⁸² These

³⁷⁸ Broadside circulated by Gerald L.K. Smith and Oscar Allen after Huey Long's death, Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 2.

³⁷⁹ Rauchway, *The New Deal and the Great Depression*, 92.

³⁸⁰ Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, 63.

³⁸¹ Share Our Wealth literature printed in the Congressional Record, LSU Special Collection, Huey Long FBI Papers, Box 2.

³⁸² “How American Can Be Adjusted,” Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

people were “the little man . . . the little merchant in his store, the little Italian that is running a fruit stand, or the Greek shoe-shining stand.”³⁸³ Huey Long wanted to protect comparatively low-income white-collar workers and comparatively high-income blue-collar workers from pauperization. As for the proletarianization of the American yeomanry, Long proposed to drag it out and make the urban fate that awaited erstwhile farmers less grim through government assistance. His ultimate goal was virtually indistinguishable from that of Franklin Roosevelt. The bitter rivals both saw themselves as saviors of the for-profit system through public-sector growth.

It is this qualification of Share Our Wealth – that it was insufficiently differentiated from the New Deal – that provides the most compelling reason to doubt the extent of Huey Long’s national prestige. Share Our Wealth’s growth was meteoric. By 1935, the society boasted 3,000,000 members.³⁸⁴ Senator Long’s Washington DC office received so many tens of thousands of letters each week that he hired eighteen stenographers and typists to respond to them all. Intrigued citizens who wrote to Long received informational literature, the Longist newspaper *American Progress*, a copy of *Every Man a King*, and a patriotically colored button.³⁸⁵ The impressive number of people who joined Share Our Wealth clubs was an index of the ephemeral nature of club membership. Long’s flagship endeavor was some cross between a debating society, mailing list, and fan club. Edward J. Sweeney, a Chicago resident, wrote J. Edgar Hoover in the Spring of 1935 offering to keep tabs on Chicago Share Our Wealth clubs for the FBI. Sweeney reported 84,000 members, the product of the evangelizing of a core group

³⁸³ Share Our Wealth pamphlet based on a radio address by Huey Long, February 23, 1934, Tulane Special Collections, William B. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 13.

³⁸⁴ Williams, *Huey Long*, 700.

³⁸⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 698.

of 300 paid Share Our Wealth workers in that city.³⁸⁶ Considering that Long planned to leverage Share Our Wealth as a springboard for a presidential bid, Alan Brinkley sums up the Society's fatal flaw: Support for it was, by no means, mutually exclusive with support for the President. Brinkley writes, "Nothing, however—not the organizational looseness, not the ideological diversity, not the overlapping with other dissident groups—was clearer evidence of the limits of Long's power as a 'mass leader' than the attitudes of his followers towards Franklin Roosevelt."³⁸⁷ It was a testament to the power of Long's charisma that he managed to win over swaths of Roosevelt supporters – while ranking among the White House's avowed enemies. However, the Democratic voters who came into Long's camp did not, then, necessarily stop supporting their wildly popular President.

Despite FDR's high popularity, the President felt threatened by the Kingfish, especially as the Depression continued despite his best efforts to turn the tide. From early in Roosevelt's first term, the President agonized over Senator Long's popularity, fretting about what it portended for the future and hoping the people would grow tired of Long. If they did not, FDR said he would need to pivot left to "steal Long's thunder."³⁸⁸ By 1935, Roosevelt was still reeling from the setbacks of 1934, disheartened that unemployment remained at 20 percent, and alarmed that Long was as popular as ever.³⁸⁹ Though FDR had amply demonstrated that wealth redistribution was not his preferred pathway out of the Depression, he told an emissary of William Randolph Hearst that he

³⁸⁶ Edward J. Sweeney to Herbert Hoover, May 25, 1935, LSU Special Collections, Huey Long FBI Papers.

³⁸⁷ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 131.

³⁸⁸ Williams, *Huey Long*, 812.

³⁸⁹ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 13.

was ready to “throw to the wolves” the US’s richest men to save the country.³⁹⁰ In a maneuver envisioned as an attack against the Kingfish, the White House unveiled the Second New Deal, an unprecedentedly radical move to “add labor to the beneficiaries of recovery.”³⁹¹ It included a “soak the rich” tax bill in the form of the Revenue Act of 1935 though this bill affected relatively few of the US’s wealthy.³⁹² The Emergency Relief Appropriation Act provisioned \$5,000,000 for internal improvements and established the Works Progress Administration that put millions to work building hospitals and schools and put writers to work documenting America through the Federal Writers’ Project.³⁹³

From the perspective of the American left, the Second New Deal’s crown jewel was the July 1935 Wagner Act designed to provide protection to the disaffected workers who had been venting their frustrations to Norman Thomas in 1934. The Wagner Act established the National Labor Relations Board to settle disputes between workers and bosses.³⁹⁴ Even Thomas praised the Wagner Act’s legally codifying workers’ right to organize though he feared employers would take advantage of the law through setting up ersatz company unions.³⁹⁵ Long praised the Wagner Act too, but he insisted that the government needed to provide pensions to senior citizens.³⁹⁶ In a direct concession to Francis Townsend and Huey Long’s Share Our Wealth platform, Roosevelt consented to the Social Security Act in August 1935, provisioning pensions for the aged. Whereas the

³⁹⁰ John F. Manley, “Marx in America: The New Deal,” *Science & Society* 67, no. 1 (March 2003): 25, <https://doi.org/10.1521/asis.67.1.9.21120>.

³⁹¹ Rauch, *The History of the New Deal*, 139.

³⁹² Manley, “Marx in America,” 25.

Rauchway, *The New Deal and the Great Depression*, 93.

³⁹³ Rauchway, *The New Deal and the Great Depression*, 66.

³⁹⁴ Badger, *The New Deal*, 139.

³⁹⁵ Socialist Public Affairs Committee, March 18, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 56.

³⁹⁶ Williams, *Huey Long*, 835.

social safety net theretofore had been largely ad hoc, the Social Security Act represented a concrete step toward establishing the permanent welfare state. Even so, it did not go far enough for Huey Long's taste. The original Social Security Act was self-funding, taking the money for pensions directly out of paychecks; Senator Long said it should not be contributory.³⁹⁷ Long had reason to nitpick the Second New Deal, for it threatened to derail his plan to run for president in 1936. The Kingfish hoped to run as a third-party candidate, realizing he could not defeat an incumbent Democratic president but hoping to act as a spoiler and set himself up to capture the Democratic nomination in 1940.³⁹⁸ Roosevelt "was not willing to fight for redistributive taxes after Long's death."³⁹⁹ President Roosevelt's relative lack of willingness to pursue aggressive reform after the Kingfish's death suggests that fear of Long had been a powerful motivator for the President.

For all of the similarities between FDR and Huey Long, the men were different in the level of alarmism present in their rhetoric. The persona President Roosevelt presented in his fireside chats and speeches before the American people was one of paternalistic reassurance. He was the beneficent, consummate patrician-insider who was going to cut the plutocrats down to size not by throwing bombs but through chastising them into cooperation. There was, conversely, a demagogic side to the Kingfish, characterized by a willingness to mudsling and to wax eschatological. According to Huey Long, the choice before the American people was not between Democrats and Republicans; he made the

³⁹⁷ Williams, *Huey Long*, 835.

³⁹⁸ Ralph Wheatley, "Huey Long Plans Third Party Race for Presidency: Senator to Campaign in 1936 on Anti-Roosevelt Platform," *Associated Press*, November 18, LSU Special Collections, Huey Long Papers, Box 43.

³⁹⁹ Manley, "Marx in America," 26.

Republicans out to have already lost. Instead, Long perceived a competition between the Democratic progressives and Marxists for the soul of America. He said, “Capitalism is on trial with communism for its world competitor.”⁴⁰⁰ In the context of the U.S. with its weak Marxist political parties, Long’s characterization of the threat posed by Communists and Socialists was self-serving. The disparity between Long’s hyperbolic fearmongering about the creeping threat of socialism and the pitiful state of the Marxist American parties perhaps explains the political superstar Long’s willingness to condescend to debate the third-party leader Norman Thomas in March 1934.

The Kingfish was almost too successful for his own good. His relentless browbeating of the President and fearmongering about the Marxist threat drove the President to drastic action. When Roosevelt unveiled the Second New Deal, he effectively stripped Long’s arguments of their potency. A more altruistic-minded man than Huey Long might have counted the President’s concessions as successes. For the power-hungry Kingfish, however, his main concern was that the President’s wily tactics diminished Long’s presidential prospects. The Second New Deal prompted the Louisiana senator to feel backed into a corner. Operating from a paranoid mindset, the normally politically astute Long miscalculated. He overreached, abusing his dominion over the Louisiana legislature to bring his enemies to their knees. In driving his enemies to desperation, Long inspired his assassin to strike.

⁴⁰⁰ Broadside, March 17, 1933, Tulane Special Collections, Wisdom B. Wisdom Collection on Huey P. Long, Box 1.

Chapter Six: Norman Thomas and the New Deal

If Roosevelt's turning out to be a progressive president sapped the wind from Huey Long's sails, it positively crippled Norman Thomas's Socialist Party. In response to the New Deal, Thomas and the Socialists reeled. The Socialist Party pivoted to the left, deepening its ties to the labor movement. Thomas's ties to industrial labor and the agricultural workforce provisioned him with a fertile source of criticisms against the New Deal. The New Deal's first iteration largely left industrial laborers and non-landowning farmers out in the cold. Thomas advocated tirelessly on their behalf, thus securing his reputation a tribune of the dispossessed for the concessions he wrung from the Administration on their behalf. In addition to the Democratic Party's progressive turn, Thomas pivoted left in response to Huey Long's rise. Thomas adopted the orthodox Marxist position, suspecting pro-capitalist reformers of fascism. Long's success prompted Thomas to retreat further and further into ideology. This retreat facilitated the Socialist Party's decline, prompting Thomas to engage in fruitless factional struggles. Despite the Party's decline, however, Thomas experienced success in his efforts to influence the Roosevelt Administration.

Headed into the spring of 1933, Norman Thomas was deeply skeptical of the program of this gentleman-politician Franklin Roosevelt. Thomas, a close observer of New York politics, had observed how Governor Roosevelt kowtowed to the New York Socialists' avowed enemy Tammany Hall. Roosevelt's checkered past, from a leftist perspective, was especially distressing, given the atmosphere of fear and desperation that permeated the country. During President Hoover's lame-duck time in office, the U.S. was in a "desperate strait." Thomas felt sure that cynicism about the democratic system's

ability to deliver America from the Depression was on the rise.⁴⁰¹ Early 1933 saw Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party take power in Germany and the dissolution of Austrian democracy. Around the world, liberal democracy itself seemed to be on its last legs with the rise of authoritarian nationalism and Leninist communism. At least, Thomas professed to believe that this crossroads was ahead of the nation.⁴⁰² This sort of binary thinking, common to ideologues, was emblematic of the international Marxist perspective. American democratic socialists did not go so far – as communists the world over did – as to suggest that mainstream conservatives and liberals were inherently fascist by virtue of their not being Marxists.⁴⁰³ Thomas and his comrades were petrified that Roosevelt would be an inept president. They feared that his failure or unwillingness to harness the awesome power of the state to fight the Depression ran the risk of disillusioning a critical mass of Americans into entertaining a fascist seducer. The most likely suspect for the role of fascist pied piper was, of course, the Louisiana Kingfish.

When the Democrats, then, proved willing to radically experiment with public-sector solutions to the Depression, Thomas was relieved. As previously detailed, he thought the TVA was the most socialistic piece of federal legislation in American history. He said that the AAA and the NIRA “constitute a bold recognition of collectivism and of governmental authority.”⁴⁰⁴ Thomas set to work currying influence with the President and attempted to steer the mercurial chief executive in a direction more nearly in line

⁴⁰¹ Norman Thomas, “The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas,” FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer.

⁴⁰² Norman Thomas, “A Socialist Look at the New Deal 1933-1934,” Tulane University Special Collections, Tulane University Rare Books Collection.

⁴⁰³ David Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism from the Inter-War Period* (Manchester, United Kingdom: Manchester University Press, 1983), 153.

