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How "Lyingnewspapers" Made Huey Long the Ruler of His State: A Model of Press-Populist Dynamics

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**HOW “LYINGNEWSPAPERS” MADE HUEY LONG THE
RULER OF HIS STATE: A MODEL OF
PRESS-POPULIST DYNAMICS**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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in

The School of Mass Communication

by
Christina Georgacopoulos
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This thesis is dedicated to my late friend Katelyn Lamb

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1. The Insurgency of Huey Long.....	7
Chapter 2. When “Lyingnewspapers” Became a Byword.....	29
Chapter 3. “ <i>The Louisiana Progress!</i> A New Sort of Newspaper”.....	56
Conclusion.....	79
Bibliography.....	95
Vita.....	97

Abstract

Huey Long's use of the phrase "lying newspapers" to discredit negative publicity is commonly cited as evidence of his negative relationship with the mainstream press, but he did not always hold a hostile view toward newspapers. Before the press turned against him during his enemies' attempt to impeach him as governor in 1929, newspapers were one of his central tools for political advancement. He devised strategies to attract press attention and relied on newspapers to publicize himself and propagate his ideas more frequently and consistently than he used circulars or radio broadcasts, which are commonly attributed to his political success. As with all populists, his disruptive ideas and behavior threatened the status quo and provoked hostile responses from the political and economic elite. The negative publicity he received as a result of their opposition and criticism worked to his advantage, however, because the press gave him a platform to defend himself and explain his perspective. The symbiotic press-Long dynamic drastically changed during his first year as governor, when his ruthless and undemocratic behavior drew the press out of neutrality. He fought back against the oppositional press by creating his own paper, *The Louisiana Progress*, of which the phrase "lying newspapers" was a primary feature. To understand why Huey Long created his own newspaper and how he used it, this thesis will correct various misconceptions about his dynamic with the mainstream press. This thesis will show how he used the press and the evolving role of newspapers during key periods of his career. More broadly, this thesis will illuminate the unique dynamic between populists and the press by using Long as a model for how outsiders can leverage the power of the news media to build political influence and maintain public support.

Introduction

Sometime while Huey P. Long was governor of Louisiana, the daily newspapers of New Orleans and some others throughout the state tacitly agreed to give Long the “silent treatment.” For a period of two or three weeks, none printed an editorial or cartoon about him, and very few news stories. According to a journalist with close relations to Long, this was the only time in his political career that he was worried, he said “it felt like being buried alive.”¹ In classic Huey Long style, he staged some dramatic event and “the newspapers were soon back at blasting him and giving him a chance to retaliate with his familiar ‘lying, thieving newspapers’ charge.” He famously defended himself against hostile journalists with the expression “lyingnewspapers.” He repeated it so often that it became a byword--“all over Louisiana people ran the words together like that.”²

It is difficult to verify the accuracy of his colleague’s recollection or whether the New Orleans’ newspapers conspired against Long as suggested. True or not, however, the “silent treatment” anecdote reveals how those closest to him recognized his obsession with press attention. He demonstrated more concern for public opinion and for how he appeared in the press than ordinary politicians, especially in comparison to the Southern gentlemen of his time, many of whom frowned upon his press agency and constant desire for attention. No matter how much the “better elements” of the state hated him or how much newspapers opposed him, however, he always maintained the loyalty of the masses.³ As with all populists, he built his influence by mobilizing the lower classes and common folk “hillbillies” of rural Louisiana who felt politics had escaped popular control and that they had been shut out of power by an unrepresentative and

¹ Fred Digby, interviewed by T. Harry Williams, n.d., box 19, folder 50, THW.

² Harnett Kane, *Huey Long’s Louisiana Hayride* (William Morrow & Company, 1941), 74.

³ Carleton Beals, *The Inside Story of Huey Long: America’s Amazing Threat to Democracy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Co., 1935), 12.

corrupt ruling elite.⁴ His shocking victory in the 1928 gubernatorial election ended a quarter century of single-class rule in the state, and the elite establishment he threw out of power struck back at him and obstructed his mandate at every opportunity.⁵ The answer to how he toppled the aristocracy of Louisiana politics and how he sustained the loyalty of his followers in the face of some of the most hostile political opposition in the nation's history rests in his dynamic with the mainstream press.

The "lying newspapers" charge is frequently cited as evidence of Huey Long's negative relationship with Louisiana newspapers, which lends itself to the incorrect suggestion made by many scholars and historians, and Long himself, that the press always opposed him from the start of his political career. Long did not start using the phrase "lying newspapers" until the state's largest newspapers turned against him during an attempt to impeach him while he was governor in 1929. A less told story of the impeachment fight is that many of the same hostile newspapers that led the calls for his removal as governor had applauded his progressive reforms merely a few months prior. Newspapers admonished his demagoguery and claimed he was temperamentally unfit during impeachment, yet, for nearly a decade before that point they had provided him with a platform to explain his ideas and convince potential supporters he was worthy of their vote. Scholarly focus on his career post-impeachment, when newspaper treatment of Long became hostile and vice versa, overshadows the full extent of his dynamic with the press. As this thesis will show, the press was a central factor of his rise to the high office of governor, and beyond when he later became a U.S. Senator for Louisiana.

⁴ Curtis Hodges, "The Politics of Huey Long" (Master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 1940), 1.

⁵ Perry Howard, "Political Tendencies in Louisiana 1812-1952; An Ecological Analysis of Voting Behavior" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1954), 173.

As an unknown and unimportant 24-year-old when he first began what would become one of the most notorious political careers in American history, Long used the press as a way to establish a reputation and acquaint potential supporters with his novel ideas. A neglected element of press coverage of Long before his impeachment in 1929 is the sheer amount of column space newspapers provided for him to state his views. It was not dumb luck that he was constantly the focus of press attention. He devised strategies to attract journalist's attention and to stage news events, which he used as an opportunity to dictate the public agenda and keep himself at the forefront of the public's attention. He relied on the press to publicize himself and propagate his ideas more frequently and consistently than he relied on his circulars or radio broadcasts, which are commonly attributed to his political success. In many instances the distribution of propaganda was itself used as a way to capture press attention. In spite of protests by the political elite, newspapers frequently obliged his publicity tactics. The press broadcast his messages to such an extent that citizens were free to form their own judgments about his disruptive behavior and bold progressive reforms.

Long benefitted from the extensive publicity he received in the early years of his political career but that does not mean he avoided negative press attention or scrutiny. He was frequently the subject of unflattering publicity as a result of his outrageous behavior. For instance, when the governor of Louisiana sued him for libel in 1921, outraged lawmakers and established public figures questioned his sanity and attempted to remove him from his post on the Public Service Commission, all of which received extensive newspaper coverage. For any ordinary politician such a public rejection by the political establishment and the negative press he received as a result may have been a disqualifying factor. As this thesis will show, negative publicity works to the advantage of populists like Long, who attract support precisely because they defy the existing

political hierarchy and violate established norms and expectations. His ability to spin negative attention to his advantage, however, was contingent on newspapers' willingness to give him a platform to defend himself and rationalize his behavior and perspective.

