WAS HUEY LONG’S POLITICAL CAREER DOOMED?

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ABSTRACT

Huey Long had one of the most remarkable political careers in American History. From the political periphery in the hill country of Northern Louisiana, Long’s political career had a meteoric rise, from Railroad Commissioner to Governor and then Senator in his 30s. The Kingfish had clear Presidential ambitions, and President Roosevelt saw him as a political threat, even polling a hypothetical third-party run by the Kingfish to gauge the risks to his reelection. However, I argue that Long was at the peak of his political power when he was assassinated, and he had nowhere to go but down. His political ambitions and conflicts with the President would have spelled the downfall of the Kingfish had he not been assassinated. Additional lessons are drawn from another Louisiana Governor whose career was doomed by a political row with the President of the same party: the Reconstruction-era Governor, Henry Clay Warmoth, who served under President Ulysses S. Grant.

1. INTRODUCTION

Huey Long was assassinated in September 1935, at the height of his meteoric ascent to absolute power in Louisiana. Given his national popularity and Presidential ambitions, Long’s ascension to the highest office in the land seemed to many observers to have been only a matter of time. Both Long’s opponents and his supporters saw a run at the White House in Huey’s future and saw the assassination as effectively foreclosing on this eventuality (Haas 1994, p. 128). Long’s ambitions to run for President were a poorly kept secret, and Huey even wrote a book entitled “My First Days in the White House'' which outlined what a future Long presidency might look like (Long 1935). The possibility of such a presidency spawned other alternate histories beyond Long’s own (Sinclair 1935; Reznick 1992). Indeed, Huey had outlined his path to the Presidency as early as 1916 to his wife: a prominent position in state government, then Governor, the Senator, the President of the United States (Jeansonne 1993, p. 147). At the time of his death, Huey had ascended to all those offices but the last, and he was poised for a Presidential run.[[2]](#footnote-2) It might seem that the assassination ended an inexorable political ascent, but this paper argues against the view that Huey’s death cut short his political career.[[3]](#footnote-3) Instead, Huey’s political career was at its peak when he was assassinated. There was no reasonable path for Huey to become President. The most likely outcomes involved jail or electoral defeat in the Senate, whichever came first.

After years of federal investigations into Huey Long’s legendary corruption, Treasury agents and federal prosecutors had put together an airtight case. The only thing blocking them from bringing a case against Long was his untimely death (Irey and Slocum 1948). However, even in the unlikely event that a conviction could be avoided, Long would have had to try to defend his Senate seat at the same time as he was running against a very popular Democratic president. Even Huey’s popularity could not hold if he had run against a President as popular as FDR in a state as Democratic as Louisiana. As he was failing to make headway as a third-party challenger for President, Long would have faced third-party challenger supported by the President, and in a Democratic landslide year like 1936, that challenger would have won. The only thing that could have overcome the significant incumbency advantage a Democratic Senator as popular as Huey had would have been for Long to take on the Democratic President of the United States and the most popular Democrat in the country at the time. That was exactly what Huey Long planned to do in 1936, and there can be little doubt what the outcome would have been. There was nowhere for the Kingfish to go but down in September 1935. I discuss parallels with one of Long’s idol and another prominent Louisiana politician, Reconstruction-era governor Henry Clay Warmouth. He also could not overcome the opposition of a popular president in the form of U.S. Grant, and similarly saw his political career collapse.

1. ROLE MODELS

To understand the arguments made here, it will be useful to examine Long’s childhood to see his influences that made him the adult he became. Huey Long was a precocious child, full of boundless energy and a voracious appetite for books. Naturally, he read the Bible extensively, and quoted liberally from the good book in his political career. It is undeniable that much of Long's populism and concern for the poor was influenced by the Good Book. Long also read extensively about many of histories “Great Men” who were influences on his political career. Long read the biography of Napoleon many times, certainly no political liability in a state like Louisiana.  But he also read extensively on a Louisiana political figure, who, if his interest had been publicly revealed, might have ended Long’s political career much earlier: that of Louisiana’s Reconstruction-era governor, Henry C. Warmoth (Powell and Souther 2001; Williams 1969, p. 184).[[4]](#footnote-4) In these two men we can see a common theme, that of the popular political boss with no regard for checks and balances bringing progress to a chaotic world (Williams 1969, p. 34, 184). It is fairly clear that the careers of both Napoleon and Warmoth served as models for Huey. It is clear, however, that all three men fell short of their ultimate goals. While Napoleon had many stunning and brilliant military successes, he was ultimately decisively defeated at Waterloo. He could never best Britain or the Russian Empire. Warmoth was impeached as governor and thus effectively removed from office. Warmoth’s experience will be instructive for why Huey Long’s political career was doomed, so we should delve deeper into his life in politics.