⁴⁰⁴ Norman Thomas, “A Socialist Look at the New Deal 1933-1934,” Tulane University Special Collections, Tulane University Rare Books Collection.

with the Socialist Party's prerogatives. Though Norman Thomas was not nearly as influential a man as Huey Long – who probably influenced Roosevelt more than anyone else outside his Administration – the Socialist leader possessed an aura of respectability and statesman-like gravitas that political and cultural elites felt bound to respect. Further, FDR was a New Yorker through and through, and his Empire State background caused him to ascribe more importance to the Socialists than he otherwise would have. For New Yorkers as for few other Americans, the Socialists were contenders, not merely also-rans.

President Roosevelt and Thomas enjoyed a cordial relationship. They corresponded regularly and met in the Oval Office four times. Roosevelt had high esteem for Thomas though Thomas stressed that their relationship was “not close but personally friendly.”⁴⁰⁵ During Roosevelt's second week in the White House, he invited the two New Yorker Socialist heavyweights, Thomas and Morris Hillquit, to the Oval Office.⁴⁰⁶ Roosevelt addressed the men not from somewhere behind his customary poker face but with uncharacteristic candor. The Socialists urged the President to seize on the opportunity afforded by the collapse of American banks to socialize the financial sector of the economy.⁴⁰⁷ The President dismissed this idea, calling it uncongenial to the American people. Thomas thought that the Emergency Banking Act, Glass-Steagall, and even – eventually – the establishment of the Securities and Exchange Commission as a watchdog agency represented treating the bankers with kid gloves. President Roosevelt eventually signed the SEC Act into law over one year into his presidency as a means of

⁴⁰⁵ James C. Duram, “Norman Thomas as Presidential Conscience,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (Summer 1990), 582.

Norman Thomas, *Norman Thomas's Unpublished Autobiography*, 135.

⁴⁰⁶ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 140.

⁴⁰⁷ Norman Thomas, *Oral History Project*, 103.

regulating Wall Street. He contravened whatever statement the act may have carried by appointing Joseph Kennedy, a banker, to head the Commission.⁴⁰⁸ Roosevelt's unwillingness to oppose finance capital filled Norman Thomas with a righteous indignation that summoned his ministerial persona. He said, "What the government has done is to restore the money lenders, in President Roosevelt's own figure of speech, to the temple. Perhaps their faces have been washed and certainly more policemen have been set over to watch them."⁴⁰⁹ Thomas's qualified enthusiasm for the New Deal took the better part of a year to sour into skepticism and even outright opposition.

By the spring of 1934, Thomas was less certain that the New Deal represented a bold step in the direction of the cooperative commonwealth. Just as 1933 was a difficult year for Huey Long, 1934 proved a challenging time for President Roosevelt. The legislative accomplishments that marked his first months in office met with initial relief that the federal government was finally making an attempt to lift the U.S. out of the Depression. That relief turned into frustration when Americans took stock and realized the first New Deal had not, in fact, lifted the Depression. What progress the country had made toward recovery was piecemeal. As FDR's honeymoon phase drew to a close, growing opposition in Congress and beyond resisted his agenda. As the commentator Walter Lippman wrote, "Once more we have come to a period of discouragement after a few months of buoyant hope. Pollyanna is silenced and Cassandra is doing all the talking."⁴¹⁰ Norman Thomas and the Socialists shared in this discouragement.

⁴⁰⁸ Rauchway, *The Great Depression and the New Deal*, 61.

⁴⁰⁹ Norman Thomas, "A Socialist Look at the New Deal 1933-1934," Tulane University Special Collections, Tulane University Rare Books Collection.

⁴¹⁰ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 13.

Thomas's falling out with the New Deal centered around his belief that the government was not distributing the dividends of recovery equally throughout the populace. Thomas sought to use his platform to highlight the plight of the industrial workers, agricultural wage earners and sharecroppers, and the unemployed and dispossessed of both city and country. He went on a national tour and saw the Hoovervilles with his own eyes, walking away from the trip afraid that CWA and other programs were exacerbating the working class's plight.⁴¹¹ Thomas rejected FDR's ideas about what was congenial to the American people, a reductive designation that both men knew referred to down-and-out middle-class people clinging to notions of dignity. Thomas pointed out that no-strings-attached relief payments would be more efficient.⁴¹² As for the WPA, even as staunch a conservative and craft unionist as the AFL's President William Greene criticized the jobs program for paying workers sub-union wages and providing bosses with a pretext for cutting wages at a time when inflation was undercutting workers' purchasing power.⁴¹³ In his increasing suspicion toward the first new deal, the Socialist Party leader fretted that the federal government was taking on a fascist character. When Hugh Johnson, head of the NRA, "advised the AFL to renounce the right to strike"⁴¹⁴ Thomas compared the NRA with Italian fascist corporatism. Thomas was similarly critical of the New Deal's general encouragement of illegitimate – from the perspective of most blue-collar organizers – company unionism.⁴¹⁵ Though Norman Thomas recognized that the NRA's Section 7A with its statutory recognition of

⁴¹¹ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 164.

⁴¹² Norman Thomas to the editor of *Time Magazine*, February 5, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁴¹³ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, August 17, 1935.

⁴¹⁴ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, August 17, 1935.

⁴¹⁵ Norman Thomas, Article for the Labor Day edition of the *Alberta Labor News*, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 70.

labor's right to organize stimulated union growth for a time, he said, the "[NRA] is now a straight-jacket [to labor organization]." ⁴¹⁶

If the first New Deal's intention was to give blue-collar labor and sharecroppers a seat at the table of New Deal economic reform, then, in 1934, it was clear that the government had fallen short of this goal. Representation on government-assisted boards for central planning under programs like the NRA and the AAA went almost entirely to the bosses and well-to-do planters. Thomas wrote to Hugh Johnson to point out "the way in which minimum wages set by the [NRA] code tended to become a maximum." ⁴¹⁷

During Roosevelt's first term, Thomas was perpetually writing letters to bureaucrats like Johnson and Henry Wallace at the AAA, pleading with them to democratize their projects. If Thomas, with his elite connections and years of experience as an activist, found the New Deal maze of bureaus and administrations inaccessible, it proved Kafkaesque to the everyday workers and agricultural laborers who felt left out in the cold by President Roosevelt's recovery plans. For all of the lip service FDR paid to labor and the need to chasten capital, his first term marked a time of bitter strife between bosses and workers, occasionally violent struggles that the White House typically ignored. Thomas estimated that fifty-one people died in labor struggles in 1934 alone and thirty-five more in 1935. ⁴¹⁸

Norman Thomas dedicated himself to labor's camp during these years, braving threats to his person and liberty and giving up his time to operate on the front lines alongside strikers. Any disaffected labor organizer, disheartened by the impenetrable

⁴¹⁶ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, April 27, 1935.

⁴¹⁷ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 164.

⁴¹⁸ Norman Thomas, *Norman Thomas's Unpublished Autobiography*, 149.

layers of red tape insulating the New Deal czars from the riff raff, who wrote to Thomas for help found in him a friend in a high place. Thomas observed modestly, “It was small potatoes compared with what Gene Debs had done. I was not the ideal successor to him, nor was I the candidate of a Socialist’s dream.”⁴¹⁹ Thomas’s tenure as Socialist leader signified a departure from the heady days of earlier decades when a more one-to-one relationship between organized labor and the Socialists seemed within reach. Despite the New Deal’s maldistribution of recovery, organized labor thoroughly aligned with Roosevelt after the NIRA, and the Democrats shored up what few holdouts remained with the 1935 Wagner Act. Thomas nevertheless figured that the middle-class base of college-educated liberals he had previously courted was now lost to him, given Roosevelt’s claim to the progressive mantle.

Reeling from FDR’s shakeup of American politics, Thomas pivoted left, seeking to make the Socialists a proletarian party in makeup as well as in sympathy. He used his networking and organizational experience to conduct food drives and raise relief funds for strikers as he did in the case of a Philadelphian transportation strike in the winter of 1934.⁴²⁰ Despite Thomas’s disclaimer that Debs’s shoes were too large to fill, Thomas followed in Debs’s footsteps and in the spirit of the IWW and the Knights of Labor by championing the cause of industrial unionism against what he saw as the pompous labor aristocrats at the AFL.⁴²¹ When eight independent shoe unions united to bolster their bargaining power, Thomas cautioned against seeking AFL affiliation, saying that President Greene’s outfit had devolved into “a strike-breaking bunch controlled by a

⁴¹⁹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 106.

⁴²⁰ American Federation of Full-Fashioned Hosiery Workers General President to Norman Thomas, December 26, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁴²¹ Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism* (New York: The Viking Press, 1957), 14.

bureaucracy which over and over has worked hand in glove with the bosses.”⁴²² Thomas often lent his celebrity and leadership ability to discreet labor struggles, operating as a kind of one-man expeditionary force by showing up in person to strikes when he thought he could lend a hand. Often Thomas’s interventions centered around civil liberties as Thomas leveraged his connections with the fledgling ACLU to reign in reactionary government crackdowns against workers. In 1926, Thomas got himself arrested in response to a New Jersey sheriff’s anti-union interdiction on public gatherings. Thomas delivered an address before a detachment of professional strike-breakers with sawed-off shotguns before police escorted him to jail.⁴²³ For Thomas, the most jarring case of government repression during Roosevelt’s first term was Indiana Governor Paul McNutt’s autocratic attempt to crush a strike at an enameled cooking-utensil factory in Terre Haute, Indiana, the late Eugene Debs’s hometown.⁴²⁴ McNutt declared martial law to prevent the strikers from demonstrating. Thomas deliberately flouted the order, attempting to provoke law enforcement, so his ACLU allies could sue. McNutt offered provisional authorization of Thomas’s meeting to avoid having to arrest the distinguished Socialist, so galling Thomas in the process that he dubbed the Indiana governor a fascist.⁴²⁵

Thomas fielded pleas for help from common laborers chafing under the corporate-friendly NRA and planter-friendly AAA. President Roy Lane of the Cumberland

⁴²² Norman Thomas to the labor editor of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, December 27, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁴²³ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 104.

⁴²⁴ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 140.

⁴²⁵ Norman Thomas, “At the Front,” *Socialist Call*, September 7, 1935.

Mountain Workers League located in Monteagle, Tennessee, copied his letter to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins to Thomas. Lane wrote:

Workers here in the mountains of Tennessee are beginning to feel that the Labor Department and the NRA are making a joke of our efforts to get an increase in our present wage scale of from 60 to 85 cents for 10 hours of work. In some instances both the father and mother are forced to cut wood to keep the children from starving.⁴²⁶

The Tennessee workers' helplessness in the face of their bosses' refusal to pay wages in line with the NRA codes demonstrated the codes' lack of enforcement and labor's lack of representation in the corridors of power. The Cumberland Mountain Workers League occupies an outsized position in the annals of labor history as it was an offshoot of the fledgling Highlander Folk School of Monteagle, Tennessee.⁴²⁷ Envisioned as a training facility for labor organizers, the School became well-known too for its graduates', including such civil rights icons as Rosa Parks's, involvement in the Civil Rights Movement.⁴²⁸ Thomas advocated on the woodcutters' behalf, writing to Secretary Perkins to say that the "Monteagle School" had generated "a great increase in doubt about NRA and AAA and how they work together."⁴²⁹ By late 1934, Thomas was just as disillusioned with the Administration's agricultural policy as with its industrial prerogatives.

Of all Norman Thomas's accomplishments throughout his long career, the one he likely would have been most content to hang his hat on was his advocacy on behalf of the

⁴²⁶ Roy Lane to Norman Thomas, November 13, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁴²⁷ H. Glyn Thomas, "The Highlander Folk School: The Depression Years," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (December 1964): 360.

⁴²⁸ Matthew Wills, "The Destruction of a Civil Rights Center," *JSTOR Daily*, April 28, 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/the-destruction-of-a-civil-rights-center/>.