Impeachment in 1929 prompted a decisive turning point in Long's dynamic with the mainstream press. His ruthless and undemocratic behavior as governor drew the state's most influential papers out of neutrality. "Every newspaper was shouting for his head" because, according to the publisher of the *Shreveport Journal*, the governor had "demonstrated his utter unfitness for the duties and responsibilities of that office."⁶ His tactics and methods revealed him to be "a cruel political tyrant, willing to resort to almost any expediency to carry out his own wishes and purposes."⁷ Influential newspapers like the *Times-Picayune*, *New Orleans States* or *Baton Rouge State Times* refused to publish the text of his circulars and statements that he issued to fight impeachment and continued to drum up new ways to remove him from office even after the proceedings formally ended. The press, once a useful tool for his defense, became his chief enemy. "If we gave them a reply to a charge it was generally ignored all together," he said, "or else distorted, deleted or hidden away so as to be worse than no publicity at all."⁸

Long realized he needed more than just a handful of circulars or radio broadcasts to fight back against hostile newspapers and counter negative publicity after impeachment. Thus, he started his own newspaper, *The Louisiana Progress*. He used *The Progress* in much the same way as he used his circulars, to bypass the gatekeepers of the press and reach his supporters directly. Unlike his circulars, however, a weekly newspaper allowed him to flood the state with a constant stream of propaganda, plus its professional appearance added a degree of credibility and

⁶ Beals, *The Inside Story of Huey Long*, 1.

⁷ *Times-Picayune*, March 27, 1929, 1.

⁸ Huey Long, *Every Man A King* (National Book Company, 1933), 146.

respectability to *The Progress*, which was essential for how he used it. Conflict is a quotidian feature of press-politician relations, but nobody attacked journalists as ruthlessly as Long did in *The Progress*. He used the paper not only to circumvent but to undermine public trust in the press as a way to discredit its criticism and offer his own version of reality, which his followers readily accepted.

The “silent treatment” incident illustrates another unique aspect of the press-populist dynamic. If Long had his own newspaper, why did he want attention from hostile newspapers that gave him unfair treatment? As this thesis will show, he always kept an enemy to attack. Populists’ support is built and maintained by cultivating public discontent into resentment of the entire class of individuals who wield political power.⁹ Newspapers’ hostility provided him with opportunities to counterattack. Ultimately, newspaper opposition kept his base energized and provided justification for his activities.

Broadly speaking, this thesis will correct a common misconception about Long’s dynamic with the mainstream press by showing how he benefited from newspaper publicity at key moments in his political career. The first chapter will examine how newspapers helped Long establish himself as a serious political aspirant and the strategies he used to orchestrate news events that kept himself and his ideas in the forefront of the public’s attention. Chapter two will examine the turning point in the press-Long dynamic that occurred during the impeachment proceedings of 1929 as a result of newspapers’ active opposition, which will serve to illustrate his motivations for creating *The Louisiana Progress*. Chapter three will examine and classify strategies Long used in *The Progress* to undermine public trust in the mainstream press and how he used the paper in his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 1930. The conclusion will show how

⁹ Robert Barr, “Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics,” *Party Politics* 15, no. 1 (2009): 31.

Long's dynamic with the press is not a unique phenomenon, and how he serves as a general example of how populists navigate the media environment in a way that transcends time and place.

Chapter I. The Insurgency of Huey Long

One sweltering July afternoon in 1919, the small central Louisiana town of Hot Wells was “the Mecca” for the “political pilgrims” who journeyed there to launch the state governor campaign.¹ The newly elected Railroad Commissioner Huey P. Long seized the opportunity to make a state-wide name for himself. He took the stage at the rally and “administered a severe verbal castigation” of his arch nemesis, the Standard Oil Company, one of the largest oil producers in the nation at that time. If there ever was an institution that stood convicted before the people, it was Standard Oil, he said. “This octopus is among the world’s greatest criminals.”² Long went on to accuse the sitting governor, Ruffin G. Pleasant, of being a tool of Standard Oil in “some of the most vitriolic language ever used in a political campaign.”³ In spite of what some newspapers dubbed “unprintable language,” the press published a near entirety of what Long said that day. The *Times-Picayune*, Louisiana’s largest and most prestigious newspaper, published over four columns of his speech in which Long described how exactly the corrupt practices of Standard Oil threatened independent oil producers and farmers. The paper included his charge that Governor Pleasant was “such an incompetent and a misfit as a lawyer that he had to go to a real lawyer to learn something about law.”⁴

Huey Long, the perennial attention seeker, followed a simple political strategy to make a name for himself: “If you want to attract popular support and attention, attack the largest, closest enemy at hand.”⁵ Taunting massive corporations and the established, high-minded gentlemen

¹ *Alexandria Town Talk*, July 5, 1919, 1.

² *New Orleans States*, July 5, 1919, 10.

³ *Times-Picayune*, July 5, 1919, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 87.

who ruled Louisiana with outrageous allegations naturally attracted press attention. His rebellious antics created news stories too sensational to ignore. More than just tabloid publicity, as his breakout moment in Hot Wells reveals, newspapers granted him extensive space to state his views on important issues. The press broadcast his views in such fullness and to such an extent that citizens were free to draw their own conclusions about whether there was any truth or value to what Long had to say. For nearly a decade, the press communicated his ideas with the public frequently, fairly, and accurately.

As an unknown and unimportant twenty-four-year-old when first elected to public office on the Railroad Commission (today's Public Service Commission), newspaper publicity was key to how he built his political influence. His appearances in the press added a sense of importance and worthiness to his image. To be singled out from the large anonymous masses meant his opinions were significant enough to warrant public examination. Ultimately, press attention enhanced the potency of his appeals and ability to convert potential supporters.

Many scholars consider Long a pioneer of modern communication and attribute his political success to his frequent use of political propaganda, especially in the form of circulars.⁶ Yet, he relied on the methods he devised to attract newspaper publicity as frequently and consistently. In many instances his circulars or radio addresses were used as tools to attract publicity, as this chapter will show. Historians have recognized Long's obsession with press attention, which endured throughout his brief career, but diminish the role it played in his political success by incorrectly suggesting that newspapers relentlessly opposed him from the start.⁷ He did frequently earn negative publicity, but as this chapter will illustrate, bad press always seemed to redound to his advantage.

⁶ Burton L. Hotaling, "Huey Pierce Long as Journalist and Propagandist," *Journalism Quarterly* 20, (1943): 1.

⁷ Williams, *Huey Long*, 43.

This chapter addresses two common misperceptions about Huey Long and his dynamic with Louisiana newspapers. First, the press did not oppose him from the start of his political career. No scholar has recognized the sheer amount of space newspapers granted Long to state his views and the significance of this simple fact to his political success. Second, his appearance in the press was not spontaneous; it was the result of his political calculus. Newspaper publicity was a central component of his governing style--he either worked through the press or around it.

In order to correct these misconceptions, this chapter will present two career defining moments, pre-impeachment, that capture the nature of his dynamic with the press. The first example will show the strategy he used to attract press attention and, in turn, the type of press treatment he received. The second example will illustrate the phenomenon by which Long benefitted from negative publicity. Taken together, these examples illustrate his symbiotic relationship with the press and how he used it to advance his political interests.

“Long was the Sensation”

Long’s Hot Wells speech is given attention in this chapter because it marks a critical moment in his political rise in which he used the press to catapult himself into state-wide prominence. He built a semblance of a local reputation as a young lawyer with his practice in North Louisiana, but by and large remained virtually unknown in the Louisiana political scene with few supporters of influence.⁸ That speech did not occur spontaneously, as the eminent biographer T. Harry Williams incorrectly suggests.⁹ He laid the groundwork for that attack nearly six-months in advance by constantly forcing the issue of Standard Oil into public consciousness. The press built public anticipation for his appearance at the rally, during which it

⁸ Allan Sindler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), 46.

⁹ T. Harry Williams implies that he spoke unannounced, but Long was invited to speak by a committee that organized the rally.

was said he would attack Standard Oil's "oppressive methods," and demand that every candidate "get off the fence" on the question of oil legislation.¹⁰ Plus, he would issue a reply to a prominent state official that had accused him of using his position on the Railroad Commission for personal advancement.¹¹

Long's obsession with newspaper publicity predated his political career. He had long-term political aspirations and carefully calculated each step of his political career, which included becoming President of the United States. According to his wife, Rose, "he was measuring it all."¹² As many politicians do, he used the legal profession as a springboard into politics. Unlike ordinary political aspirants, he took a job as a correspondent to a few daily newspapers in Shreveport and other north Louisiana cities to ensure publicity for his legal victories, and to enlarge his modest income.¹³ At only 21 years old, with little political experience and no reputation, law provided him a means to establish a public record and prove his capabilities.