Henry Clay Warmoth was born in 1842 in Illinois, so he was a Yankee who would become a Reconstruction-era governor in the Deep South.[[5]](#footnote-5) Warmouth was able to become governor of Louisiana at the tender age of 26 in 1868, one of the youngest governors in US history. Huey Long would become governor at the age of 35, not even a decade older than Warmoth. Warmoth engaged in similar stronghanded tactics as Long, using a questionable interpretation of his appointment privileges to back the Louisiana government with his loyalists (Lonn 1967[1918], p. 45-47). Warmoth jawboned the legislature to give him almost unchecked authority, giving him the right to appoint or remove most of the important bureaucratic position in the state government, including local police forces and election authorities (William 1969, p. 183). Indeed, Warmoth would preside over several contested elections where he used his powers to try to overturn the will of the Louisiana voter, centralizing power to make peace with the old Louisiana elites and the Democratic party (Powell 2006). Warmoth also shared racial views with Long which are certainly retrograde today, but which were strikingly free of prejudice for the time. Neither man would support civil rights legislation, but both believed in equality under the law (Warmoth 2006 [1930], p. xv-xvi).

 Shifting alliances in Louisiana politics, a perennial feature of Huey Long’s political career in the state, were similar in the Reconstruction period. Warmoth would challenge the President of the United States at the time, Ulysses S. Grant, in a parallel with Huey Long’s rivalry with Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR). Both men were not underestimated by the presidents of their party at the time, and both were able to gain the upper hand against their Louisiana party colleagues. The origins of the rivalry between Grant and Warmoth dates to the Civil War, where Warmoth was accused of exaggerating Union losses and being away without leave. It would not be surprising if Grant perceived Warmoth as being supportive of his rival in the Western theater, Democrat John A. McClernand, who also hailed from Southern Illinois as Warmoth did. However, the rivalry between the President and Warmoth did not flare up again until after Warmoth became governor. Like Long, Warmoth used the power of his office to gather wealth and power, but he was wise enough to avoid direct bribery. The Republican party quickly split into pro- and anti- Warmoth factions, in a similar split to the pro- and anti-Long factions in Louisiana more than a half century later (Warmoth 2006 [1930], p. xviii-xix, xxi-xxiii).

Warmoth would be impeached just as future governor Long would be. This impeachment was due to his attempt to influence the certification of the 1872 election where he supported a fusion ticket of Liberal Republicans and Democrats opposing the ruling Republican party, related to his conflict with Grant’s allies in the state.  While Long was able to jawbone enough legislators to avoid impeachment, Warmoth was impeached but not convicted as his term was set to expire soon after, making formal removal unnecessary. However, the limitations to Warmouth’s governorship in Louisiana are instructive. While broad-based support for Reconstruction-era governments brought the Republican party to power in the postbellum South, the political leadership could not wield enough power to keep the old elites and the Democratic party from overthrowing them and reversing Reconstruction-era gains. In Warmoth’s case, his political fights with a popular President in his own party further hastened his political demise, a parallel with what faced Huey Long had he survived (Warmoth 2006 [1930]).

1. POPULISTS AND THE POLITICAL MACHINE

Huey Long was unique in many ways, but perhaps most unique in how he combined a quixotic, populist desire to remake the United States economy and society along more equitable lines with a ruthless will to power by any means necessary. In history, this combination is rare, though one could perhaps place Julius Caesar in a similar category. The similarities don’t end there either- both men were also assassinated, and Caesar was well known for his support for the plebeians and his opposition to the patrician elite, who hated him as much as he hated them. However, Huey was no strong man, and abhorred violence, so that contrast with the general couldn’t be stronger (Williams 1969, p. 272). His rival, FDR, knew it too, and said that Long was a “physical coward.” But why would one use violence when there were so many other tools Huey had at his disposal? (Williams 1969, p. 29) Roosevelt misunderstood Long, though, when he said Long was without principle. While Long was unscrupulous in his bid for power, his populist principles ran deep (Jeansonne 1993, p. 149). While a Napoleon or a Hugo Chavez could use a military career to cement their rise to power, this was impossible in a sub-national polity like Louisiana.

