

Dear Chris,

I'm a fan of "All In" and recently began listening to your podcasts. In addition to being on the same wavelength politically, I particularly respect the intellectual rigor you bring to your work. Your focus on policy details, historical context and an appreciation for nuance are sorely needed in the political discourse of this day and age. I was especially eager to listen to your recent podcast with Rachel Maddow, as I routinely watch her show and have been following her Bag Man series.

Around minute 12, you made a passing reference to Huey Long as a "demagogue" and "really corrupt" (with seeming assent by Rachel), which I think is unfair and not supported by the facts. This was especially disappointing coming from two of my favorite progressive commentators. Caricaturing Huey as a corrupt demagogue is part of a longstanding effort by those who oppose the progressive premise that government can and should work to improve the lives of the common man. Unfortunately, this mischaracterization of Long is often the extent of people's familiarity with the man.

If you have time to read 900+ pages on Huey Long, I would recommend T. Harry Williams' authoritative biography, which won the Pulitzer prize and National Book Award (see <https://www.amazon.com/Huey-Long-T-Harry-Williams/dp/0394747909>). For an easier read, check out www.HueyLong.com, an educational site about Huey Long. (Full disclosure: I worked on the web design and development of this site back in 2006 and my wife is a descendant of Long's.)

I think these resources would radically change your assessment of Long. In fact, I think there are aspects of Long's policies and achievements that merit consideration (and potential emulation) by today's progressive movement.

A *demagogue* is defined, among other things, as "a leader who makes use of popular prejudices and false claims and promises in order to gain power" (Webster's). It has the connotation of someone who espouses policies in which they do not truly believe solely for political benefit. Consequently, once the demagogue gains power, he often fails to deliver on the false promises, because (i) they are not realistic/feasible and/or (ii) he never intended on fulfilling the promises. (There are other, more nuanced definitions of demagogue, but I think the above is what most people mean by the term.)

Contrast this with Huey Long, who promised and delivered: free schools, buses and textbooks for school children; abolition of the poll tax; 9,700 miles of (non-toll) paved roads and 111 new bridges; adult literacy programs; expansion of LSU; Homestead exemption for property taxes; debt moratorium for homeowners during the Great Depression; expansion of Charity Hospital system, creation of LSU Medical School, and reformation of state mental institutions and prisons; construction of the new State Capitol and New Orleans airport, among many other things. Huey Long essentially brought Louisiana into the modern era and provided unprecedented economic opportunity to its citizens.

In short: Trump saying he is going to "bring coal back" is demagoguery; Long saying he is going to build roads and bridges and provide free textbooks to school children is not.

Long certainly had a folksy manner and took his case straight to the people (partly because the state's newspapers were controlled by the oil companies). In his 1928 campaign for governor, he traversed 15,000 miles on the state's dirt roads and made 600 speeches. At a time in which the state was run by a corrupt political machine serving wealthy planters and big corporations, Long's focus on the concerns of the common man was revolutionary — and belittled as demagoguery by the establishment. The idea

that government should give the disadvantaged a helping hand became the hallmark of “Longism” and split the state into “Pro-Long” and “Anti-Long” factions for decades after Huey’s death.

Another factor perhaps contributing to the ‘demagogue’ critique of Long is the then-radical nature of some of his policy proposals, particularly his “Share Our Wealth” program (which would have capped personal fortunes at \$5M - \$8M in 1930s dollars and guaranteed a basic income to all Americans), at a time before there was Social Security, Medicare/Medicaid, food stamps, college financial aid, veterans benefits, housing assistance, etc. However, the popularity of Share Our Wealth is credited with FDR’s Second New Deal, and many today are re-examining the merits of wealth redistribution.

Regarding the charge that Huey Long was “corrupt”, there seems to be three main (factual) arguments for this: (1) he built a political machine that concentrated political power in his office (to the point that he was often called a “dictator”); (2) he collected campaign funds from state employees for his “Deduct Box”; (3) he was impeached by the La. House (though not convicted by the state Senate).

It’s important to understand the details and historical context around these issues. First, Long had to overcome an entrenched, aristocratic political machine to gain — and keep — power, often using strong-arm tactics. He mastered the political patronage system the Old Regulars had created and basically out-politicked them. His methods were controversial, and there is a legitimate debate about whether the ends justified the means. But, they must be considered in the context of the La. political climate of the 1920s and 30s.

For example, the Deduct Box in which Long collected \$50k - \$75k per election cycle, was justified by Long as a legitimate way to fund his campaign given that his opponents essentially were collecting bribes from big corporations. Long needed funds to print circulars and travel the state at a time when the press was uniformly aligned against him. (It’s worth noting again that the newspapers were controlled by the establishment.) Importantly, there is no evidence that Long personally enriched himself with the funds, and he had very little money to his name when he died. (The Deduct Box was never found and is believed to have been stolen by one of his associates.)

Long’s impeachment was led by the legislative allies of Standard Oil after Long proposed a 5 cent-per-barrel tax on oil production to finance his building and social programs. (Standard Oil financed ‘impeachment rallies’ against Long at which the company’s band provided entertainment.) Some of the charges were comical, like attending a party where a stripper was present, carrying a concealed weapon, and using foul language; others were serious. In any event, Long was able to avoid conviction in the Senate.

When Long later became a threat to run for president, FDR launched federal investigations into Long. Though no evidence of wrongdoing by Huey was found, this led to a lot of innuendo by Anti-Longs.

One other common reason that people associate Long with corruption is that subsequent pro-Long politicians were notoriously corrupt. Gov. Richard Leche, elected in 1936, served five years in federal prison for taking kickbacks on state purchases, and hundreds of government officials and businessmen were implicated in wrongdoing. Anti-Long politicians explicitly tried to link Huey to this corruption in order to tarnish the entire pro-Long movement.

To summarize, history is complicated! Killed in September 1935, Huey was unable to refute the relentless character assassination that followed after his death. Accordingly, I think it’s incumbent on us

to have an informed understanding of the history of his life and times before reducing his legacy to one of a corrupt demagogue, particularly given the political motivations of those who make this charge.

Thanks for taking time to read this and for all of your great work on the show. I hope you'll consider learning more about Huey Long and perhaps correct the record with your podcast audience.

- Jeremy