He always took the "side of the small man" and "the underdog."¹⁴ As a young lawyer, Long fought difficult cases against large corporations often for little or no compensation because, with no reputation to lose, a victory promised notoriety. He was not fighting a lone battle, however; other middle-class reformers were also advocating for regulations and certain restraints on business to "curb the evils of bigness."¹⁵ Louisiana in particular was dominated by a highly entrenched conservative political class, known as the New Orleans "Ring" or "Old Regulars," that maintained close ties with the massive corporations that supported the state's economic

¹⁰ The *Shreveport Journal*, June 28, 1919, 1.

¹¹ The *Times-Picayune*, July 4, 1919, 1.

¹² Williams, *Huey Long*, 107.

¹³ *Ibid*, 87.

¹⁴ Huey Long, *Every Man A King* (National Book Company, 1933), 15.

¹⁵ Williams, T. *Huey Long*, 111.

livelihood. Many historians and critics of his own time suggest Long was a demagogue, who recognized the political advantage to be gained by fomenting public discontent. Regardless of the genuineness of his progressive ideals and sympathy for the poor, he loved politics for its own sake. He thought it was “a sport of kings.”¹⁶

Long’s name began appearing in the press as early as 1916. In February 1916 the Shreveport *Times* identified Huey as the attorney for property owners in a lawsuit seeking compensation for sidewalks built on their property.¹⁷ In other instances, he used the strategy of denouncing large enemies to coax journalists’ interest. During his first visit to the state Capitol to present amendments to the Louisiana employers’ liability law, he accused established members of the Senate committee of being corporate henchmen. His outrageous statements against the committee members, plus his amendments to the law that amounted “practically to repeal,” captured the attention of journalists who went on to present his side of the issue at length.¹⁸

Long capitalized on the momentum from publicity he drummed up from his law practice to run for public office. His legal victories earned him a degree of local recognition and status, but to hold an important public office, such as governor or beyond, required that he build a statewide presence and invade urban areas where the conservative elite controlled massive voter blocs. His motivation to serve on the Railroad Commission itself stemmed from a consideration of publicity. His transformation of the relatively passive and toothless body into a powerful regulatory agency presented unlimited opportunities to attract publicity and burnish his reputation. According to author and journalist Harnett Kane, with Huey as a member, “the Railroad Commission leaped into sudden new importance in the public eye. People who had

¹⁶ Richard Leche, interviewed by T. Harry Williams, n.d., box 19, folder 103, THW.

¹⁷ The Shreveport *Times*, February 24, 1916, 1.

¹⁸ The *Times-Picayune*, June 13, 1916, 4; The Baton Rouge *State Times*, June 15, 1916, 4.

barely known it existed now heard of it every day. Huey, it seemed to the public, was the Commission.”¹⁹

Long continued to practice law even once elected to the commission because it promised favorable publicity, some of which was the voluntary expression of newspaper editors who appreciated what Long had done to help their community. Most of it, however, was contrived by Long, what many of his conservative opponents criticized as “press agency.” In a revealing letter sent to the secretary of the commission, he wrote, “I am sending you a copy of the article that I have sent to the Times-Picayune, the Item, and the Daily States and the Shreveport Times. Make up some copies and send them out as bulletins. Send me a few of them so I may be able to answer inquiries.”²⁰ He would frequently appear in the office of a Shreveport paper with lengthy statements “on a foolscap” and without saying a word place it on the city editor’s desk under the weight of “a half-gallon fruit jar of homemade moonshine.”²¹

Long immediately set out on the offensive to make his presence known once elected to the Railroad Commission. A mere couple of weeks passed before he opened an investigation into the conditions and practices of the oil industry in North Louisiana fields and other places where large corporations dominated.²² He focused his sights on what would become his most enduring political enemy, the Standard Oil Company. He traveled to Shreveport where he summoned representatives of independent oil producers of that region who condemned Standard Oil and pipeline companies for monopolizing the Pine Island oil field north of Caddo Parish.²³ The Shreveport *Times* published a full statement he issued to the press during the initiation of his

¹⁹ Kane, *Huey Long’s Louisiana Hayride*, 47.

²⁰ Williams, *Huey Long*, 161.

²¹ Paul Flowers, interviewed by T. Harry Williams, n.d. box 19, folder 63, THW.

²² Brandy Banta, “The Pine Oil Situation: Petroleum, Politics, and Research Opportunities in Southern History,” *The Journal of Southern History* 52, no.4 (1986): 590.

²³ *Ibid.*

inquiry into the “Pine Oil Situation,” in which he argued that Standard Oil prioritized the importation of foreign oil at the expense of small, local producers.²⁴ In effect, he set the stage for a Commission meeting in Baton Rouge a month later, where he issued an official report that called on the legislature to enact a law to bring the pipelines under his regulatory jurisdiction.

After forcing a hasty deliberation, Long secured the passage of his Commission report and distributed copies of the resolution to the press hoping the publicity would create a public spectacle and “force an extra session of the Legislature,” or if not that, force the “oil question” as an issue in the state-wide political campaign to start later that year.²⁵ According to Long, the press gave “sensational publicity” to the report.²⁶ After all, his formal position on a state agency meant journalists were required to follow his activities. It brought a swarm of lawyers and lobbyists on behalf of Standard Oil before the commission the following day, along with newspaper reports of his full statement in which he demanded Governor Pleasant call a special session.²⁷

Newspapers obliged Long’s publicity campaign while he solicited public support in the months following the release of his report. An editorial that appears to be written by Long himself, titled “Protect Our Oil Industry,” appeared in the Shreveport *Times* the day after he handed his report to the press.²⁸ A statement he issued appeared that day as well, in which he claimed with little evidence that there was “strong sentiment” in Baton Rouge in favor of an extra session.²⁹ Interestingly, the following day, two days after the initial report, the *Shreveport Journal* ran a front page story that claimed North Louisiana oil operators and businessmen had

²⁴ The Shreveport *Times*, Jan. 5, 1919, 4.

²⁵ Long, *Every Man A King*, 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

²⁷ The *Shreveport Journal*, March 27, 1919, 1; The *Times-Picayune*, March 26, 1919, 1; The *New Orleans States*, March 26, 1919, 3.

²⁸ The Shreveport *Times*, March 27, 1919, 8.

²⁹ The *Shreveport Journal*, March 27, 1919, 1; The *Times-Picayune*, March 28, 1919, 4.

“deluged” Governor Pleasant with telegrams urging an extra session.³⁰ Long likely orchestrated this effort, in light of the specificity of their demands.

In May, the *Shreveport Journal* published a letter a state senator sent to Long that endorsed his fight on behalf of independent oil producers.³¹ Considering the letter is explicitly addressed to Long, it is likely he supplied a copy to the paper himself. Later that month, the *Shreveport Times* and the *New Orleans Item* printed a full-page ad authored by Long that closely resembled the appearance of his circulars. It urged Louisianians to write Governor Pleasant to urge the special session, and presented Standard Oil’s “short resume of crime” that extended over a period of years, and the method by which the company “escaped and avoided” punishment.³²

In the text of that advertisement, Long explained his inability to “match the financial display” made by Standard in the full-page advertisements that he claimed the company purchased in “every paper in the state,” and how the company’s unfair methods were “not unusual procedure.” The time had arrived to protect citizens from the “radical tactics” of foreign financial and political powers, he told readers. “In making the fight I am now waging in defense of the plain citizenship of this state, I am aware and mindful that I may soon face both political and financial destruction.”³³ A similar advertisement appeared in the *Shreveport Journal*, titled “Why the Standard Oil Company Came to Louisiana: A Short History of Freezeouts.” “Save Pine Island!” he pleaded, “The Standard is spending thousands to prevent it.”³⁴

³⁰ The *Shreveport Journal*, March 28, 1919, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, May 16, 1919, 4.