But that then meant that Huey Long needed to build a political coalition without the military in the conditions of interwar Louisiana, a state with divisions between the Anglo and Protestant North and the French and Catholic South, which could serve to block the ascent of political upstarts from outside of the establishment. Huey needed to motivate politicians and elites to build a political coalition that could both achieve and maintain power over the state and to overthrow the existing elites. Rarely using violence, Huey primarily used his legendary oratorical skills to gain political power, and then used his power and patronage to further build his political coalition and accrue more power.

The Long populist program and Long’s drive for money and power worked in concert while he was rising through the ranks of Louisiana politics from Railroad Commissioner to Governor to Senator. Long’s ability to mobilize the masses at the ballot box made him electorally unassailable, and even unimpeachable. This meant Huey could use patronage, gerrymandering, bribery, and any other feasible tool to achieve his goals, no matter how corrupt. This naturally attracted many followers, interested in using an alliance with Huey to amass additional money and power for themselves. However, these techniques were only effective in Louisiana with Long controlling the state as his personal fiefdom. Huey’s fearlessness and ability to break through any opposition on his own in Louisiana did not translate into electoral success outside of the state. There, his inability to compromise or make alliances with the establishment was a severe impediment, and eventually the national Democratic party would have emerged victorious in its struggle with the Louisiana upstart. Within Louisiana, this phenomenon was reversed, as the Long movement could better prevail politically without being tarnished by any alliance with the old political and economic elites.

In the U.S. Senate, things were different. Huey’s antagonism with the Senate Majority Leader, Joe T. Robinson, meant that Huey Long was isolated and had few friends in the Democratic majority (Williams 1969, p. 809-10).  Indeed, Long had friendly ties with progressive Republican Senators like Norris and Borah. One can speculate that perhaps Long would have been a progressive Republican instead had political conditions in Louisiana been different. As it was, running as any kind of Republican would have been political suicide given overwhelming Democratic majorities in Louisiana at the time. In any case, Long made enemies of both the Senate Democratic leadership as well as the Democratic President. As a result, he was isolated in the Senate, and participated little in legislation. Long voted against most of the major New Deal legislation. In response, the Roosevelt administration funneled New Deal patronage to anti-Long Democrats in Louisiana, like former governor John M. Parker. The Roosevelt Administration continued to cautiously give New Deal funds to Louisiana in later years so long as they didn’t end up in Long’s hands. All of this could have been avoided if Long had simply tried to work with the President rather than obstruct him. But this was never Long’s character. Huey could never be anything other than the Kingfish (William 1969, p. 7, 559, 637-8, 809-810; Jeansonne 1993, p. 150-1).

 Long needed to return frequently to Louisiana as he continued his de facto rule over the state. This included the shepherding through of bills he wanted passed in the Louisiana legislature. Indeed, this is exactly what the Kingfish was doing in the Louisiana Capitol when he was fatally shot on that fateful night in September 1935. Ultimately the Long political coalition split after his death between those that supported his populist program (led by the odious Gerald L. K. Smith), and the core of the political machine, only interested in money and power, led by Huey’s top general, Seymour Weiss. The populists lost out almost immediately, with Governor Leche formally throwing out the Share Our Wealth pledges over the objections of Smith. The machine negotiated a truce with the Roosevelt administration, which resulted in a flood of New Deal money to Louisiana, controlled by the Long faction of the Democratic Party. This was jocularly named the “Second Louisiana Purchase.” Huey Long was motivated by his ideals and his political program, but he had to motivate those around him, who mostly didn’t share his ideals, with money and power. This meant his populist program was largely abandoned after his death. Long needed to create a political machine to rise to power, but this political machine was motivated by money and power and not to radical redistribution of income and wealth, and so Huey’s ideals were betrayed by those closest to him soon after his death (Kane 1940, p. 181-187, 196; Williams 1969, 863-868).