⁴²⁹ Norman Thomas to Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, November 16, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

sharecroppers in the face of an intransigently pro-planter Democratic Party. FDR's worst crime, in Thomas's eyes, was his unwillingness to alleviate this "intolerable serfdom."⁴³⁰ Since slavery's abolition and Reconstruction's failure to dislodge the plantocracy from its control of the South, the sharecropping system predominated in that region amid the former plantations in the fertile, cash-crop-producing areas.⁴³¹ Plantations consisted of hundreds to thousands of acres divided into twenty or thirty acre tracts operated by sharecroppers and tenant farmers, who payed rent to landowners or gave them a substantial portion of their crop.⁴³² Planters trapped sharecroppers into exploitative cycles of debt through a variety of exploitative and corrupt practices. Thomas estimated that there were 1,500,000 Southern sharecroppers in 1930.⁴³³ Seeking to organize sharecroppers to bargain for more desirable conditions, the Socialist Party-aligned Southern Tenant Farmers Union formed in Arkansas in the summer of 1934.⁴³⁴

Thomas became involved with the STFU early on, working closely with its leaders, H. L. Mitchell and J. R. Butler, and dispatching organizers to help midwife the union's initial development. Thomas made his first trip to the Arkansas Delta in 1934, and he was so moved by what he saw that he made annual pilgrimages to the region for years thereafter.⁴³⁵ Thomas's trips to Dixie were instrumental in bringing the AAA's disastrous effects to the nation's attention. In the spring of 1935, Charles McCoy, director of the Socialist local in Truman, Arkansas, wrote Clarence Senior to raise the alarm that

⁴³⁰ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's Unpublished Autobiography, 143.

⁴³¹ Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle*, 236.

⁴³² Norman Thomas, "The Plight of the Share-cropper" (New York: League for Industrial Democracy, 1936), 4.

⁴³³ Norman Thomas, "The Plight of the Share-cropper," 6.

⁴³⁴ Norman Thomas, "The Plight of the Share-cropper," 35.

⁴³⁵ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's Unpublished Autobiography, 144.

“landlords are casting their tenants on the highways.”⁴³⁶ The AAA policy of subsidizing decreases in crop output led planters to evict their tenants from their homes while keeping the subsidies for themselves.⁴³⁷ One of these displaced sharecroppers wrote to Thomas:

I have not got any work and no where to put my things I have got my house hold sitting in a wood shed and the rain is ruining everything I have got I thought I would write you and see if you help me get a tent or some place to take my wife and things [sic].⁴³⁸

Thomas petitioned AAA head Henry Wallace – whom Huey Long called “the honorable lord destroyer”⁴³⁹ – saying, “Has the Administration any plans...other than pious hopes?”⁴⁴⁰ Wallace’s obstinate refusal to acknowledge the sharecroppers’ crisis throughout the Depression years ranked among Thomas’s chief points of contention with the Administration. Wallace refused to see Thomas during the latter’s repeated trips to D.C., always pleading business and shuffling off Thomas to one of his deputies.⁴⁴¹ Thomas did, however, secure an audience with the President. When Thomas informed Roosevelt about the AAA’s lack of protections for the sharecroppers, FDR did not deny the truth but told the Socialist leader, “Norman, I’m a damn sight better politician than you.” Roosevelt explained that he could not risk alienating Southern Congressional leaders such as the Senate Majority leader from Arkansas Joe Robinson.⁴⁴²

Thomas kept up his pressure campaign against the Administration and repeated his visits to the Arkansas Delta. These visits were formative moments in Thomas’s career, standing out in his mind years later as some of his most vivid recollections.

⁴³⁶ Charles McCoy to Clarence Senior, March 12, 1935, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁴³⁷ Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 419.

⁴³⁸ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 160.

⁴³⁹ Williams, Huey Long, 813.

⁴⁴⁰ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 159.

⁴⁴¹ Thomas, Oral History Project, 94.

⁴⁴² Thomas, Oral History Project, 100.

Thomas said, “One of the most picturesque moments in his life” was huddling in an abandoned warehouse with an interracial group of sharecroppers on the outskirts of Marked Tree, Arkansas, banded together for protection from the planters’ patrols who threatened them with violence. A black preacher who was there led the group in a rendition of “We Shall Not Be Moved,” singing “The Union is our leader / We shall not be moved / The union is our leader / We shall not be moved / Like a tree / Planted by the water / We shall not be moved.”⁴⁴³ On another occasion, Thomas travelled to Bird Song, Arkansas, to give an address to a group of sharecroppers outside of a black church. An armed mob of white men arrived and drove Thomas and his comrades out of the town at gunpoint.⁴⁴⁴ Referring to Thomas’s national radio broadcasts on the sharecroppers’ behalf, one of the mob members said, “We aren’t afraid of any God damned nigger loving yankee even if he did speak over the radio.”⁴⁴⁵ Thomas’s star power may have stayed the white mob’s hand from attacking his person, but STFU leadership on the ground was not always so fortunate. J. R. Butler reported that sheriffs were jailing black and white union organizers alike.⁴⁴⁶ Just weeks before Thomas’s visit to Birdsong, outraged Southerners assaulted Lucien Koch of Commonwealth College and Bob Reed of the Young Communist League outside a black church for teaching an interracial audience how to resist evictions.⁴⁴⁷ In 1936 – shortly after President Roosevelt ignored the sharecropper issue on a trip to Arkansas and praised “Greasy Joe” Robinson – white

⁴⁴³ Thomas, Oral History Project, 97.

⁴⁴⁴ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 145.

⁴⁴⁵ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 145.

⁴⁴⁶ Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 421.

⁴⁴⁷ Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 425.

terrorists murdered a black organizer named Frank Weems and flogged a young activist, a white woman from a prominent Memphis family.⁴⁴⁸

Given this level of opposition and constant violence, the STFU achieved remarkable success. In the fall of 1935, thousands of STFU members participated in a strike, undermining the planters' bottom line in the middle of the harvest season. They asked for \$1 per one hundred pounds of cotton picked rather than the fifty or sixty cents which was their current wage. STFU won a wage increase to seventy-five cents.⁴⁴⁹ The STFU affiliated with the Congress of Industrial Organizations which boasted over 30,000 members spread out over three hundred twenty-eight locals.⁴⁵⁰ More than any immediate concessions achieved on the picket line, however, it was the STFU's moral stand on behalf of the U.S.'s most downtrodden class – amplified by the Socialist Party bullhorn – that forced the New Dealers to reevaluate their Faustian bargain with the Bourbon Democrats. The Roosevelt Administration signed into law the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act, appropriating tens of millions of dollars toward subsidies for tenant farmers to purchase their farms.⁴⁵¹ The federal government conceded improved wages for agricultural laborers in the AAA code and established the Farm Security Administration in response to Socialist agitation.⁴⁵² These belated policy achievements were relatively insignificant compared with the totality of the New Deal, and they did not solve the plight of the sharecroppers. Nevertheless, they provided indexes of the Socialist Party's ability to punch above its weight. When Huey Long, with his millions of followers and track

⁴⁴⁸ Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 427.

⁴⁴⁹ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, October 19, 1935.

⁴⁵⁰ Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 429.

⁴⁵¹ M.S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933-1937," *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (1965): 244, <https://doi.org/10.2307/40023962>.

⁴⁵² Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 431.

record of blockbuster radio performances, railed against the New Deal, Roosevelt took his entire Administration in a new direction. When Norman Thomas – with his large following in FDR’s home state of New York but paltry appeal nationwide – petitioned the White House, the Administration took years to respond and did so begrudgingly. The STFU declined after 1938 due to its membership’s continuing dislocation, eventually relocating to California where it organized agricultural labor alongside a young Chicano activist named Cesar Chavez.⁴⁵³

The Socialist-aligned STFU provided a model for cooperation between Communists and Socialists through its work with the Communist Alabama Sharecroppers Union.⁴⁵⁴ The Arkansas sharecroppers chose to work with the Communists at a time when relations between the Marxist political parties were fraught. In reductive terms, the Bolshevik Revolution had drawn the battle lines between democratic socialists who sought to abolish capitalism through legal means and the communists who thought the legislative avenue was a dead end. Providing a flavor of communist sentiment between World War I’s end and the Nazi takeover of Germany, Leon Trotsky said, “Norman Thomas called himself a Socialist ‘as a result of a misunderstanding.’”⁴⁵⁵ In a similar vein, the Third International “had declared war upon the whole bourgeois world and all yellow social democratic parties” in 1919.⁴⁵⁶ Communists changed their tone when the Soviets decided in 1935 that a united front with the liberals and socialists was necessary to vanquish the fascist menace.⁴⁵⁷ American Communists transitioned from heaping scorn

⁴⁵³ Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 430.

⁴⁵⁴ Green, *Grassroots Socialism*, 426.

⁴⁵⁵ Duram, *Norman Thomas*, 28.

⁴⁵⁶ Seidler, *Respectable Rebel*, 55.

⁴⁵⁷ Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 359.

on Thomas to attempting to seduce the Socialist Party into an alliance.⁴⁵⁸ The Communists – eventually helped along by the US’s alliance with the USSR during World War II – attempted to rehabilitate their image, making themselves palatable to everyday Americans. In a sense, then, the Communist strategy in the late 1930s became reminiscent of Norman Thomas’s middle-class strategy for the Socialists during the late 1920s. A particularly preposterous example of the Communist tonal shift came from the Party’s New Orleans local, which paid homage to Sinclair Lewis’s anti-Huey Long novel *It Can’t Happen Here* in a circular under the same name. The red New Orleanians, citing the examples George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, called for the Crescent City’s bourgeoisie to unite with the Communists against Kingfish-style fascism.⁴⁵⁹

Under Thomas’s direction, the Socialist Party resisted calls for this united front. Due to past Communist Machiavellianism, the Socialists were not willing to give the Communists the benefit of the doubt that they were negotiating in good faith. Half a year after Thomas’s debate with Huey Long, Thomas debated the Communist leader Earl Browder – a former Socialist who had served a sentence at Leavenworth for opposing World War I and had been the American Communist leader since 1929.⁴⁶⁰ Browder proposed an alliance while Thomas needled his opponent for his Party’s deference to the USSR and the lack of civil rights and liberties there.⁴⁶¹ Thomas insisted that as a result of the Communists’ “extreme opportunism” any alliance “will break like a rope of sand.”⁴⁶² He was correct that the Communists’ offer to cooperate was disingenuous. The

⁴⁵⁸ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 175.

⁴⁵⁹ Communist Party of America New Orleans, “It Can Happen Here,” Tulane Special Collections, William J. Wisdom Collection on Huey Long, Box 2.

⁴⁶⁰ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 190.

⁴⁶¹ Norman Thomas, “At the Front,” *Socialist Call*, October 5, 1935.

⁴⁶² Norman Thomas, “At the Front,” *Socialist Call*, August 10, 1935.

Communists' willingness to countenance underhanded means so long as they were in service of the grand goal of proletarian rule extended to their relations with rival parties and organized labor. The Communists, following a policy of united front from below, attempted to undermine allied organizations by going over the heads of their leaders and directly evangelizing to the rank-and-file membership.⁴⁶³ An extreme example of these Trojan Horse tactics came not from the American Communist Party but from their communist rivals, the Trotskyists. Thomas admitted a contingent of Trotskyists into the Socialist Party as individuals in 1936. The communist internationalists joined the party under false pretenses hiding their ultimate plan to "withdraw to form a new, truly revolutionary Leninist party."⁴⁶⁴ The Trotskyist debacle exacerbated the Socialist Party's decline that had been underway since the Roosevelt Administration's first hundred days.

Thomas's handling of Socialist-Communist relations and their implications for intra-Socialist Party factionalism provided the most fertile source for critics of his tenure over the Party. Thomas's occasionally contradictory stance on these issues weakened the Party internally and helped to facilitate the Communist Party's eclipsing the Socialists during the 1930s. By 1933, the Communists boasted 30,000 members.⁴⁶⁵ The Socialists, in turn, had 18,548 in 1933, a number that would become even paltrier in 1935.⁴⁶⁶ The Communists' overtaking the Socialists was, in part, a consequence on Thomas's emphasis on building up a bourgeois Socialist base beginning the late 1920s. Thomas focused on proselytizing to college students, a demographic chiefly interested in Marxism

⁴⁶³ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 198.

⁴⁶⁴ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 208.

⁴⁶⁵ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 197.