³² The *Shreveport Times*, May 10, 1919, 11; The *New Orleans Item*, May 13, 1919.

³³ The *Shreveport Times*, May 10, 1919, 11.

³⁴ The *Shreveport Journal*, May 21, 1919, 13.

Governor Ruffin G. Pleasant, a strong conservative who became a bitter enemy of Long, however, refused to call a session to order. Some say that Long was not disappointed that he lost this particular political battle because “the oil question” and Standard Oil provided Long, an up-and-coming politician, with endless opportunities to attack and polish his reputation as an underdog and fighter for the common folk or country “hillbillies,” as they were called.³⁵ Long felt it was “bad psychology” to destroy a political enemy. “You always leave a figurehead for your boys to fight against,” he said, “if you don’t they start fighting against themselves.”³⁶

Long chose the political rally at Hot Wells on July 4 to strike again once it became clear Pleasant would not call a special session to order. He also needed to clear his name after he faced accusations by Pleasant’s state fire marshal that he was urging the special session for financial gain. Renditions of Long’s speech appeared on the front page of nearly every large newspaper in the state, and many small papers.³⁷ This was no ordinary speech. According to the *Times-Picayune*’s noteworthy coverage of the rally that day, while candidates for the highest office in the state formally launched their campaign for governor, Long “injected” the Pine Oil situation into state politics with a “severe verbal castigation” of Standard Oil, Governor Pleasant, and the State Fire Marshal W. M. Campbell. He finished the program with a “fiery speech” in which he said, “I see from the newspapers...that one Bill Campbell...has published a lying statement about me in which he charges that I have been using my official position to further my own interests...in giving out his statement attacking me, in my opinion, was the catspaw of Governor Pleasant. I believe that Pleasant is really in fact responsible for Campbell’s attack upon me.”

³⁵ Hodges, “The Politics of Huey Long,” 1.

³⁶ Charles Frampton, interviewed by T. Harry Williams, n.d., box 19, folder 68, THW.

³⁷ New Orleans *States* July 5, 1919, 1; Monroe *News Star*, July 5, 1919, 1; Alexandria *Town Talk*, July 5, 1919, 1; *Times-Picayune*, July 5, 1919, 1; New Orleans *Item*, July 5, 1919, 1.

Long blasted the governor for “trying to fix a soft place for himself as attorney for the Cotton Export Corporation, a job that he can hold after he goes out of office.” Pleasant was “perfectly willing” to convene the Legislature to fix things “so that he could slide into the position as attorney for the cotton corporation,” Long said, “but he is unwilling to call an extra session to prevent the waste of one of the state’s most valuable products and the impoverishment of some of our people through the greed and rapacity of the Standard Oil Company.”³⁸

Then Long pivoted his attack to Standard Oil. For twenty years “the plain Louisiana citizenship” had been the “passive victim of a constant and oft repeated crime,” he proclaimed. The powers “that reign in this state have seen fit to remain quiescent, whilst that organization carries out a policy of destruction to the Louisiana farmers and laborers in order that it may secure wealth which was uncovered by independent citizens of our country.” His purpose, he stated, was to “explain what is happening to that class of people.” Long discussed at length how exactly Standard Oil caused a “freeze-out” of independent oil producers, and how the company spent “much money in distorting facts” to convince the people of Pine Island that the oil was low grade and poor quality, then once the farmers and independent oil men surrendered their property, Standard Oil raised the prices.

Long introduced a whole new type of politics to the state of Louisiana with that speech. Before he appeared on the Railroad Commission, other commissioners had not discussed the issue of regulating large oil trusts in the manner he suggested. In spite of the hostility and resistance of the oil lobby, Long used the press to bring the “oil question” to the forefront of public consciousness. Regardless of whether he earned publicity for his novelty and entertainment, by publishing large portions of his speech, the public not only learned the

³⁸ The *Times-Picayune*, July 5, 1919, 1, 11.

specifics of the “oil question,” but perceived the issue and Long’s perspective as important and worthy of their attention.

“The Worst of it is there are Some People Who Will Believe What He Says”

Newspapers' willingness to publish the entirety of Long’s charges against the established powers of Louisiana explains why the negative publicity he received for his violation of every norm of politics and decency seemed to redound to his advantage--an interesting phenomenon that deserves examination. In the instance that follows, when Governor John M. Parker sued Long for criminal libel in 1921, the press repeated his libelous statements in their entirety. The trial crystallized his political opposition--outraged lawmakers nearly filled a book with denunciations of Long “for most everything in the English language.”³⁹ The press provided extensive space for Long to respond and published verbatim copies of statements he made in defense of himself. By the end of the highly publicized trial, Governor Parker’s testimony “filled the newspapers of the state with propaganda for Huey Long.”⁴⁰

Long never ceased with the oil fight and his claims grew more intense and outrageous each time he went on the offensive. His speech in Hot Wells presented legitimate criticism of the practices of the oil industry that warranted a serious reply from Pleasant and Standard Oil. He led his charge with facts and evidence for his claims. The next time he attacked, however, his charges against the political establishment and the oil industry turned conspiratorial. He issued a series of three circulars that charged the entire state government, from top to bottom, including the governor, was bought and paid for by Standard Oil.⁴¹

³⁹ The Shreveport *Times*, October 3, 1921, 8; New Orleans *Item*, October 2, 1921, 10.

⁴⁰ Hodges, “The Politics of Huey Long,” 31.

⁴¹ The Shreveport *Times*, September 29, 1921, 2.

The circulars ignited “a week of booming fireworks, bombast, charges and counter charges, everything, in fact, save coffee and pistols for two.”⁴² The enormity of his statements, many of his opponents argued, did not deserve the dignity of a response. Others plainly stated that he wanted attention and should be ignored. Accused lawmakers did not contest the substance of what he said so much as they argued Long himself did not belong in politics, and launched a counterattack in an attempt to remove him from the commission. They called him “a publicity hound” who loved and sought notoriety, and that it was “about time to stop him from using the Public Service Commission offices for his own personal benefit.”⁴³

Ironically, Long campaigned for John M. Parker in 1920. He campaigned on behalf of established politicians on numerous occasions before he became governor himself--always in exchange for influence in the making of the candidates’ political agenda once elected. It also guaranteed public attention and opportunities to drum up good publicity for himself. Long convinced Parker to renew his fight against “the oil question” and expand the commission’s regulatory power in exchange for Long’s support in Northern rural parishes. He distributed thousands of circulars in that campaign and led a seventy-day stump tour where he went to “places where no other campaign orator had reached.”⁴⁴ The overriding reason to vote for Parker, Long explained, was that Parker was hostile to the large oil interests.⁴⁵

Parker won the 1920 election and Long credited himself with the victory, but soon after his inauguration when Long called on him to expand his regulatory authority, Parker disavowed Long and his promise to fight against the large corporate interests of the state. Long describes their falling out in his autobiography: “Here I saw a phenomenon that has frequently presented

⁴² The Shreveport *Times*, October 3, 1921, 8.

⁴³ The *Times-Picayune*, September 30, 1921, 2; Alexandria *Town Talk*, October 1, 1921, 5.

⁴⁴ Long, *Every Man A King*, 48.