1. FEDERAL PROSECTION

Huey Long had supported FDR in his 1932 campaign, claiming that Long had been the primary reason that FDR had prevailed in the primary.  While Long’s support had been welcome, it was clearly not decisive. Roosevelt resented the Louisianan’s arrogance and disrespect. After they fell out, Roosevelt wanted to deal with this Southern thorn in his side. Using federal prosecutions for corruption was one method FDR used to this end. Huey Long’s corruption was legendary even within a state like Louisiana, which had been plagued by corruption throughout its history. Federal investigations into Long began during the Hoover administration, as anonymous letters started flooding in about corruption. These investigations only really started in earnest in 1932 as Long became more vocal in the Senate. The Roosevelt administration initially did not make these investigations a priority, but as the rift between FDR and Long deepened, the investigation was pushed forward.[[6]](#footnote-6) Elmer Irey, the Treasury agent who had successfully built a case against Al Capone, was placed on the case. Irey started by prosecuting Long’s underlings, including Seymour Weiss, Huey’s right-hand man, as well as another prominent member of the Long organization, Abe Shushan (Williams 1969, p. 795-798).

 Long was careful to keep his corrupt dealings from implicating himself directly, and so, Huey thought he could prevail against federal prosecution. Huey Long was very effective at raising funds, but the majority of these funds accrued to the political machine which he led. Beyond the donations of wealthy supporters of the Long machine, like the Mayor of New Orleans, Robert Maestri, there were mandatory payments by state government employees as well. These “deducts” took 10% of the salaries of all state employees in Louisiana. They owed their jobs to the Kingfish, after all, so why shouldn’t they donate a bit of these salaries to keep the Long machine well-funded? These funds were kept in the legendary “deduct box”, which was said to contain $1 million when Huey passed away (Brinkley 2011, p. 27). Accounting for inflation, this would be worth a bit under $22 million today, so no small sum. However, these funds were used by the Long political machine for expenses related to political activity. While clearly these secret funds were not well accounted for and functioned in a legal gray area, they were unrelated to Long personally and so could not be used in prosecutions of Long himself. But the Kingfish’s appetites were legendary and eventually he could not resist profiting personally from his power (Williams 1969, p. 58, 61, 319-20, 822). While money was useful to get power, power was also useful to get money for Huey.

Huey Long, along with his fellow governors O. K. Allen and James A. Noe, as well as his personal secretary, Earle Christenberry, and Seymour Weiss, the Kingfish’s right-hand man, formed the Win or Lose Corporation in November 1934. The company was founded with ten thousand dollars in initial capital, corresponding to one hundred shares. In practice, this meant that Seymour Weiss and Earl J. Christenberry each paid in $100 for 1 share each, and then Noe was issued 98 shares from the corporation. This might seem strange; How then were Allen and Long involved? They would later be gifted shares out of Noe’s shares (Seidemann et al. 2017, p. 75). This might seem strange, but given the involvement of a U.S. Senator, which Huey was at the time, as well as other former governors and other well-connected people, it is perhaps unsurprising that those involved made it difficult to know who exactly owned what.

The Win or Lose Corporation was involved in extensive future litigation, unsurprising given the unethical nature of its activities. This does have a silver lining, however, as this produced a written record of testimony by many involved in the company. In *U.S. v Noe*, we have direct testimony by Earle Chistenberry regarding the share transfers made in the Win or Lose Corporation. Noe transferred 23 (more) shares to Weiss, 12 shares to the O.K. Allen’s children, 31 shares to Rose Long (Huey’s wife), and even 1 share to Alice Grosjean (Huey’s mistress). Mr. Noe was very generous to Huey and his friends indeed! (Seidemann et al. 2013, p. 7-8).

Before moving to the company itself, it is worthwhile at this point to give some background on the major players. Allen was the governor of Louisiana at the time, and functioned as a puppet of Huey’s, allowing him to continue to effectively govern the state even from his offices in Washington, D.C. Even though Allen was the *de jure* governor of the state, governors were not barred from being involved in oil deals of this type under Louisiana law at the time. Neither were Lieutenant Governors, which Noe was at the time. James Noe was from Kentucky and was a successful oil man before becoming part of Long’s orbit through a legal case. Long then pushed Noe towards a political career in the Louisiana Democratic party, first as a State Senator, where he was also President Pro Tempore of the Senate, and later, as Lieutenant Governor, earlier in 1934. Earle Christenberry was Long’s personal secretary and involved in some of his political dealings. Seymour Weiss was a hotelier who also became deeply involved in corruption involving the Long political machine. In 1934, Weiss was under indictment for tax evasion, which he settled by paying back taxes. However, Weiss would be indicted for defrauding Louisiana State University for selling a hotel’s furniture twice. Weiss would also plead guilty to tax evasion charges related to the Win or Lose Corporation, a point which will be touched on later (Kane 1940, Seidemann et al. 2017, p. 78-84).