⁴⁶⁶ Socialist Party National Executive Committee Memo #6, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 55.

for reasons of emotional, not economic, gratification. The simultaneous rise of a progressive Democratic president and pretentiously revolutionary American Communist Party hemmed in the Socialists from both right and left and sapped them of an electoral lane. As the novelist John Dos Passos – who counted himself a Communist in the 1930s and penned yet another anti-Huey Long novel called *Number One* – commented that, during the Depression, “becoming a Socialist was like drinking near-beer.”⁴⁶⁷

The Socialist Party’s loss of uniqueness did not cause it to hemorrhage members immediately. The Party’s diminishing prospects spawned factions that vied for control, each claiming that their formula held the key to revival. The Socialists broke down between the Thomasite Militants, college-educated recent converts who favored cooperation with the Communists, and the Old Guard, anticommunist Party veterans. The various exponents of the left throughout American history have shared few greater common denominators than internecine squabbling; a leftist organization in the U.S. has not really been leftist before it enjoyed a bitter schism or two. The tendency toward histrionic in-fighting over doctrinaire disagreements, which typically came across as esoteric – if not inscrutable – in retrospect, typified the American left’s impotence. The Socialist Party’s Thomas-era factionalism indexed its sectarianism, its retreat into abstraction in the face of a demoralizing irrelevance imposed on it by events.

The crux of the split playing out along generational and class lines centered around the nature of the Party’s relationship with the Communists and, hence, the age-old question of whether or not an authoritarian state was a necessary precursor to a Marxist society. Democratic socialists the world over were becomingly increasingly cynical on

⁴⁶⁷ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 56.

this issue during the 1930s thanks to fascist gains in Europe.⁴⁶⁸ The Fourth International, or Socialist Internationalist Conference – a body affiliated with the Socialist Party of America – met in Paris in October 1933 to declare that socialists “must utilize power in order to destroy the bourgeois state and install the dictatorship of the revolutionary party.”⁴⁶⁹ Thomas expressed “disappointment” in the Fourth International’s position.⁴⁷⁰ Though Thomas, who had risen to the Party leadership as a reformist, right-wing Socialist, during Roosevelt’s first term, he occasionally rendered himself vulnerable to accusations of crypto-Leninism. However much Thomas protested that his faith in democracy remained unwavering, the Militant faction which he led with partisan rancor was increasingly willing to voice Communist-sounding rhetoric. Militant flirtation with revolutionary discourse climaxed at the Socialist Party Convention in May 1934 when the Party ratified a Statement of Principles espousing the sentiment that Socialists would no longer genuflect before “bogus democracy.”⁴⁷¹ Thomas understood the statement, which the Party approved with his support, as a perfunctory concession to the spirit of the times, a position to be taken seriously, albeit not literally. Thomas bowed to the youthful exuberance of his Militant protégés, who were not really revolutionaries, he thought, but merely intense.⁴⁷² The Militants’ detractors in the Party had no patience for Militant impetuosity, youthful or otherwise.

The Old Guard, consisting of an older generation of mostly immigrant Socialists who were centered around New York City and had less ethereal ties to the labor

⁴⁶⁸ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 161.

⁴⁶⁹ Paris International Socialist Conference, October 28, 1933, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁴⁷⁰ Norman Thomas to William M. Konikov, November 25, 1933, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁴⁷¹ Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas’s Unpublished Autobiography, 164.

⁴⁷² Thomas, Oral History Project, 72.

movement, were up in arms about the Statement.⁴⁷³ Committed anticommunists by the New Deal era, they were baffled as to why the Militants would choose Roosevelt's first term – a time when the forces behind social democracy seemed, at long last, to awake from their lethargy – to give up on democracy. The Old Guard-affiliated Socialist Party of Oregon left the Party over the Declaration, taking their way out the door as an opportunity to snipe at the “sky pilots [i.e. priests], lawyers and college-kids, who gained their knowledge of the working class while they lounged in easy-chairs.”⁴⁷⁴ The protracted fallout from the 1934 Convention alongside further skirmishes between the factions culminated in a formal schism, resulting in the loss of approximately half of the Party's membership in addition to critical components of its infrastructure.⁴⁷⁵ The Socialist Party never recovered from this loss. The erstwhile Old Guard formulated, with the assistance of a delighted Franklin Roosevelt, the American Labor Party, which worked toward the President's reelection effort in 1936.⁴⁷⁶

Thomas's presiding over the Old Guard's exodus from the Party ranked among the significant blunders of his career. Thomas obfuscated the significance of the schism, arguing that it was insignificant weighed against the flatlining effect that the New Deal's success had on the American left. This defense, however, was surreptitious, a line that Thomas came up with years later after he had embraced the sea change which FDR's first term represented for the U.S. body politic.⁴⁷⁷ Decades later, Thomas looked back on the 1930s and said that at the crossroads of dictatorship and freedom Americans chose the

⁴⁷³ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 128.

⁴⁷⁴ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 174.

⁴⁷⁵ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 195.

⁴⁷⁶ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 212.

⁴⁷⁷ Norman Thomas, *Norman Thomas's Unpublished Autobiography*, 157.

latter by electing FDR in 1932. This timeline was revisionist on Thomas's part, at least as regarded his raising the alarm about democracy's peril.⁴⁷⁸ Throughout the remainder of his life, Thomas pinned the Socialist Party's demise on one source: Franklin Roosevelt.⁴⁷⁹

During the 1930s, Thomas thought that the threat fascism posed to democracy similarly amounted to one man: Huey Long. As much as the well-heeled Militants' performance of underground Marxism reflected their moonlighting approach to radicalism, it also represented psychological preparation for the contingency of a fascist takeover. The American socialists were horrified at the pitiful performance of European social democrats, as evidenced by the ease with which fascists were able to liquidate their organizations. As one ultra-Militant division explained, "this [Socialist Party] division was a reaction to the tragic German and Austrian events."⁴⁸⁰ If Huey Long meant to subordinate the nation to fascist derangement – as Thomas and his followers were absolutely convinced he was – then the Kingfish would have to pry the levers of power from Norman Thomas and company.

Thomas's rivalry with Long formed the backdrop of his semi-successful advocacy on behalf of the sharecroppers and industrial laborers. The Socialist leader perceived that the Depression had brought the U.S. to a fork in the road. Pressure against the system was mounting as the millions of people who had lost their stake in it casted about for alternatives. In the absence of robust Marxist political parties, many of them settled on

⁴⁷⁸ Norman Thomas, "The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas," FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer..

⁴⁷⁹ Norman Thomas, *Norman Thomas's Unpublished Autobiography*, 157.

⁴⁸⁰ Statement of the Revolutionary Policy Publishing Association, January 28, 1936, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 55.

Huey Long and his Share Our Wealth societies as a potential source of change. Thomas exerted pressure on the President, urging him to aid the millions of dispossessed Americans before privation had them eating out of the Kingfish's hands. The impetus for Thomas's critiquing the New Deal, then, was his fear of a Longist takeover. Thomas's lobbying the President resulted in the only concessions the Roosevelt Administration ever made to the non-landowning agricultural labor force.

Chapter Seven: Long vs. Thomas, the Distributist and the Collectivist

Between 1934, Long's announcement of his Share Our Wealth clubs, and 1935, with Long's assassination, the Kingfish and Thomas were at loggerheads. Thomas believed that Long was secretly planning a fascist takeover of the country. He consequently dedicated a substantial portion of his energy to denouncing Long. He wrote articles in the press denouncing the Kingfish, challenged Long to debates, and planned to tour Louisiana to bring his case against Long directly to Louisianans. Thomas was a minor figure compared with Long, who few people doubted had the potential to contend for the presidency. Nevertheless, Long deigned to spar with Thomas for two reasons. One, Thomas's elite connections and recognized ability made him a more prominent figure than the Socialist Party's paltry membership strictly justified. Long, a naturally combative politician who thrived on controversy, was not likely to ignore altogether heated and repeated attacks from a man of Thomas's prominence. Two, Long predicated his pitch to the American people on the idea that Marxists were waiting in the wings to take over the country following President Roosevelt's failure to end the Depression. The dishonesty of this claim undermined Long's position vis-à-vis the Roosevelt Administration. It suited Long, then, to pretend that the Socialists were more powerful than they actually were.

By early 1934 – after Huey Long's Share Our Wealth societies, buoyed by his sensational NBC broadcasts, catapulted him into the national limelight – the Kingfish had become Norman Thomas's *bête noire*. The Socialist Party's Militant caucus latched onto Long as the sum of their fears, a manifest justification for their hand-wringing about

democracy's peril and the need for a redoubtable left. Socialist Party mouthpieces often expressed this rationale explicitly between 1934 and 1935. The *Socialist Call* said that the exigent threat Huey Long posed necessitated a united front though Norman Thomas was ever careful to hold the Communists at arm's length.⁴⁸¹

The national mood's bordering on despondency in 1934 formed the backdrop against which the drama between Thomas and Long unfolded. Walter Lippmann's quip about Pollyanna and Cassandra captured the left-of-center doubt that President Roosevelt was fresh out of tricks up his sleeve to reverse persistent unemployment and cajole a freshly independent-minded Congress back in line. Norman Thomas's initial enthusiasm for the first New Deal had waned due to his close working relationship with the sharecroppers and industrial labor. Thomas was convinced that American capitalism was locked in a death spiral that week-kneed, Roosevelt-style liberalism was ill-equipped to remedy. Following the thoroughgoing settler colonization of the North American continent from coast to coast and 1929 Stock Market Crash, the speculative ventures of the barons of American finance capital liquidated the yeomanry and petit bourgeoisie. From Thomas's point of view, these forces expedited the pauperization of the nation's erstwhile middle class. The Socialist Party leader toured the South and Midwest in early 1934 and saw the extant Hooverilles on the outskirts of cities and the evicted sharecropper families sleeping under the sky on the side of country roads. Thomas did not believe these masses of desperate people would give up their claim to a stake in American prosperity absent a struggle. He said, "Out of this set-up someone will come

⁴⁸¹ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, July 15, 1935.

along and put the pieces together and there will be a big Fascist movement in this country."⁴⁸²

Thomas's tour and the conclusions he drew from it placed the Kingfish in the Socialist Party leader's crosshairs. Under the auspices of the Socialist Party press organ, the *Socialist Call*, Thomas and the Socialist Party issued a debate challenge to Long, which the latter accepted.⁴⁸³ It would not be the last time the upstart Socialists would attempt to punch upwards at the influential Long. The text of the Socialists' second debate challenge to Long issued in the Summer of 1935 hinted at how the tone of the first challenge must have come across. The 1935 challenge said:

We can sure promise you a real humdinger debate next month with someone who differs fundamentally with everything you stand for. You can debate – if you dare – with Norman Thomas . . . who doesn't believe in patching up an old system to share scarcity, but in building a new one to share plenty.⁴⁸⁴

The contest between Thomas and Long took place at Mecca Temple, located on 55th Street, between Sixth and Seventh avenues on March 2, 1934.⁴⁸⁵ Political debates during the Thomas-era Socialist Party were a means for the Party to raise funds and draw media attention. Thomas's debate with Huey Long preceded separate debates he would stage with Earl Browder and Upton Sinclair the next year.⁴⁸⁶ The *Socialist Call* sold tickets for these contests. The cost of admission to the Long-Thomas debate likely ranged from fifty-five cents to \$1.65.⁴⁸⁷ Considering the crowd of 2,500 that gathered to hear the great

⁴⁸² Norman Thomas, "Thomas Warns on CWA," *New York Times*, March 2, 1934, 3.

⁴⁸³ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 164.

⁴⁸⁴ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, August 10, 1935.

⁴⁸⁵ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, March 2, 1934.

⁴⁸⁶ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, October 26, 1935.

⁴⁸⁷ "Thomas to Debate Huey Long," *New York Times*, February 11, 1934, 37.

men go tit-for-tat, the perpetually strapped-for-cash Socialists raised, at least, the better part of \$1,000 from the night with \$500 going to Huey Long.⁴⁸⁸

If a complete transcript of the debate ever existed, it is lost to history. However, many of the major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, dispatched reporters to cover the event. These reporters peppered their articles with choice quotations from the two men's speeches and descriptions of the audience's reception. These articles form a general impression of the debate; one can infer the specifics from remarks Thomas and Long made elsewhere. Thomas could be long-winded on the subject of fascism generally and Huey Long specifically. For Long's part, the Marxist parties were a specter he was frequently quick to invoke as an impetus for Share Our Wealth. Huey Long scholars have generally overlooked the significance of Long's debate with Thomas, failing to mine it as a source of information for the Kingfish's views on Marxism. Long's words on March 2 marked a rare occasion wherein he held forth on Marxism at length rather than merely employing it as a buzzword.