⁴⁵ Williams, *Huey Long*, 134.

itself in the after years....The crowd of wiseacres, skilled at flattery and repartee, surrounded our newly elected governor....before long he was made to see how much bigger his majority might have been but for the ‘hindrance’ of such ‘objectionables’ such as myself. He made his own program with the help of Standard Oil lawyers. But the governor had made too many promises to oppose us in the open.”⁴⁶

By 1921, Long collected enough evidence against Parker to make a convincing public attack on his administration. Parker promised during the campaign to revise the state tax structure to force large corporations to bear a more equitable share of the tax burden. The provisions of the Louisiana severance tax on companies extracting natural resources were especially loose and difficult to enforce and needed changing. Parker proposed a two percent tax rate but under the pretense of a “gentlemen’s agreement” with Standard Oil in which he vowed to not increase the tax during his term. He also made the fateful error of agreeing to let Standard’s lawyers write the law themselves. The severance tax inevitably became a topic of contestation at a constitutional convention that convened in 1921, with many legislators advocating for a higher rate similar to Long.⁴⁷

Parker intervened as a mediator in the deliberations, arguing that a higher rate violated his agreement with Standard. The convention ultimately ended with a compromise on all sides, and at which point Parker called Standard’s treasurer to ask if the company concurred with the proposed compromise.⁴⁸ Despite campaigning as a reform politician, Parker’s convention hardly accomplished a single progressive measure. The convention did change the name of the Railroad Commission to the Public Service Commission and somewhat expanded its regulatory powers,

⁴⁶ Long, *Every Man A King*, 48.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴⁸ *New Orleans Item*, November 4, 1921.

but it “did not take much perception to realize that Parker and the ruling class had blundered badly.”⁴⁹

The severance tax issue continued to stir controversy when legislators returned later that year for a special session to enact mandates from the convention. Proponents of the tax again pushed to raise the rate to three percent. Shortly after they convened, they found on their desks, with additional copies scattered in the halls of the capitol, the libelous circular authored by Long in which he plainly stated Standard Oil ran the Parker administration. “As a means of forcing upon the state legislation injurious to the people, but highly profitable and beneficial to the Standard Oil trust and its allied corporate monopolies,” Long wrote, “you have seen an administration trade in offices which belong to the people, and barter them away in a manner unbecoming an ancient ruler of a Turkish domain. Better to have taken the gold hoarded in the Standard Oil vaults at 26 Broadway and deliberately purchase the votes with which the administration has ruled this state for nearly two years, than to have brow-beaten, bulldozed and intimidated the legislature for the benefit of the corporate interests through the free use of the people’s patronage.” “Bold and amazing is the governor’s cry that he has no bill to submit to you, for the reason is that it is at 26 Broadway for its final polish...Corporate government in this state is soon to meet its doom...When you have fallen prey to the peoples’ disgust, Mr. Law-Maker, you will longer be of no use or power to this corporate element...Don’t make the mistake made by our late ex-governor, who now...would, no doubt, even renounce the ‘invisible empire’ which controlled his administration...you cannot, in good conscience, allow to be bartered for public plunder.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Long, *Every Man A King*, 145.

⁵⁰ The Shreveport *Times*, September 29, 1921, 2.

Long did not provide any basis for the claims in the first circular he issued on September 27, but regardless of his lack of factual evidence, many newspapers reprinted the full text of the circular.⁵¹ Resentful legislators immediately issued a strong rebuke, which many papers published alongside the text of the circular. The press gave prominent attention to a speech delivered by a House member, who said he ordinarily would treat such “scurrilous” attacks with “the contempt they so richly deserve,” but that as a lawmaker and member of the convention he felt called upon to say that “any charge directly or indirectly made which seeks to connect me with the Standard Oil Company or subject to ‘the club of executive power and the bludgeon of wealth’ is not only false and libelous, without foundation in fact, but it worse than that, in that it is as false as the coinage of hell itself.”⁵²

Long clearly struck a nerve. The day he issued the first circular, the *Shreveport Journal* published a statement made by a House member that charged Long was drunk in Baton Rouge and “lit up like a Christmas tree.”⁵³ During debate over a resolution permitting light wine and beer, a House member said he opposed “any measure that would make it easier for Huey Long to get liquor, because if he got any more there would be no living with this self-anointed critic.”⁵⁴ Nearly every large paper repeated the drunkenness charge, but many also published a statement of denial Long issued that same day.⁵⁵ Long threatened to sue the Shreveport paper for \$25,000 and eventually got into a fist fight with the editor, and the two fought until the editor was bleeding at the mouth.⁵⁶

⁵¹ The full text of the first circular also appeared in the *Alexandria Town Talk* on September 28, 1921, 1; *The Times-Picayune* September 28, 1921, 1; *The Shreveport Times*, September 29, 1921, 2.

⁵² *New Orleans Item*, September 28, 1921, 6.

⁵³ *The Shreveport Journal*, September 28, 1921, 2.

⁵⁴ *Baton Rouge State Times*, September 29, 1921, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, September 29, 1921, 8; *The Times-Picayune*, September 29, 1921, 2.

⁵⁶ *The Times-Picayune*, October 7, 1921, 1; *The Times-Picayune*, October 9, 1921, 4; *New Orleans States*, October 8, 1921.

Long issued another circular quickly after the first. “The poor deluded friends of the governor!” he said. “Some of them have managed to get some of their supporters appointments to office which plunder has brought upon them the duty of defending administration acts...in days when the invisible empire ruled this state from behind the silken veil, there would have been an impeachment move begun had the people known what they now know to be true with regard to the preparation of those laws.”⁵⁷ The circular also stated as evidence of corporate rule the appointment of a son of a Standard Oil attorney as the superintendent of the Charity hospital in New Orleans. “It can be no longer doubted that the invisible empire which heretofore controlled this state has now become an open, visible and actual control of our state affairs.”⁵⁸ The *New Orleans Item*, *Shreveport Times*, *Alexandria Town Talk*, and *Shreveport Journal* printed the full text of the circular. ⁵⁹

Lawmakers responded with another outburst. One House member suggested the legislature “appoint a lunacy commission to inquire into the sanity of Huey Long,” another called him “one of those specimens of humanity who doesn't know the difference between notoriety and fame. I do not think this body should pay any further attention to him.”⁶⁰ A member from North Louisiana said that he knew “the immortal Huey since he had molasses in his beard and cockleburs in his hair” and that he simply wanted attention and should be ignored. Another said they knew Long planned to run for governor and was simply advertising himself, and that “We all know Huey Long. He likes the notoriety that the case has been giving him. The

⁵⁷ The *Times-Picayune*, September 29, 1921, 1.

⁵⁸ *New Orleans Item*, September 29, 1921, 16.

⁵⁹ *New Orleans Item*, September 29, 1921, 16; *The Shreveport Times*, September 29, 1921, 2; *Alexandria Town Talk*, September 28, 1921, 1; *Shreveport Journal*, September 29, 1921, 1, 3.

⁶⁰ The *Times-Picayune*, September 30, 1921, 2; *Shreveport Journal*, September 29, 1921, 1.

more we notice him the more circular letters he will write and the worst of it is there are some people who will believe what he says.”⁶¹

Long distributed a third and final circular on October 2. The New Orleans *Item* said his response to lawmakers was “beautifully simple.” He said “everybody who speaks disrespectfully of him is on the Standard Oil payroll or else controlled by the wicked Parker patronage. Here it is just as he tells it himself.”⁶² Long said in the circular that the counterattack made against him was itself “proof” that the state administration leaders in the House were “tied hand and foot to the Standard Oil Company and its allied associates.” He said, “I can go down the line and trace every man who gave utterance to a falsehood against me and show that he either is on the payroll of the Standard Oil Company or else directly or indirectly a beneficiary or recipient of the state administration patronage which the taxpayers support.”