It is important to note that at this time, Long was no longer the *de jure* governor of the state, and instead had moved to the Senate. Huey’s name did not appear on the Win or Lose Corporations paperwork at the time of its founding, though his involvement is certainly very clear. Indeed, Long was careful enough that the corrupt dealing in the case did not violate state law, and so the state of Louisiana did not even attempt to take back the Win or Lose corporation’s oil leases. Despite clearly unethical behavior, these leases were awarded in accordance with Louisiana state law (Seideman et al. 2017, Seideman 2018). However, the issue of tax evasion at the federal level loomed. Irey uncovered this scheme and connected the financial scheme to Long himself, an essential part of any future prosecution. Dan Moody, the former Texas governor was the U.S. attorney with jurisdiction to prosecute Huey Long. He had agreed to seek an indictment after meeting with Irey and his assistants the day before Long was shot. They considered the case airtight (Irey and Slocum 1948).

One might argue that, while Weiss pled guilty, both Noe and the Win or Lose Corporation were found not guilty by a Louisiana jury in 1942. However, this seems to have been due more to a lack of concern about income tax evasion in the midst of the much more serious crisis of the Second World War than about the facts of the case themselves. Noe claimed that he had no recollection of most transactions, which certainly would not have been enough to prevail against determined Treasury prosecutors. Noe also claimed that a payment to Allen was not a dividend payment, but instead was a gift. This was shown to be false of course, as Allen owned shares, as discussed above, and so these were clearly the dividend payments made to any shareholder. Moreover, Noe claimed that the Corporation never issued stocks to Long himself, which was also a falsehood. While a jury may have been willing to overlook these lies in 1942, the Treasury would have been successful in prosecuting them in the mid-1930s (Seideman et al. 2017, p. 88).

One can compare this to other cases Elmer Irey had won. For example, Al Capone was indicted for tax evasion without explicitly making false claims. He was stuck with the same Catch-22 as Long faced. Capone could pay taxes on illicit income, thus avoiding prosecution for income tax evasion. However, this would involve admitting to illegal activities, which would have opened Capone up to prosecution for his crimes, which were more serious than the income tax charges (Bittker 1974). Capone couldn’t avoid the Catch-22, but he was smart enough to avoid overt falsehoods, which would have made prosecuting Long easier than prosecuting Capone.

While the investigation was called off in the wake of Huey's death, he would have most certainly been indicted at the federal level, even if he could avoid prosecution for state crimes. This scandal would have not only brought down the Kingfish himself, but also other members of his inner circle who were also involved in the scheme. The Louisiana scandals of 1939-1940 would simply have been pushed back to 1935-1936, with the Long forces being swept out of office one election cycle earlier. Indeed, Jimmy Noe and Seymour Weiss were both indicted in 1940 for their role in the Win or Lose Corporation, and if they could be indicted at that point, Irey and Moody would have obtained a successful prosecution a few years earlier (Kane 1940, p. 160, 176; Irey and Slocum 1948).

V. 1936 ELECTION and 1936 NATIONAL INQUIRER POLL

Long’s presidential ambitions in 1936 were fairly clear, though his tactics in this election might surprise the reader. The strategy Long told those close to him was convoluted. Long would first gather up the support of other populist protest movements like Townsend’s movement for pensions for the elderly, Upton Sinclair’s socialism, and Father Coughlin’s anti-Wall Street demagoguery. With this base of support, Huey would run in 1936 against FDR. Even Long did not think he could prevail outright, he expected to split the Democratic vote such that the Republican candidate would win. It’s clear that Long did not think much of FDR’s chances, given how ineffective the New Deal had been in addressing the fundamental problems facing the country. Then Long could run again in 1940 as the Democratic candidate, with Roosevelt out of the picture, and win easily against a failing Republican, according to Long’s telling of the plan (Williams 1969, p. 843-845).