The substance of the debate centered on the question of whether or not "capitalism is doomed and cannot now be saved by a redistribution of wealth."⁴⁸⁹ Thomas took on the affirmative position, arguing that nothing less than the wholesale interdiction of for-profit production in favor of for-use production and distribution could solve the US's economic woes. A President Thomas would have taken the New Deal's industrial boards under NIRA and taken them leaps and bounds further. In the cooperative commonwealth, organized laborers and consumers would hold sway on the boards in contrast to the NRA boards, which titans of industry dominated. New Deal

⁴⁸⁸ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 164.

⁴⁸⁹ "Long and Thomas Argue Capitalism," *New York Times*, March 3, 1934, 7.

historian Eric Rauchway estimates that less than ten percent of NRA boards had a labor representative while even fewer gave a voice to consumers.⁴⁹⁰ Rather than establishing standards for private companies to follow, a Socialist government would do away with the private companies altogether, allowing the public sector to step in and see to it that the production of such critical resources as oil, coal, and iron redounded to the public good and not merely the bottom line of a handful of oligarchic families.⁴⁹¹ These remarks were in line with Thomas's general condemnation of the New Deal and NRA, in particular, for not being sufficiently cohesive. Thomas thought that NIRA evidenced the shortcomings of FDR's pragmatism, shortchanging the American people by offering them disorganized, industry-by-industry coordination instead of across-the-board planning.⁴⁹²

Long, for the most part, declined to substantively engage with Thomas's arguments. He offered a few, halfhearted arguments against socialism. Under socialism, Long said, the government would force people to give up their individual possessions, including their underwear. Long further explained that socialism is undesirable because absent the profit motive, people would lose their incentive to work hard if they did not think they could purchase their own underpants.⁴⁹³ The Huey Long who mounted the stage on March 2 was not so much Huey Long, the dignified statesman who had been conscientiously attempting to project presidential airs since 1933, but the Louisiana Kingfish, his old knee-slapping, Dixieland stage presence. W. A. Swanberg says of the

⁴⁹⁰ Rauchway, *The New Deal and the Great Depression*, 83.

⁴⁹¹ "Long and Thomas Argue Capitalism," *New York Times*, March 3, 1934, 7.

⁴⁹² Norman Thomas, "A Socialist Look at the New Deal 1933-1934," Tulane University Special Collections, Tulane University Rare Books Collection.

⁴⁹³ Long and Thomas Argue Capitalism," *New York Times*, March 3, 1934, 7.

debate that a “puckish” Huey Long held forth “histrionically if not logically.”⁴⁹⁴ T. Harry Williams writes that “he affected a southern rustic pose.”⁴⁹⁵ Thomas and Long, venturing from their radically divergent epistemologies, failed to identify common ground. Long answered Thomas’s dry syllogisms with “studied grammatical errors” and hickish Bible thumping. He claimed he didn’t understand Thomas, said he would write Thomas a letter once he figured out what the Socialist leader was talking about, and joked that debts should be “ipso facto remitted. Maybe you don’t know what I mean by ipso facto. Well, I don’t neither.”⁴⁹⁶ This remark, as well as others, prompted gales of laughter from the audience. Long made appeals to Christianity, saying that capitalism began with the animal husbandry of Cain and Abel.⁴⁹⁷ The pro-Thomas audience felt that he had won the debate though, as befitted Long’s greater popularity, autograph seekers approached him after the debate’s conclusion.⁴⁹⁸

Long’s decision to revert to his Louisianan parochialism before an audience of intellectually inclined New Yorkers and Socialists was a perplexing one tactically. Considering the Kingfish’s formidable political instincts, the most plausible conclusion one can draw from his clownish behavior is that he intentionally threw the debate to Thomas. Perhaps, he recognized that the urban audience was already in the tank for Thomas and opted to amuse them rather than make a vain attempt at convincing them. It is also possible that the historical record’s reliance on newspaper accounts has distorted the historiography surrounding the debate. The New York City media was nearly

⁴⁹⁴ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 164.

⁴⁹⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 695.

⁴⁹⁶ Williams, *Huey Long*, 695.

⁴⁹⁷ “Long and Thomas Argue Capitalism,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1934, 7.

⁴⁹⁸ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 164.

invariably hostile to Long, and it would not have been out of character for its reporters to mischaracterize Long by overemphasizing his provincial attributes to suit their condescending portrait of him as a Louisiana buffoon. The impression provided by a surviving eyewitness account of the debate from an audience member validates this hypothesis. Seward Collins was at Mecca Temple on March 2 and wrote a letter to Thomas afterwards outlining his takeaway. Collins wrote:

He [Long] has hold of two of the prime truths; that ownership of property is essential to liberty; and that it is ‘the rich’ who have done us out of liberty by gobbling up most of the property. I believe he also sees, in his floundering fashion, that it takes a more powerful executive than our system is likely to produce to break up and socialize (both!) the excessive holdings... The eventual course seems to me clear. Communism is dictatorship (a monarchy) with the collectivist state as its ultimate goal; Fascism is a dictatorship with the distributist state as its ultimate goal.⁴⁹⁹

Collins was certainly guilty of putting words in Long’s mouth as there is no evidence that Huey Long ever advocated for dictatorship at the level of public discourse.

Still, Collins’s perception of the debate revealed that a substantive debate had taken place. This perception suggests that more attention should be paid to the sections of the newspaper coverage that did not focus merely on style. Namely, *New York Times* reported that Long gave voice to his Share Our Wealth platform, advocating for limits on poverty, reduced work hours, social security, and benefits for veterans. Thomas retorted that these measures were merely “stop-gap.”⁵⁰⁰ This section of the *New York Times* coverage suggests a fairly anodyne exchange, summarizing the difference between a democratic socialist and New Deal liberal. Indeed, Huey Long, the national statesman, was substantively as much of a New Deal liberal as Norman Thomas was a democratic

⁴⁹⁹ Seward Collins to Norman Thomas, March 15, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁵⁰⁰ “Long and Thomas Argue Capitalism,” *New York Times*, March 3, 1934, 7.

socialist. The question, then, arises: What was the source of the accusation that Long was fascist? Thomas's correspondent Seward Collins, who was a fascist himself, simultaneously took Long at his word when he said he wanted to redistribute the wealth and assumed that Long was lying when he said he would accomplish this transfer of wealth via democratic means.

Norman Thomas, conversely, thought that the lip service Long paid to egalitarian politics was nothing but a pretense. Upon obtaining power, Thomas thought, the Kingfish would stop pretending to care about inequality and commence with the fascist project of overhauling American government on behalf of the economic status quo. Though Thomas was apparently too civil to call Huey Long a fascist to his face, the Socialist leader made no bones between the time of their debate and the Kingfish's assassination roughly a year and a half later about calling Huey Long a fascist at every opportunity. In a representative passage from Thomas's numerous volleys against Long, Thomas said that an American "dictator will be of the demagogue type and he will speak with the voice of Huey Long."⁵⁰¹

The March 1934 debate was a clarifying event for Thomas after which there was no room in his mind for doubting Huey Long's fascism. Evidence for Thomas's evolution comes from his correspondence with Father Charles Coughlin prior to March 2, 1934. In the months after his debate with Long, Thomas came to believe that Coughlin was sort of a Goebbels to Long's Hitler. By the spring of 1935, the Socialist Party leader was challenging both Long and Coughlin to debate him in one breath, denouncing the statesman and the polemicist alike as false "friends of the common man."⁵⁰² Thomas and

⁵⁰¹ "Thomas Predicts Dictatorship Here," *New York Times*, February 7, 1935, 5.

⁵⁰² Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, April 7, 1935.

Coughlin had corresponded sharing conciliatory, if not friendly, words on the very eve of Thomas's showdown with Long in March 1934. Thomas wrote to Coughlin upon the request of one of his constituents, saying he admired Coughlin insofar as the Catholic priest had advocated for "social ownership and production for use, not profit."⁵⁰³ Coughlin wrote Thomas to say, "Fascism endeavors to protect private ownership and control of money and credit. Herein I differ from the Fascist."⁵⁰⁴ After his debate with Long, Thomas walked away convinced of Long's fascism whereas before he had, at least, been prepared to consider the possibility that men like Long and Coughlin were sincere social democrats. W. A. Swanberg goes a long way toward explaining this evolution when he writes that their debate persuaded Thomas that Long was insincere.⁵⁰⁵ Insincerity, then, was a distinguishing attribute that Thomas attributed to the fascist.

Because this word *fascism* has suffered from as much equivocation and resulting definitional creep as any word in the American political lexicon, it is helpful to restore the word to its original meaning. The word *fascist* originated as a descriptor of a phenomenon affecting Western industrial nations after World War I, namely Mussolini's Italy, Nazi Germany, Francoist Spain, and Vichy France. Robert Paxton's book on the subject, the *Anatomy of Fascism*, argues that fascists rode anticapitalist sentiment to power. Fascist leaders railed against globalization and finance capital, arguing that these forces were antithetical to the nation-state, which they strongly identified with a particular ethnicity such as white, Aryan Germans in the case of the Nazis. While they railed against capitalism's role in eroding traditional values, they were stalwart defenders

⁵⁰³ Norman Thomas to Father Coughlin, March 1, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

⁵⁰⁴ Ross, *The Socialist Party of America*, 361.

⁵⁰⁵ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 164.

of social hierarchy and the for-profit system, merely proposing to reinvigorate an anemic capitalist order by providing it with a fresh *raison d'être* in the form of ethnic nationalism.⁵⁰⁶ Thomas's theory of fascism had much in common with Paxton's definition though Thomas's ideas veered more closely to the orthodox Marxist interpretation.

The Marxist view tended to emphasize fascism's continuity with liberal capitalism. Thus, Nazi Germany was not a repudiation of Weimar Germany but rather a more evolved iteration. Before developments such as the Spanish Civil War and other occurrences frightened the Communist International into circling the wagons around the gains of the Russian Revolution after the mid-to-late 1930s, it was easier to identify who the Communists did not think were fascists than who they thought were. According to the Communists, even democratic socialists such as Norman Thomas were fascists though the Communists abandoned this line of argument after the Spanish Civil War began.⁵⁰⁷ In general, Marxists viewed the fascist strongman as a Svengali figure. The fascist demagogue entered onto the scene during a time of economic decline that threatened the masses of the *petite-bourgeoisie* with economic privation. The fascist, who was secretly a puppet of behind-the-scenes, economic elites, dangled economic salvation in front of his frightened lower-middle-class constancies and utilized xenophobia and jingoism to appeal to them psychologically. Once in power, fascists betrayed the people who put them in power by entering into an open alliance with the economic elites, relying on

⁵⁰⁶ Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York, Random House, 2004), 216.

⁵⁰⁷ Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 153.

reactionary military units and doubling down on the psychological phase of fascism to keep the masses in line.⁵⁰⁸

Thomas's own views on fascism were almost entirely consistent with the Marxist line on fascism writ large. Fascism, he said in one of his speeches on the LID circuit, represents capitalism's final stage. It is revolt of the middle class "or of the lower middle class on the one hand against the rise of class-conscious workers, and on the other against the dominion of a plutocracy, or more particularly against the power of bankers, especially international bankers."⁵⁰⁹ Fascists, he said, implemented a form of state capitalism, a nationalization of resources and infrastructure intended to safeguard social and economic hierarchies from Marxist levelers. Fascists achieved success by aping anticapitalist, Marxist talking points. Once in power, fascists invariably failed to deliver economically while deploying "the head of a mystic nationalism" to "keep the people drunk."⁵¹⁰ In line with Thomas's identification of Long as the most powerful American fascist, the Socialist case against Longism essentially rested on two points: one, that Share Our Wealth was unworkable. Two, the Marxists argued that Long was manipulating the U.S.'s beleaguered lower middle class on behalf of economic elites who had given up on the hope that democracy could preserve their fiefdoms and saw a Longist dictatorship as being preferable to a Marxist takeover.