Long explained how Parker not only failed to “drive the Standard Oil lobby from the state house” as he had promised, but that “he refused to act at all and left the bunch to parade in glory in the capitol building.” The circular continued: “Some few days ago Mr. Parker gave out the written and printed statement that the tax law had been written by two attorneys and the treasurer of [Standard]. Later he let it be known that the bill, as written, had been sent to 26 Broadway for its final approval. Every man in Louisiana who reads a paper has seen these statements...Yet, without giving any reason, some man just gets up in the House and says that my statement is not correct. Why isn't it? Answer, Mr. Parker, did not these lawyers and officials...write that severance tax bill?”⁶³

⁶¹ Alexandria *Town Talk*, October 1, 1921, 5.

⁶² New Orleans *Item*, October 2, 1921, 10.

⁶³ New Orleans *States*, October 2, 1921, 14; Baton Rouge *State Times*, October 3, 1921, 1.

Prior to bombarding the legislature with his circulars, Long claimed to reporters at a commission hearing that the other two members of the Railroad Commission had received favors in exchange for political influence from the Cumberland Telephone and Telegraph company, another powerful corporation. Aside from his statements about Governor Parker and lawmakers, the enormity of Long's accusations against his colleagues, House members argued, required a formal investigation, which they hoped might save-face and bring evidence of wrongdoing on Long's part to justify removing him from the commission.

News that the House planned to investigate and possibly impeach Long created sensational publicity, before even more sensational news broke that Governor Parker was suing Long on charges of criminal libel.⁶⁴ The nature of the allegation that the whole state government was bought out by Standard Oil was too outrageous to be true, but Long provided just enough truth that one could believe his claims if they chose to. His statements were also the subject of front-page news stories for a week and needed to be addressed. When Parker filed his suit, he issued a statement saying that "attacks from such irresponsible individuals are not worthy of notice, but when an official elected by the people makes direct charges against the governor of the state...if these charges are true, I am unfit to be governor; and if, on the contrary, these attacks are willfully and maliciously false then such an official should be dismissed from office and put in jail."⁶⁵

Impeachment of Long in the House never materialized, and the libel trial, which lasted for a week, ended with a conviction on technical grounds which many saw as vindication for Long. Verbatim transcripts of Huey's testimony covered the pages of newspapers. One paper

⁶⁴ Baton Rouge *State Times*, October 3, 1921, 1; *Times-Picayune*, October 4, 1921, 1; *Shreveport Journal*, October 3, 1921, 1; The Shreveport *Times*, October 4, 1921, 1.

⁶⁵ The *Times-Picayune*, October 4, 1921, 1.

wrote afterward that “They don’t know Huey Long. They never saw him and would not know him if he stepped off the train at our station. But, they know him in name and you can’t make them believe he is not their defender.”⁶⁶

The day the trial formally ended, the New Orleans *States* published on its front page a letter authored by Long with the headline, “Long Dares Parker to Face Real Charges--Standard at State’s Throat, We Proved It, He Declares.” Long reiterated in the letter the veracity of his statements, which he claimed to have proven during the trial, saying, “It is quite striking to note that a great deal of these facts, a great majority of them, were admitted by the governor.”⁶⁷ The Baton Rouge *State Times* also published a full copy of the letter under the headline: “Fight in State Just Beginning Says Huey Long--Commissioner Declares Various Facts ‘Proved’ At Trial.”⁶⁸ The New Orleans *States* published an additional statement Long issued to legislators with the headline: “Long Out In New Spicy Statement--Says Whole State Will Rejoice if Governor Resigns.” His statement touched on the hypocrisy of Parker’s “gentlemen’s agreement” with Standard Oil and betrayal of the citizens who had voted him into office.⁶⁹ The simple fact was that Parker had done what Long accused him of--that is, he abandoned the progressive pledges made during his campaign, and then permitted a Standard Oil attorney to write the severance tax law.

The public weighed in after the trial. In an editorial titled “What’s the Reason,” a frustrated citizen opined that “In the case of Huey Long, charged with libeling Governor Parker, we always thought too much notoriety was given in the beginning, during the trial of the case and when [the] sentence was pronounced. It looked like a tempest in a teapot. There was so little

⁶⁶ New Orleans *States*, November 11 and 14, 1921.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, November 10, 1921, 1.

⁶⁸ Baton Rouge *State Times*, November 10, 1921, 1.

⁶⁹ New Orleans *States*, November 15, 1921, 4.

of public importance attached to the whole matter that we should hardly discern why so much fuss and feather came out of it, why the big claim that Huey would be a hero win or lose, or what there was in the trial to make Huey a State figure.”⁷⁰ A Long supporter from North Louisiana shared a similar sentiment, that the case was blown out of proportion. “We hold no brief to defend Mr. Long and Governor Parker needs none, and there is no fault to be found with the verdict of the court but...the trouble with Governor Parker and [others] is that they take our Huey too seriously. His home folks know better than to do that, but when he is in trouble, we must stick to him like a fever tick does to a Sabine parish cow.”⁷¹

Conclusion

In the words of biographer William Ivy Hair, Huey Long illustrates the appropriateness of a political career for someone with the combination of “skills, mania for attention, and urge to dominate others.”⁷² His appearances in the press were not a random occurrence, as this chapter reveals. He assumed an active role in orchestrating news events that kept him in the forefront of public attention. The “Pine Oil situation” and his speech in Hot Wells illustrates the first of many instances over the course of a decade in which he used the Railroad Commission as a conduit for publicizing himself. He used his powers as Commissioner to thrust new issues into debate and directed public attention toward facts he could slant in his favor and remind potential supporters of later on when he asked for their vote.

Long shows how populists need the “oxygen of publicity” to exist.⁷³ His constant appearances in the press bestowed status and prestige to his public image, which ultimately

⁷⁰ *The Richland Beacon-News*, November 19, 1921, 2.

⁷¹ *The Colfax Chronicle*, November 26, 1921, 2.

⁷² William Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long*, (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 144.

⁷³ Toril Aalberg and Claes H. de Vreese, *Populist Political Communication in Europe, Introduction: Comprehending Populist Political Communication* (Routledge, 2016), 2.

enhanced perceptions of his authority and legitimacy. While he was persuasive in his own right, to wield actual political influence required he cultivate a reputation as a serious political contestant who could be effective within the existing political system.⁷⁴ The mere appearance of an individual in the news media signifies worthiness and importance.⁷⁵ To be singled out from the large anonymous masses means one's opinions are significant enough to warrant public examination, and to be ignored by the press suggests the opposite.

As a testament to this point, Long's failed campaign for governor in 1924 was not because of newspaper hostility but of neglect. According to one scholar, a careful perusal of the *Times-Picayune* in the months before the election shows that Long was seldom mentioned, except to say how he was losing ground in one section of the state or another and trailing far behind the other candidates.⁷⁶ The state was badly divided along religious lines over the subject of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1924 election, and Long, who refused to engage in racial disputes, avoided the issue altogether. His reluctance to weigh in on the central issue of the election meant he was not relevant or important enough to command press attention.

Not just *if* but *how* an individual is featured in the news media influences their social standing and whether the public is receptive of their ideas. Long's clash with Governor Parker in the libel trial illustrates populists' unique dynamic with the press. The idea that "any press is good press" apparently rings true for populists. The same reasons for why they become the object of negative press reports are precisely the same reasons why they are found appealing. In Long's case, the trial crystallized his opposition in the elite establishment while at the same time

⁷⁴ Linda Bos and Wouter van der Brug, "Public images of leaders of anti-immigration parties: Perceptions of legitimacy and effectiveness," *Party Politics* 16, no. 6 (2010): 779.