While Long’s overconfidence was on full display here, FDR still had reason to be concerned. Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously said that Huey Long was one of the two most dangerous men in America, with Generate Douglas McArthur being the other (Snyder 1975). The possibility of a nightmarish Huey presidency is thinly disguised in Sinclair Lewis’s “It Can’t Happen Here” (Lewis 2014 [1935]). This book was frequently performed as a play by WPA theater troupes, showing implicit support by the Democratic administration in Washington for the cautionary implications of the novel regarding a Long presidency. The Kingfish had already begun a national organization of Share Our Wealth clubs in support of his populist program for radical wealth and income redistribution to solve the Great Depression. Long brought his oratorical skills to the national airwaves, using the radio to get his message out across the nation.  It was clear that the Kingfish was a potential threat in the 1936 election.

In response, James Farley, the Chair of the Democratic National Committee and manager of the Roosevelt campaign for reelection, commissioned a poll by mail which pitted FDR against a generic Republican and Huey Long. This poll was conducted by Emil Hurja, a prominent pollster who was also the executive director of the Democratic National Committee, on behalf of the fictional magazine, the *National Inquirer*. This poll found that the Kingfish had significant support, and it is often said that this was part of the reason the FDR moved left in 1935, in order to guard against a challenger from the left.

However, this concern was perhaps overblown. The poll results indicated that Huey would not win the electoral votes of any state. His strongest support was in Louisiana, where 36% were Long supporters.  However, the president retained 58% support in the state. The Kingfish had his strongest support in his home state which was far from a swing state. Long’s second strongest state was Nevada where he had 19% support, but the President had 61% support there, so he would win easily there too, even if challenged by the Kingfish. Even outside the South, Long ran strongest in strongly Democratic states that would also have strong support for Roosevelt. Long’s support was maldistributed across the country, usually being strongest in areas where Roosevelt’s support was so strong that he would have prevailed against Long and a Republican candidate regardless. Long’s support was only decisive in flipping a few states to the GOP, like Colorado, and the President would have won enough states to win the election in the *National Inquirer* poll even had Long run for president.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In the end, the actual 1936 election was even more of a landslide than this early poll would indicate. This is perhaps unsurprising given the significant advantage that incumbent Presidents have (Weisberg 2002; Mayhew 2008). However, polling was in its infancy at the time, and polling methods tended to oversample high income voters who were less likely to vote Democratic. Even with a significantly better performance than in the hypothetical polling, Long would have failed to win any electoral votes, having no effect on the final outcome (Amenta et al. 1994, p. 690).

  As we have seen, Roosevelt was very popular in the state of Louisiana, and a primary challenge to the President would have been, perhaps, the only factor that could have risked Long’s reelection in a Senate primary in Louisiana. Indeed, Huey was first elected to the U.S. Senate in 1930 to a 6-year term, and so he would have been up for reelection in 1936 and would have had to decide to run for President and for the Senate effectively simultaneously. For the Senate, in a state like Louisiana, only the Democratic primary would matter (in a normal year at least). This is why Long had the 1936 primary moved from September to January of that year to ensure that the primary was locked up early. This would then allow the Kingfish to pivot to his Presidential campaign (Jeansonne 1993, p. 168).

However, even if the Kingfish had secured the Democratic nomination for Senate before moving on to the Presidential campaign, Long’s challenge to Roosevelt would have likely resulted in an electoral defeat for Long in both races. The Republicans had no reason to move their Senate primary earlier in the year, and they would have jumped at the chance to unseat a Democratic Senator in a one-party state like Louisiana in the 1930s. Anti-Long Democrats would certainly have been willing to run a candidate jointly with the GOP or a 3rd party candidate (or both) to bring down Long. Given the political landslide in 1936, Roosevelt’s chosen candidate would have run away with the election for Senate easily in Louisiana that year.

Despite Long’s massive popularity and the enormous electoral advantage that incumbents have in the Senate (particularly in a one-party state like Louisiana), challenging a popular President like Roosevelt would have decimated Long’s popularity among Democrats, bringing down the electoral chances of the entire Long political organization. Anti-Long Democrats would have romped in the 1936 election across the board, four years before the anti-Long Democrats won the governor’s office in Louisiana. This is another parallel with Warmoth, who was eventually impeached and effectively removed from office by an alliance of Democrats (opposed to his Republican governorship and heavy-handed ways) and the oppositional Custom House Republicans, who were allied with President Grant against Warmoth (Lonn 1967[1918], p. 110-111).