Thomas argued that Long's Share Our Wealth proposal was infeasible. In a 1935 anti-Long polemic titled *Forerunners of American Fascism*, Julian Messner offered an

⁵⁰⁸ Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 88.

⁵⁰⁹ Norman Thomas, Release of LID Speech on "The Nature of Fascism," New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 70.

⁵¹⁰ Norman Thomas, Release of LID Speech on "The Nature of Fascism," New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 70.

interpretation of Long's popularity that was largely consistent with Thomas's view. Messner said, "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."⁵¹¹ Long historian Alan Brinkley later echoed this criticism, citing a 1935 study purporting to show that if the government followed through on Long's capital levy, there was only enough liquid capital in private hands to support \$400 homesteads, not the \$5,000 ones Long envisioned.⁵¹²

In addition to the charge that Long's Share Our Wealth proposals amounted to panaceas, the Marxists thought that Long was in cahoots with economic elites. Among the most complete critiques of Long along Marxist lines came from the Communist writer Alex Bittelman who toured Louisiana during the 1930s and authored a pamphlet entitled "The Communist Way Versus Huey Long." In addition to echoing the critique of Long that Share Our Wealth had no provision for redistributing brick-and-mortar assets, Bittelman offered the most obvious line of attack against Long. The Kingfish possessed dictatorial control over Louisiana for years and never enacted his Share Our Wealth proposals in the Pelican State; therefore, he must have been insincere. Bittelman argued that Long did not care about the proletariat because he opposed union organization.⁵¹³ Richard White echoes this critique, writing that – as the man in charge of Louisiana – Long opposed a law giving labor the right to organize, opposed old-age pensions, minimum wages, and unemployment insurance, and he would not abolish child labor.⁵¹⁴

⁵¹¹ Norman Thomas, "A Socialist Look at the New Deal 1933-1934," Tulane University Special Collections, Tulane University Rare Books Collection.

⁵¹² Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 85.

⁵¹³ Alex Bittelman, "The Communist Way versus Huey Long," New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Box 13.

⁵¹⁴ White, *Kingfish*, location 4299.

In other words, he did not practice what he preached, in practice, opposing all the measures at the local level that, at the national level, he theoretically favored. Bittelman, finally, decried Long for his neo-Populist, myopic support for independent farmers at the expense of sharecroppers and agricultural wage workers.⁵¹⁵

Thomas agreed with Messner and Bittelman in their condemnations of Long. The final proviso of his anti-Longism was his disapproval of the authoritarian nature of Long's control over Louisiana. A *Socialist Call* political cartoon from the Summer of 1935 was typical of Socialist caricatures of the Kingfish. Titled the "Dictator of Louisiana," it showed Huey Long shaking a cocktail in celebration of his having gotten the vice-president of the Louisiana Federation of Labor fired for publicly opposing Long's regime.⁵¹⁶ For Thomas, Long's contempt for democratic niceties was irrefutable evidence of the insincerity of the progressive persona projected by Senator Long. Thomas did not have to read about Long's dictatorial methods in the papers either. He experienced a taste of Huey Long's Louisiana firsthand through his correspondence with the New Orleans Local of the Socialist Party. On a previous visit to New Orleans, Thomas had stayed at the home of Louise Jessen, secretary of the New Orleans Socialist Party local. Jessen, who ran for New Orleans City Council in 1934, faced imprisonment for distributing handbills that attacked power companies and local politicians.⁵¹⁷ Thomas attempted to intercede on her behalf, writing a letter of protest to the *Times-Picayune* against the move to imprison Jessen. Thomas later regretted writing this letter when he

⁵¹⁵ Alex Bittelman, "The Communist Way versus Huey Long," New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Box 13.

⁵¹⁶ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, August 3, 1935.

⁵¹⁷ Edward and Martha Johnson to Norman Thomas, March 29, 1934, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 2.

learned that it had endangered Louise's husband's Otto's job working for a barge line, a political patronage job in Louisiana.⁵¹⁸

While Long's authoritarianism was beyond doubt, whether or not he received clandestine support from economic elites was a murkier question. During a Congressional inquiry into Long machine corruption, Julius Long testified that Huey's 1924 gubernatorial campaign received the lion share of its funding from the Southwestern Gas and Electric Company.⁵¹⁹ Even more damning than the idea that Long, the public utility commissioner, was in league with local oil wealth, T. Harry Williams paints a very fascist-like portrait of the source of the Kingfish's funding for his prospective 1936 presidential campaign. Williams writes that the representatives of powerful businesses and banks donated as much as \$2,000,000 to Long. The representatives apparently made it clear that they were not strictly for Huey Long but hoped he would succeed in his ambition of spoiling President Roosevelt's re-election hopes by luring enough Democratic voters away to allow the Republicans to regain the White House.⁵²⁰

Against these charges that he was a stooge of the big bourgeoisie, a dictator, and a demagogue, Huey Long did not always have convincing rejoinders. Long was aware of the criticism that Share Our Wealth was overly focused on liquid assets though he never quite thought through this obstacle. On one occasion he said that wealth redistribution under his presidency could include hard assets as well as currency, yet this defense seemed to undermine the entire anti-Marxist impetus for Share Our Wealth.⁵²¹ Long

⁵¹⁸ Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 162.

⁵¹⁹ Raymond Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism* (New York: J. Messner, 1935), 105, Tulane Special Collections, Tulane Rare Book Collection.

⁵²⁰ Williams, *Huey Long*, 845.

⁵²¹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 695.

made it clear repeatedly that Share Our Wealth was a way of avoiding the kind of collectivization which Marxists proposed. “We are on our way to being the Soviet Government” unless the U.S. issues a capital levy, Long told the Senate.⁵²² Long ultimately threw up his hands on this issue, weakly saying, “I am going to have to call in some great minds to help me.”⁵²³ Long defended himself against the charge that he had not carried out the Share Our Wealth platform in Louisiana by saying that people would not accept social-welfare legislation in Louisiana. Long pointed to the fact that he had a perfect pro-labor voting record in the Senate and explained that there were only 8,500 people who belonged to organized labor in Louisiana.⁵²⁴

That Long’s rejoinders against the accusation of fascism were occasionally weak did not make the charge true. Furthermore, the Kingfish possessed a powerful argument in his verbal arsenal in that he displayed none of fascism’s psychological phase. The “mystic nationalism” which Thomas insisted distinguished the fascist was nowhere to be found in Huey Long. “There has never been a country that puts its heel down on the Jews that ever lived afterwards,” Long said.⁵²⁵ For his lack of bigotry by the standards of the day, Long often reacted with outrages when faced with Thomas-esque comparisons between himself and Hitler or Mussolini.⁵²⁶ Long, further, never displayed an ounce of militarism. Long’s rhetoric was at its most Socialist-sounding when he decried U.S.

⁵²² Senator Huey Long, February 27, 1933,, 73rd Congress, Congressional Record: 5101.

⁵²³ Williams, *Huey Long*, 695.

⁵²⁴ Williams, *Huey Long*, 857.

⁵²⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 761.

⁵²⁶ Haas, “Huey Long and the Dictators,” 151.

foreign policy. Long said, “The Spanish-American War and World War I were both ‘murderous frauds’ waged for the benefit of Wall Street.”⁵²⁷

The charge that Huey Long was a fascist depended on exoticized views of the Depression-era U.S. and Louisiana. The fact that Thomas clung to it dogmatically revealed a drawback of the otherwise forward-thinking Socialist emphasis on internationalism. American Marxists did not examine Long impartially and discern his fascism. The European phenomenon of fascism put them into a state of fear that caused them to cast about the U.S., panning the political waters for likely suspects. The idea that Long opposed the proletariat and dispossessed peasantry entirely depended on Long’s tenure in Louisiana as he had a sterling progressive record in the Senate. The critical Marxist view of Long’s Louisiana tenure depended on an ahistorical analysis of the state. It ignored the fact that Long had had an almost singularly modernizing and progressive impact on the state. If the Kingfish ruled as a dictator, his Bourbons predecessors possessed less respect for democracy than he did. To the extent that Long did not include labor or the rural poor in his reforms, this fact too was in line with the status quo ante. Long did as much or more for the sharecroppers and agricultural laborers than Roosevelt’s New Deal did. Long’s relative progressivism on social issues and isolationism were, finally, damning to the Marxist case against him.

Thomas clung to his anti-Longism for the duration of the Kingfish’s life and afterwards. Thomas even ratcheted up his opposition to Long. The Socialist Party announced in the summer of 1935 that Thomas would embark on a tour of Louisiana

⁵²⁷ Jerry P. Sanson, “‘What He Did and What He Promised to Do...’: Huey Long and the Horizons of Louisiana Politics,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 47, no. 3 (2006): 275.

complete with Long-style sound trucks. The idea was for the Socialists to take their case to everyday Louisianans in October 1935, going around the Pelican State “to denounce the demagoguery of Huey Long’s share-the-wealth program.”⁵²⁸ If Huey Long was phased by this announcement, his stoicism did not falter. Long said, “I understand Mr. Roosevelt was heading Mr. Thomas out this way. But we share-the-wealthers don’t have anything to do with Roosevelts and Thomases. Mr. Thomas won’t get three people to listen to him if he comes here.”⁵²⁹ Long’s association of FDR and Thomas was peculiar. The baseless charge may have been a homespun appeal to Southern anti-elitism. Thomas may have been a tribune of the dispossessed, but he was still an East Coast elite of the type who received favorable press coverage from prestigious media outlets and hobnobbed with the likes of Franklin Roosevelt. The Socialists were elated that Huey Long had deigned to respond to their scheme. The Party’s National Executive Committee issued a statement accusing Long of being nervous about Thomas’s tour and denying that Roosevelt had anything to do with it.⁵³⁰ The Socialists were presumptuous to suggest that their quixotic striking at the Kingfish’s power base could succeed where President Roosevelt had failed.

If the sound-truck tour had a shot at making a splash in Long’s home state, the Socialists never had the chance to test their hypothesis. The Socialists called off their Louisiana tour when Huey Long died a month before it would have begun.⁵³¹ Following Dr. Carl Weiss’s deadly attack against Long inside the marbled halls of the Louisiana State Capitol, Thomas wired Long while the latter was on his deathbed. “As a strong

⁵²⁸ “Plans to Tour Louisiana in Opposition to Longism,” *The Times-Picayune*, July 14, 1935, 16.

⁵²⁹ “Socialist Break Is Held Needless,” *Socialist Call*, July 14, 1935.

⁵³⁰ “Socialist Leaders Fix Peace Terms,” *New York Times*, July 15, 1935, 8.

⁵³¹ “Thomas’s Tour Is Called Off,” *Socialist Call*, September 21, 1935.

critic of your political policy and program I am especially anxious to send word of my hope of your prompt and speedy recovery.”⁵³² The first *Socialist Call* issue following the assassination featured an obituary by Thomas bemoaning the instance of political violence. At the same time, Thomas argued that Weiss’s desperate act proved that democracy had not existed in Louisiana. He observed that “the ablest and most colorful forerunner of American Fascism is dead.”⁵³³ The *Socialist Call*’s editors apparently did not share their Party leader’s civil unwillingness to dance on Long’s grave. Bizarrely, they chose the occasion of the Kingfish’s violent murder to publish a political cartoon satirizing him. The cartoon played on Long’s chubbiness to depict him as a kind of obese Napoleon. The equestrian Long’s imperious expression belies his disheveled hair and his protruding gut. His pants tucked into riding boots and with a sheathed sabre, he rides a donkey. The donkey’s ass includes an inscription saying, “Here’s the bloated Huey Long, writer of song and righter of wrong. Follow the horse, boys, share the wealth, and sing out the hooey with Huey himself.”⁵³⁴ Conceivably, the artist had drawn the cartoon before Weiss’s bullet claimed Long’s life, and the newspaper editors were not about to let a little thing like the assassination stop them from printing a well-made caricature.

If Thomas expected any political windfall from the premature death of the man he saw as one of his greatest rivals, he was disappointed. Thomas and the Socialists held onto their dream of a farmer-labor coalition capable of dislodging the two-party system through the 1936 election. In 1935, the Socialists helped form the Farmer-Labor Progressive Federation, hoping it would run as a farmer-labor party in 1936. It did not,

⁵³² September 13, 1935, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 56.