⁷⁵ Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, *Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), 20.

⁷⁶ Hodges, "The Politics of Huey Long," 271.

provided convincing evidence that he was not a part of the entrenched elite. He leveraged negative attention to present himself as a needed disruption to the status quo, and an admirable and trustworthy outsider who was untainted by power.

It is a truism that the news media “simply cannot ignore what is newsworthy.”⁷⁷ While many established public figures dismissed him as a “publicity hound” who sought notoriety for the sake of vanity or personal fame, his press agency accomplished far more than just social recognition. He deliberately committed outrageous acts to make an opportunity to present and explain his perspective. Characters like Long, “be it in Cuba, Mexico or Louisiana,” rise through insurgency.⁷⁸ He rose against the domination of single-party rule, against his political enemies and the enmity of powerful corporations, he “endured calumny and ridicule, and both enhanced his popularity--thus overthrowing a holy American axiom.”⁷⁹

By the time he ran for governor in 1928, he had “milked the Public Service Commission for about all the publicity it could provide.”⁸⁰ As the following chapter illustrates, the impeachment of Long in 1929 marked the end of his symbiotic relationship with the mainstream press. The state’s most influential newspapers--once his chief political tool--became openly hostile and advocated for his removal.

⁷⁷ Steward Mazzoleni and Julianne Horsfield, *The media and neo-populism: A contemporary comparative analysis* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 6.

⁷⁸ Beals, *The Inside Story of Huey Long*, 17.

⁷⁹ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 35-36.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 144.

Chapter II. When “Lyingnewspapers” Became a Byword

“Sensational charges were flying all over the streets” during the impeachment of Governor Huey Long in March 1929.¹ Newspapers covered their pages inside and out with vituperation spewing from the state Capitol. Determined to “cut off his political head once and for all,” his enemies “raked up every charge from bad manners to a murder plot.”² Amidst the chaos of the proceedings, a former Long campaign manager sent a statement to the press with a warning that Long would “return to the public eye as a martyr” if newspapers denied him a fair and impartial trial. The more newspapers attacked, the more righteous Long appeared, he explained, many people believe “that the newspapers and corporations are trying to cut Huey Long’s throat.” The proceedings should be conducted “free from extraneous influences” he pleaded, “with only such publicity as is necessary in order to give the facts to the people.”³

Long never ceased his fight against Standard Oil and the political establishment, and the effects of possessing power appeared to drive him to act more recklessly and ruthlessly. The threat of impeachment lingered like a dark cloud over his entire career and appeared again in 1929 when he ordered a special session to levy a controversial manufacturers’ tax on oil refineries--a clear jab at Standard Oil. The session he called to order quickly spiraled from his control as lawmakers, with support and direction from the conservative elite of the New Orleans Ring, brought forth a slew of disturbing allegations about his activities during his first year as governor. Virtually every paper was “shouting for his head” in light of the charges, which ranged from misuse of state funds to bribery to attempted murder.⁴ Aside from the indictment he faced,

¹ The *Times-Picayune*, March 28, 1929, 1.

² Carleton Beals, *The Inside Story of Huey Long: America’s Amazing Threat to Democracy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Co., 1935), 9.

³ The *Times-Picayune*, March 28, 1929, 1.

⁴ Beals, *The Inside Story of Huey Long*, 9.

however, Long's activities in preceding months provided all the evidence necessary for the press to conclude his unfitness for office.

During impeachment, as this chapter will illustrate, newspapers became openly hostile toward Long and provided him minimal space to explain his position or defend himself. He naturally defaulted to his trusty circulars to fight removal from office when he could no longer amplify his messages through the press. Few newspapers, however, published the content of his circulars, and most did not publish any text at all. More than that, the press cried foul at his propaganda "smoke screen," and for using taxpayers' dollars to turn the executive offices into a "publicity bureau" with state employees working to produce the circulars at his behest.

Before impeachment, according to the *New Orleans States*, Long "never had a single statement that he sent to the New Orleans press turned down, despicable as has been his attitude in dealing with the local newspapers."⁵ During impeachment, "The truth was not to be had from the daily newspapers. They made all manner of displays, distorting every kind of fact," Long claimed. "If we gave them a reply to a charge it was generally ignored all together, or else distorted, deleted or hidden away so as to be worse than no publicity at all."⁶ The press ignored his former campaign manager's warnings. Impeachment, his "clever victory," enhanced his popularity and "helped make him lord and master of his state," his enemies "made him a national figure."⁷

This chapter examines the turning point in Long's relations with the Louisiana press that occurred in early 1929 and illustrates the intensity and type of press opposition that culminated in impeachment. More importantly, this chapter will show how he used his circulars in an

⁵ *Shreveport Journal*, April 8, 1929, 9.

⁶ Huey Long, *Every Man A King* (National Book Company, 1933), 146.

⁷ Beals, *The Inside Story of Huey Long*, 12.

attempt to undermine public trust in the press, discredit newspapers' criticism, and transform their hostility into validation of his political program. In the impeachment circular campaign, more than any other, Long made the term "lying newspaper" a byword, thereafter, "hundreds of thousands of Louisianians ran the words together like that."⁸

The "Fated" Turning Point in the Press-Long Dynamic

Long's own activities precipitated the end of his symbiotic relationship with the press. In the early months of 1929, an acrimonious and very public falling-out between Long and Colonel Robert Ewing, the politically influential owner of the New Orleans *States*, Shreveport *Times*, and Monroe *News-World*, foreshadowed the press opposition to come during the impeachment fight.⁹ Long found it necessary to form alliances with a number of establishment figures like Ewing, and "go to bed with his enemies" in order to supplement his rural support with votes in New Orleans and other urban areas.¹⁰ No candidate for governor could win without the massive bloc of voters in New Orleans, which was firmly under the control of the conservative "Old Regulars" or "the Ring."

Like other opportunistic politicians who wanted a stake in the future and hoped to ride into power with him, Ewing saw Long as a rising star and formidable political contender. He assumed the role of a prime minister who would oversee important decisions, but once installed in power Long proved to be impervious and uncontrollable.¹¹ Little did his allies know they would be "rudely shown the door and put out in the cold for twelve long years by little Huey

⁸ Harnett Kane, *Huey Long's Louisiana Hayride* (William Morrow & Company, 1941), 74.

⁹ Margaret Martin, "Colonel Robert Ewing, Louisiana journalist and politician" (master's Thesis, Louisiana State University, 1964), 16.

¹⁰ Curtis Hodges, "The Politics of Huey Long" (master's thesis, Louisiana State University, 1940), 42.

¹¹ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 341.

when they opposed his program.”¹² He “had the whip for a change,” and “never failed to wield it with a strong and firm hand.”¹³

Long said that he had no intention of ever relenting to Ewing, and it appears he intentionally forced their break-up.¹⁴ When a delegation from the anti-Long stronghold of Caddo Parish visited Long in the executive offices at the Capitol to request his help in securing a federal bid for an army air base in Shreveport, he stubbornly responded with an ultimatum. The Shreveport *Times* and the rest of Caddo Parish had “got to get right” before it would get “a damned thing” from his administration, he told the group, “I will teach you to bow your heads damned low when Huey Long comes to town.”¹⁵ A few months later he ordered a detachment of the state’s national guard to raid gambling houses in St. Bernard parish on the outskirts of New Orleans, a city where gambling operated in the open. Repeated raids left his enemies thoroughly horrified at the crude manner in which they were executed. Guardsmen burst into establishments in St. Bernard with guns drawn and, in some places, women had been searched for money. Worst of all he used the state militia. Soldiers destroyed private establishments without search warrants and without a declaration of martial law.¹⁶

Colonel Robert Ewing’s son, John D. Ewing, who Long later nicknamed “the Clown Prince of the Bow Wow Dynasty,” served as the associate publisher of the Shreveport *Times* and chaired the Caddo delegation whose petition for the airbase Long snubbed.¹⁷ John Ewing disagreed with his father’s decision to support Long--he and Long were bitter enemies.¹⁸ Long’s mistreatment of Ewing’s son, and the national guardsmen’s search of women, which particularly

¹² Hodges, “The Politics of Huey Long,” 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Long, *Every Man A King*, 115.