1. CONCLUSION

With the Presidency out of the picture, even if the Kingfish could have held on to his Senate seat, Huey Long’s only route to political survival would have been to make peace with FDR and hope that this would end the federal investigations.  Indeed, this path was feasible, as the Long machine made peace with the FDR administration in the wake of Huey’s assassination, which resulted in the corruption investigations against the Kingfish’s associates being dropped. The Long machine also received a flood of New Deal monies as a result in what was jocularly called “the Second Louisiana Purchase.”

It is difficult to see how Huey Long’s ego would have ever allowed himself to be subordinate to anyone, even the President of the United States. Huey had planned his path to the Presidency in his childhood. The Kingfish was too kinetic to be impeded, and he had to keep moving forward, like a shark, towards his ultimate goals. Long could not recalibrate his tactics and accept that he would need an alliance with President Roosevelt to ever hope to become president. Had he waited until the 1948 election to run, Long would have been just 55, a perfectly reasonable age to become president. But the Kingfish couldn’t wait, and there was only room for just one at the top. In 1936, that was not Huey P. Long (Jeansonne 2002). Like Warmoth before him, Huey could not prevail against the President and his allies, but Huey refused to learn the correct lessons from the political defeat of his idol in similar circumstances. Like Icarus, Long flew too close to the sun, and despite his rapid political rise, he would plunge to earth just as fast.

A comparison with his brother, Earl Long, is instructive here. Earl Long was a much less effective politician than his brother, Huey, though that would be true for almost any politician. That said, Earl was very successful in Louisiana politics, serving as governor three times. Earl benefitted from his fraternal relationship with his brother, and naturally had the support of the Long organization in the Democratic party. Earl was an effective politician in his own right as well.  But the major difference between the brothers was that Earl always worked within the Democratic party organization, and Huey only worked with the Democratic establishment when it suited his own personal ambitions. This made all the difference in the long run, and Earl would serve as governor in non-consecutive terms stretching over 4 decades, from the 1930s to the 1960s (Kurtz and Peoples 1991). Ultimately, the turtle outran the hare in the Long family, and the hubris of the Kingfish would have doomed his political career even if he had not been assassinated.

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1. American University, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue N.W., Washington, DC 20016. +1.202.885.3708. mathy@american.edu. Many thanks to Thomas E. Patterson, Professors Robert T. Mann and Lawrence Powell, as well as to the audience and attendees at the Louisiana Historical Association Meetings, March 2022, for helpful comments and critiques. Many thanks also to Patrick Fahy and the staff of the FDR Library and Archives and the staff at the Hill Memorial library at Louisiana State University for their assistance. The author gratefully acknowledges funding from the American University College of Arts and Sciences Mellon Fund. Laura Heras Recuero provided excellent research assistance. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Long had been elected railroad commissioner in 1918, using the regulatory position to gain popular support statewide through his populist policies (Williams 1969, p. 121-128). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. One can find some of the arguments made in this manuscript in Haas (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Warmoth stayed in Louisiana after his term as governor, running a plantation there (Powell 2020). Though Warmoth only passed away in 1931, Huey never attempted to meet the former governor. Long certainly would have been aware how an association with a Reconstruction-era Republican governor of a Southern state would play out politically in Louisiana (Williams 1969, p. 184). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Despite being born in the North, Warmoth spent significant time in Missouri and was admitted to the bar there, and so considered himself a scalawag (a Southerner who worked on behalf of federal authorities during reconstruction), rather than a carpetbagger (a Northerner politician who moved South to administer Reconstruction) (Warmoth, 2006 [1930]). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Allegedly, FDR’s son Elliot, noted that his father may have originated the use of the IRS as a tool to be used against political opponents (2009). If so, Long could not complain too much about the use of similar tactics against him as Long had used regularly against his enemies in Louisiana. On the other hand, it should perhaps temper some of the self-righteousness Roosevelt had in his struggle against a “crook”, like Long. The President knew how to play hardball too. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Miscellaneous Materials related to the National Inquirer Poll, 1936; Boxes 72-79, Access Number: 59-20, Papers of Emil Hurja; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)