⁵³³ Norman Thomas, “At the Front,” *Socialist Call*, September 14, 1935.

⁵³⁴ Norman Thomas, “At the Front,” *Socialist Call*, September 14, 1935.

choosing to caucus instead with the LaFollette-led Progressive Party.⁵³⁵ The failure of this endeavor was disastrous for Thomas, who had believed for over a decade by 1935 that a successful farmer-labor party held the key to the Socialists' obtaining influence in the U.S.⁵³⁶ Long, for the appeal he held to farmers, in particular, had represented a substantial threat to the realization of this goal. Before Long's death, H. L. Mitchell had written to Thomas in 1935 about people who "used to be Socialists" forming a Share Our Wealth club in Blytheville, Arkansas.⁵³⁷ Thomas had feared that Long's national stature made hopes for a Socialist-led farmer-labor coalition dim. Huey Long's death in September 1935 came too late to improve the Socialist Party's rapidly diminishing prospects.

Ironically, it had not been Long's crypto-fascism that undermined the Socialists but his progressive influence on the Roosevelt Administration. Roosevelt's ratification of the Second New Deal cemented the Democratic Party's alliance with organized labor for a generation. FDR, who now had the former Old Guard faction of the Socialist Party in the form of the American Labor Party and the Communist Party essentially flocking to his banners,⁵³⁸ had the unions lined up in support for him after 1935.⁵³⁹ By 1936, Thomas recalled, "it was *lèse majesté*" to oppose Roosevelt as far as a majority of the American left and organized labor were concerned.

Norman Thomas and Huey Long, for all their opposition to one another, had been unified in many of their criticisms of Roosevelt and experienced success as far as pushing

⁵³⁵ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 216.

⁵³⁶ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, July 27, 1935.

⁵³⁷ Howe, *Socialism and America*, 67.

⁵³⁸ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 212.

Swanberg, *Norman Thomas*, 202.

⁵³⁹ Thomas, Oral History Project, 78.

the President to the left. Huey Long was instrumental in forcing the President to liberalize the New Deal's industrial policy. Norman Thomas did more than anyone else to force the Roosevelt Administration to pay attention to the sharecroppers. Huey Long and the Socialists hoped that, in opposing Roosevelt's conservatism, they would carve out influence for themselves and garner popularity in the eyes of the American people. Roosevelt outplayed them both. Rather than chafing against their criticisms, the President co-opted their proposals and made them his own. Huey Long and Norman Thomas both failed at their life's ambitions. Long never became president, and Thomas never succeeded at prompting a party-realignment through the supplanting of the Democrats with a socialistic labor party. To the extent that they both shaped Roosevelt's monumental first term, however, Thomas and Long both made the country more closely resemble their visions for it.

Conclusion

During the better part of the two years that elapsed between Huey Long's debate with Norman Thomas and his death, the sky seemed to be the limit to how high the Kingfish could rise. The years 1934 and 1935 were replete with successes for Long. In 1935, the most powerful holdout to Long machine rule over Louisiana, the New Orleans Old Regulars, bent the knee to the Kingfish.⁵⁴⁰ President Roosevelt, while far from submitting to Long, reconciled himself to the inconvenient likelihood that the Louisiana senator was not the flash in the pan that the President had hoped. FDR was sufficiently concerned about Senator Long's presidential aspirations that he substantially revised his legislative priorities to rob Long's critiques of their saliency. On June 19, 1935, Roosevelt advocated to Congress an overhaul of the existing tax structure to "prevent an unjust concentration of wealth and economic power."⁵⁴¹

Long did not have much time to process the news of either event. In early September, the de facto state leader returned to Baton Rouge from Washington to ram a fresh round of bills through his compliant legislature. Conceivably, underneath Long's layers of bravado, Roosevelt's partial co-optation of Share Our Wealth had unnerved the Kingfish, prompting him to tighten his grip over Louisiana to the point of rendering his opponents desperate. The bills that came out of the special session of the state legislature that Long had Governor Allen call shored up Longist control. Long rewarded the New

⁵⁴⁰ Williams, *Huey Long*, 847.

⁵⁴¹ Williams, *Huey Long*, 836.

Orleans bosses, offering financial aid to a New Orleans that had already paid a steep price for its leaders' independence streak. The Longist legislature had brought the city to the brink of insolvency the previous summer by depriving the city government of two thirds of its yearly income besides subjecting the city's police, fire, water, and sewage boards to oversight from Baton Rouge.⁵⁴²

The Kingfish was not content with bringing the state's great metropolis under heel. He directed the legislature to pass a measure gerrymandering the opposition leader Judge Benjamin Pavy, redrawing judicial district lines so that Pavy would likely lose reelection to his St. Landry Parish judgeship. Pavy had been a thorn in Long's side during the aftermath of the 1932 Senate contest between Broussard and Overton, denying the legitimacy of Longist dummy commissioners. Considering the degree of the Long machine's ascendancy over Louisiana, many observers interpreted the move as a vindictive, superfluous gesture. The Kingfish was zealously beating a dying horse. Long, a man with Southern patricians with life-and-death notions of honor for enemies, would have done well to show more respect. Pavy's son-in-law was a bespectacled ear, nose, and throat specialist named Dr. Carl Weiss who possessed a Manichean vision of politics and fancied himself a Brutus to the Kingfish's Caesar. Weiss gunned down Long inside the halls of the state capitol and received over thirty bullets from the senator's bodyguards. Both men died from their gunshot wounds. Norman Thomas did not go so far as to commend the sic semper tyrannis sentiment, but he did say that Weiss would not have resorted to assassination in a functioning democracy.⁵⁴³

⁵⁴² Williams, *Huey Long*, 852, 860.

⁵⁴³ Williams, *Huey Long*, 796, 861- 869

Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, September 14, 1935.

While many of the state's elites especially sympathized with Weiss's desperation, hundreds of thousands of Louisianans mourned their fallen leader. Between 150,000 and 200,000 people attended Long's funeral, the flowers they laid blotting out roughly 1,500,000 square feet of the capitol grounds.⁵⁴⁴ "He was the Stradivarius," Gerald L. K. Smith eulogized, "whose notes rose in competition with jealous drums, envious toms. His was the unfinished symphony."⁵⁴⁵ The tone of reverence for the Kingfish's memory at his funeral did not extend to the political realm. Long's successors squabbled over the remains of his empire though his political machine had considerable staying power within Louisiana. In the immediate years following his death, his lieutenants Richard Leche and Robert Maestri became Louisiana governor and New Orleans mayor respectively, and the Longist faction remained powerful in the state for decades.⁵⁴⁶

While the Pelican State absorbed the brunt of the impact of Huey Long's life, Long's work also shaped the nation as a whole. It is an irony Long himself likely would not have appreciated that he principally impacted U.S. history to the extent that he affected his nemesis Franklin Roosevelt. Long was a towering progressive figure, ranking highly among the people of his time who pushed the state to assume responsibility for individual economic prosperity. Assessing Huey Long's, the national figure's, legacy, the Kingfish helped to usher in the age of embedded liberalism, as scholars classify the several decades of liberal consensus that followed the New Deal.⁵⁴⁷

⁵⁴⁴ Raymond Daniell, *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 12, 1938, LSU Special Collections, Huey Long Papers, Box 43.

⁵⁴⁵ Gerald L. K. Smith, Funeral Oration, September 12, 1935, William Wisdom Collection, Tulane Special Collections, Box 10.

⁵⁴⁶ Raymond Daniell, *The Saturday Evening Post*, February 12, 1938, LSU Special Collections, Huey Long Papers, Box 43.

⁵⁴⁷ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 10.

A subset of orthodox Long scholars has construed the Kingfish as a progenitor to the popular right that emerged as a defining force in American politics during the 20th century's latter half. This historiographic tradition begins with some of the 20th century's leading intellectual figures including Richard Hofstadter and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.⁵⁴⁸ Though this view is largely out of vogue among professional historians, the theory of the historical continuity between Populists, neo-Populists, and popular conservatism retains currency among centrist political pundits and popular history writers. There is a certain kind of contemporary minoritarian intellectual that relishes quoting Schlesinger's *The Vital Center* or Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* to scoff at political leaders who gain prominence based on grassroots support rather than institutional backing. The election of Donald Trump, in particular, invited the theory's resurgence with the Trump White House years seeing frequent comparisons of Trump with the Kingfish in the popular media.⁵⁴⁹ The bestselling author Larry Tye, author of a recent Joe McCarthy biography, argues that Longism was a precursor to McCarthyism.⁵⁵⁰

The argument that figures such as Joe McCarthy and Donald Trump drew from the Long playbook is a largely baseless distortion of the historical record, stemming from a conflation of the statesman's form with his function. The popular right that emerged in the aftermath of the New Deal and eventually took over the Republican Party did draw from the cultural affect that Populists and neo-Populists including Huey Long deployed as a shibboleth to win over rural Americans. When Huey Long engaged in identity

⁵⁴⁸ Anton Jäger, "The Myth of 'Populism.'" Accessed November 15, 2021.

<https://jacobinmag.com/2018/01/populism-douglas-hofstadter-donald-trump-democracy>.

⁵⁴⁹ Joshua Zeitz, "Summer Reading for Democrats and Never Trumpers." *POLITICO*. Accessed November 15, 2021. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/07/10/democracy-slipping-hofstadter-schlesinger-498550>.

⁵⁵⁰ Larry Tye, "Books – Larry Tye." Accessed November 15, 2021. <https://larrytye.com/books/>.

politics, he emphasized Christianity, anti-intellectualism, and patriotism to signify his cultural similarity with supporters. Post-World War II popular conservatism came to rely on many of the same themes. However, the similarity largely ends there. Despite Huey Long's stylistic Populism, the record he left behind reveals a progressive statesman. For Americans who believed that an augmented, interventionist state was necessary to achieve egalitarian ends, the Roosevelt era represented a singular victory, and Long was instrumental in the progressives' achievement.

The political system Americans had before Roosevelt was distinctly less democratic than the one that replaced it. In the old system, the divide was not so much between rightists and leftists as between optimates and populares. The elites who governed the U.S. broke down between those politicians who garnered support by whipping up the masses and politicians who refused to condescend to the riff raff. After the introduction of wealth redistribution into the realm of political possibility through Roosevelt's New Deal, optimate-style politics gradually lost influence as the ensuing popular progressive-conservative division was an intra-populare struggle. In many ways, the intellectual backlash against Huey Long has represented a rear-guard optimate action, a bemoaning of the fact that American government became more responsive to the ordinary citizenry.

Though Norman Thomas was as hostile to Huey Long as any of the Kingfish's contemporaries, the Socialist Party leader would have viewed this urge to circle the wagons around an elitist, Hamiltonian vision of American government contemptuously. The source of Thomas's opposition to Long was not derision for mass politics qua mass politics. Thomas dedicated his life to advocating for the implementation of his vision of

bottom-up, class-based politics. As an inveterate social democrat, Thomas was no Leninist, believing that a vanguard, Marxist intelligentsia could impose an equitable division of resources on the country. Thomas and the Marxist political parties writ large opposed Long because they believed that his brand of mass politics served ulterior, reactionary motives. Marxism and fascism ostensibly shared a common enemy in the form of plutocratic decadence, Thomas believed. The Marxists sought to upend the status quo with proletarian-cum-peasant majoritarianism. Fascists were able to rival Marxists in terms of popular support because they appealed to a broad base of culturally conservative petite-bourgeois people who feared the political and economic enfranchisement of the working poor. Fascists assuaged affluent people's fears of losing their affluence by petrifying economic hierarchy. Their disingenuousness stemmed from their distributist claims, the promise that they would cut the plutocrats down to size for the middle class's benefit. The petrification of economic hierarchy worked both ways, foreclosing the possibility of upward as well as downward mobility.⁵⁵¹

Thomas's attempt to enter Huey Long into this Marxist equation of fascism misunderstood the Kingfish. The insistent American Marxist scouring of the U.S. for popular fascists where there were none represented an exotification of U.S. conditions. Huey Long exhibited fascist characteristics in that he sought to safeguard middle-class prosperity by subordinating the free market to a muscular state. However, by this definition of fascism based on observations of Mussolini's Italy, Franklin Roosevelt was a closer analogue to Il Duce than Huey Long. The logic of Thomas's economic analysis

⁵⁵¹ Norman Thomas, Release on LID Speech on the "Nature of Fascism," New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 70.

compelled the unsettling observation – which he occasionally arrived at but declined to dwell on – of the similarity between progressive and fascist economics.⁵⁵²

Both centered around pro-capitalist distributism intended to offset the negative externalities of capitalism, less runaway inequality should facilitate a Marxist takeover. “The economics of Fascism,” Norman Thomas said, “are quite similar to the economics of the New Deal, except that they are more openly authoritarian and less liberal.”⁵⁵³ Given Thomas’s beliefs about progressive reformism, it was not surprising that he applied the fascist moniker to Huey Long though his logic might just have easily have led him to make comparable allegations against the New Deal Democrats. Thomas confused Long, the progressive, with a fascist because of, one, his ignorance of Louisiana history, which led him to view the Kingfish’s authoritarianism as aberrative rather than banal. Two, Thomas mistook Long’s neo-Populist, Dixie demagogic style for evidence of a fascist psyche. This perception stemmed especially from Thomas’s debate with Long, an example of cultural miscommunication. Long’s Bible thumping and anti-intellectualism awakened an urbane snobbishness in Thomas, not dissimilar from the disdain for Long shared by the nation’s political establishment and press. Long is “thoroughly insincere,” Thomas wrote of Long.⁵⁵⁴

Despite the cultural disconnect that prevented Long and Thomas from finding common ground as contemporaries, in hindsight, it is clear that the men worked toward comparable goals. Broadly construed, this goal was “peaceful revolution.”⁵⁵⁵ In

⁵⁵² Norman Thomas, Release on LID Speech on the “Nature of Fascism,” New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 70.

⁵⁵³ Norman Thomas, Release on LID Speech on the “Nature of Fascism,” New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 70.

⁵⁵⁴ Unknown transcript, New York Public Library, Norman Thomas Papers, Reel 70.

⁵⁵⁵ Norman Thomas, “The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas,” FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer.

Thomas's formulation, democracy's preservation necessitated the end of the age of rugged free market individualism. In its place, under the state's auspices, society had to accept responsibility for individuals' economic well-being. Though Franklin Roosevelt did not go as far as either Huey Long or Thomas wanted, the New Deal accomplished precisely this goal, Thomas later admitted.⁵⁵⁶

It would take Thomas many years to admit that Franklin Roosevelt, a man Thomas had opposed during FDR's lifetime, brought the U.S. closer to that Socialist chimera, the cooperative commonwealth. Thomas and the Socialists went on opposing the Democrats into the 1936 election cycle. Because the Communists along with organized labor and the Midwestern farmer-laborites had fallen in line with Roosevelt, the Socialist Party's obstinacy drew considerable flak from fellow radicals.⁵⁵⁷ Thomas said, "We Socialists do praise steps in the right direction, but we want to be sure that the steps are in the right direction. We want to be sure that the good isn't the enemy of the best and that the good isn't the gold-brick type of good."⁵⁵⁸ Thomas's public-facing defense of the Party's continuing to run its own presidential candidate belied private doubts. As early as 1934, Thomas lobbied the Socialist National Executive Committee not to oppose Roosevelt in 1936. By 1935, however, he accepted the wisdom that his running against Roosevelt was necessary to foster Party organization. Thomas's showing in 1936, at 187,342 votes, was the Party's lowest vote total since the first year it had run in 1900.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁶ Norman Thomas, "The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas," FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer.

⁵⁵⁷ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 209.

⁵⁵⁸ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, July 6, 1935.

⁵⁵⁹ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 210, 211.

The pitiful showing in 1936 augured the years of decline ahead of the Party. The spirit of national unity that characterized the U.S.'s domestic front during World War II further undermined the party, especially considering Thomas's insistence on opposing U.S. involvement.⁵⁶⁰ Though Thomas remained at the Party's helm through the 1950s, it never reclaimed more than a modicum of the success it had known during the Debs and even Depression years. By 1950, Thomas advocated for the Party to stop running candidates and dedicate itself to research and educational efforts. At seventy years-old in 1955, he resigned from the Party though he remained involved with the ACLU and LID. The Socialist Party of America ran its last candidates a few years later.⁵⁶¹

Looking back on his career, Thomas spoke of the "strange mingling of disappointment and unusual happiness" he experienced.⁵⁶² Thomas was hard on himself, taking the Socialist Party's decline as an index of failure when he might have found other means of measuring his success. The flowering of the labor movement owed much to Thomas's efforts. The formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the labor congress that the STFU joined, provided, in its friendliness to industrial unionism, an avenue for former Marxist party members to become involved with the labor movement. People who had taken inspiration from Thomas's example during the Depression years became involved with the unions just as labor was becoming a powerful force in its own right. Between 1927 and 1939, union membership grew from 3,000,000, or 11.3 percent of the non-agricultural labor force, to 8,000,000, or 28.6 percent of the labor force.⁵⁶³ In the powerful United Auto Workers Union alone, the leadership drew largely from the

⁵⁶⁰ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 219.

⁵⁶¹ Seidler, *Respectable Rebel*, 235-241.

⁵⁶² Norman Thomas, Norman Thomas's unpublished autobiography, 1.

⁵⁶³ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 203.

former Socialist Party Militant faction that Thomas had cultivated.⁵⁶⁴ Many of the Thomasite Militants who did not continue their careers in the labor movement served the labor-aligned Democratic Party. Richard Hofstadter claimed that the Socialist Party's defectors to the Democrats wielded enough influence to give the party of Roosevelt "a social democratic tinge."⁵⁶⁵

Though Thomas, who died in 1968, did not live long enough to appreciate this impact, the Socialist Party's example served as a cautionary tale to future generations of democratic socialists. The American socialist leader Michael Harrington – who became practically the successor to Daniel De Leon, Eugene Debs, and Norman Thomas – formed the Democratic Socialists of America. Harrington theorized that, given the U.S. two-party system's constraints, socialists needed to caucus as a faction within the Democratic Party as opposed to the old third-party model. Though socialists remember Thomas as an obstinate advocate for the third-party model and even condemn him for wrecking the Socialist Party by opposing Roosevelt, Thomas actually agreed with the critique of third-partyism. Thomas argued that the two-party system straightjacketed American democracy. Thomas lamented that "no third party ever took power in America" and conjectured that, had the U.S. had a parliamentary system, then the Socialist Party would have eradicated the Democrats before they had the opportunity to reinvent themselves under FDR.⁵⁶⁶ Thomas thought that the Socialists, absent such anti-democratic Constitutional obstacles as the Electoral College and the third party's lack of

⁵⁶⁴ Seidler, *Respectable Rebel*, 98.

⁵⁶⁵ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 232.

⁵⁶⁶ Norman Thomas, "The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas," FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer.

a right to proportional representation in Congress, would have become as powerful as the United Kingdom's Labor Party.⁵⁶⁷

Thomas's reasons for participating in the Socialist Party of America as a third party, then, were two-fold. One, he believed in a third party's ability to educate Americans. The Socialist Party had a transformative, educational influence, Thomas argued. The Party was instrumental in disabusing the public of the capitalist sacred cow that the profit motive was necessary for achieving efficient industrial output. The Socialist Party's pioneering advocacy for women's suffrage, income taxes, social security, and collective bargaining rights for labor unions normalized these positions apropos the public consciousness years before any progressive Democrat or Republican supported these ideas.⁵⁶⁸ Two, Thomas feared that caucusing with the Democrats would erase socialist identity. Thomas feared that joining the pro-capitalist Democrats would force Socialists to compromise their core opposition to the profit motive as an organizing principle for society. As the historian Daniel Bell has argued, "the dilemma of American radicals during the 1930s as in other periods has been to choose between isolation and absorption."⁵⁶⁹

Justified or unjustified, Thomas's implicit hope that Americans might someday come around to the truth of capitalism's iniquity betrayed an optimism that future generations of radicals lacked. Harrington, for instance, rejected "the traditional model of the Socialist Party as an electoral alternative."⁵⁷⁰ In light of a socialist faction under

⁵⁶⁷ Norman Thomas, "The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas," FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer.

⁵⁶⁸ Norman Thomas, "The Minority in America: Featuring an Interview in Norman Thomas," FWO5512, 1961, Folkways Records, produced by Howard Langer.

⁵⁶⁹ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 233.

⁵⁷⁰ Marks and Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here*, 219.

Senator Bernie Sander's recent near successes at taking over the Democratic Party in the name of democratic socialism, it is fair to say that evidence has been accumulating in favor of Harrington's accommodationist position. Thomas made a greater attempt at educating the American public about socialism than any other American Marxist ever did. He wrote sixteen books, an untold number of pamphlets, gave thousands of speeches, ran for public office unsuccessfully again and again, and corresponded with the leading intellectual and political leaders of his day.⁵⁷¹ However, for all of Thomas's educating, it was not until American socialists operated from within a progressive Democratic party that they came within reach of running the country.

That Thomas never succeeded in bringing American socialism within striking distance of building a ruling coalition does not diminish the 1930s Socialists' role in shaping the New Deal. Thomas exerted direct influence on the New Deal Democrats, influencing them to make their economic relief efforts more inclusive of industrial laborers and the non-landowning agricultural workforce. If the voice which Norman Thomas spoke with in the President's ear was merely one of many – as befitted the Socialist's status as a weak party – then Huey Long did not have to compete for the President's attention. As a result of Long's national preeminence, his hounding FDR from the left had a transformative effect in that it produced the Second New Deal. Shedding light on the Thomas-Long rivalry reveals the significant role that Long's opposition to Thomas and general anti-Marxism played for his critique of the First New Deal. For the Kingfish, it was a matter of the utmost importance that the Democrats succeed at delivering Americans out of the Depression. The alternative, he feared, was

⁵⁷¹ Seidler, *Respectable Rebel*, 81.

that Americans would pay more attention to a man like Norman Thomas, whose ideas were fundamentally anathema to the American way.

Though the New Deal ultimately failed to lift the Great Depression, the historical consensus holds that Roosevelt's policies provided the economy sorely-absent stimulation. Roosevelt's reforms marked an unadulterated step in a positive direction both from the progressive and socialist perspectives. The implementation of measures such as social security, unemployment insurance, and government sanction for unions made the U.S. a less precarious place for working-and-lower-middle-class people.⁵⁷² The view that certain conservative historians have taken that the federal government's meddling exacerbated a Great Depression that the free market otherwise would have sorted out by itself does not withstand scrutiny. Government spending, ultimately, did end the Great Depression. Only, it did not do so under the auspices of the New Deal but rather through the economic stimulus necessitated by the U.S.'s economic mobilization for World War II.

The transformative economic effect of World War II domestically vindicated the Keynesian idea that unharnessing government spending could curb unemployment.⁵⁷³ Norman Thomas, who had been arguing that the New Deal did not go far enough from its inception, said, "A great world that we live in! We can find jobs for men for purposes of destruction but not to create abundance."⁵⁷⁴ In this vein, Long and Thomas were winners and losers in American history. On the one hand, the decades-long moderate liberal consensus that followed the 1930s had few abler ushers than the Kingfish and Socialist

⁵⁷² Howe, *Socialism and America*, 77.

⁵⁷³ Badger, *The New Deal*, 115.

⁵⁷⁴ Norman Thomas, "At the Front," *Socialist Call*, October 12, 1935.

Party leader. On the other hand, Thomas was horrified that a commitment to the American war machine's domination of large swaths of the globe was a feature of this consensus. Had Huey Long lived to see World War II and the outbreak of the Cold War – to see “the welfare state by unforeseen and unavoidable consequences become something like a barracks state” – he likely would have expressed a similar sentiment.⁵⁷⁵ The prerogatives of the nation's global empire continually undermined the growth of American social democracy. The country might have benefitted from an isolationist such as Huey Long's living longer and tempering the imperialist instincts of a President whom the Kingfish's death left peerless. Their past rivalry notwithstanding, Long might have joined his voice to that of Norman Thomas, whose influence never did become commensurate with his ability and ambition.

⁵⁷⁵ Rauch, *The History of the New Deal*, xi.

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