¹⁵ *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, April 6, 1929, 2.

¹⁶ Williams, *Huey Long*, 341.

¹⁷ *The Louisiana Progress*, July 24, 1930, 1.

¹⁸ Martin, “Colonel Robert Ewing,” 33.

disgusted Ewing, forced the break. A giddy New Orleans *Item* headline told of their falling-out: “Dropping the Pilot/Young Kaiser Sends His Iron Chancellor Over the Side/Long-Ewing Row Fated/Both Demanded to Rule Everything, Observers Point Out.”¹⁹

Ewing became Long’s foremost nemesis in the press, and a few short weeks later, “in the lead of all those directing impeachment.”²⁰ Ewing penned an editorial for the front-page of the *States* after their falling out that referred to Long as a “Prince of Ingrates” and a “Knight of the Double-Cross.”²¹ He described the governor as “drunk with power and aspiring to be the Tyrant of Louisiana,” and added that “providing his delusions of grandeur are to continue, if he does not soon return to normalcy, his administration is doomed to fail.”²²

Long’s growing frustration with the press at the time of his falling-out with Ewing led him to call up the city editor of the New Orleans *Item* with a demand. “I’m damn tired of these reporters bothering me all the time. Have you got one man over there that’s got any sense at all that I can talk with,” he shouted. “Put that son-of-a-bitch on the phone.” Long frequently called that “son-of-a-bitch” reporter to his room in the top suite of the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans “when he wanted some publicity.” According to Charles Frampton, the *Item* reporter who he ultimately forged a friendship with, Long told him he knew all the papers in the state were against him, most of all the *Item*, and that they would change the story when Frampton handed it in. But Long never asked him to slant the news on his behalf, all he asked is that Frampton present the facts.²³ Aside from Frampton, after impeachment he was reluctant to meet with

¹⁹ New Orleans *Item*, February 3, 1929, 1.

²⁰ Long, *Every Man A King*, 156.

²¹ The Shreveport *Times*, February 19, 1929, 1.

²² New Orleans *States*, February 18, 1929, 1; Shreveport *Times*, February 19, 1929, 1; Alexandria *Town Talk*, February 18, 1929, 1; Monroe *News-Star*, February 19, 1929, 1; Shreveport *Journal*, February 18, 1929, 1; *Times-Picayune*, February 19, 1929, 1; Baton Rouge *State Times*, February 18, 1929, 1; New Orleans *Item*, February 18, 1929, 1.

²³ Charles Frampton, interviewed by T. Harry Williams, n.d., box 19, folder 68, THW.

reporters, who he believed did not give him fair treatment even if he cooperated. Instead, he issued statements directly to the press to ensure at least some degree of accuracy, but with little success.

A political hegemon, Ewing's active opposition to Long paved the way for other papers to follow suit when a few weeks later in March 1929, Long proposed the controversial manufacturers' tax. Long needed the tax, he argued, to fund the various proposals successfully passed during the first regular session of his term, including his promises of free textbooks for school children and facilities for the "lame, halt, and the blind."²⁴ His conservative opponents and the press, on the other hand, condemned the "spite tax" as an attempt to punish Standard Oil and proof of his temperamental unfitness. Furthermore, both parties argued, the manufacturers' tax de-incentivized future development and industry and jeopardized the prosperity of the state's economy. The Standard Oil Company was the largest oil refinery in the world at that time and considered "the heart of Baton Rouge's existence."²⁵ Its base of operations in the capital city employed 8,000 Louisianians of the population of 30,000, plus an additional 18,000 throughout the state.²⁶ The tax was calculated to cost Standard Oil an extra \$3 million a year, and Standard's president warned that the tax might cause the company to shut down its Baton Rouge refinery.²⁷

Little did Long realize that within a week the session he called to order would be transformed into the stage for his own political execution. Opposition quickly organized in the House by bitter lawmakers who, merely three months prior in December 1928, Long had forced to authorize \$30 million worth of bonds to fund his road building program.²⁸ More than just

²⁴ Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate*, March 29, 1929, 1.

²⁵ New Orleans *Item-Tribune*, "Kingdom of the Kingfish" article series by Hermann Deutsch, August 16, 1939.

²⁶ Richard White, *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long* (New York: Random House, 2006), 61.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Shreveport *Times*, December 15, 1928, 1.

criticism of the tax, hostile legislators seized on rumors floating around the capitol that Long doled out two state jobs to secure votes in the special session, and condemned his actions in a House resolution that received extensive press coverage.²⁹

Alarmed editors and publishers of the state's largest and most influential papers declared their opposition to the tax in stronger terms than members of the legislature. The *Shreveport Journal*, among the earliest dissenters of Long's proposed special session, dubbed the "nefarious" tax "a form of prosecution" and said it presented additional evidence of his "hostile spirit" against industry.³⁰ The *New Orleans Item*, an opponent of Long on par with Ewing's *States*, pleaded for "no more tax extortion," and played up fears that "Standard May Throw 2000 Out of Work."³¹

The editor of the *Item*, Marshall Ballard, described as a "doughty battler for a cleaner brand of politics," opposed the governor long before his inauguration.³² As with other conservative Louisianians, Ballard saw Long's victory in 1928 as the elevation of a radical and demagogue and especially opposed any increase of taxes for the purposes of funding his socialist programs.³³ The *Item* reminded Louisianians that his latest "crack-brain" tax added to the "tens and tens of millions" of their tax dollars already subjected to expenditure "by a man whose personality and actions, plainly demonstrated in his public acts," made his "mental balance gravely debatable."³⁴

The Baton Rouge *State Times* and *Morning Advocate*, both owned by the distinguished Charles Manship, ordinarily maintained neutrality on political issues but took a clear position

²⁹ Baton Rouge *State Times*, March 19, 1929, 1.

³⁰ *Shreveport Journal*, March 19, 1929, 1.

³¹ *New Orleans Item*, March 24, 1929, 1; *New Orleans Item*, March 18, 1929, 1.

³² *Congressional Record*, A1686, Proceedings and Debates of the 83rd congress, vol. 99, part 10, first session, March 23, 1953-May 18, 1953; *New Orleans Item* August 30, 1923.

³³ Martin, "Colonel Robert Ewing," 19.

³⁴ *New Orleans Item*, March 24, 1929, 1.

against Long's "spite tax."³⁵ The Manship papers published front-page editorials critical of Long every day from March 18 when the special session convened until April 6 when lawmakers voted on the first article of impeachment. The *State Times* issued a warning to the public on the first day of the session. "Oil is now put up before the firing squad. But the next interests to go will be the lumber interests...Then after that will likely be the sugar refineries."³⁶ "The prosperity of Louisiana is at stake today," the *Morning Advocate* lamented, "All the years of planning and building and hoping of the part of a far-sighted citizenry has suddenly been jeopardized by the personal whim of a man thrown by chance into a position where he can exercise that whim to the detriment of an industry which he conceives to be antagonistic to him."³⁷

The press did not have reasonable justification to demand impeachment until a few days after the session convened, when the *State Times* issued a scathing report of the governor's depraved tactics in a front-page editorial, titled "This, Gentlemen, Is the Way Your Governor Fights." Long's growing frustration with the Manship papers' editorial opposition compelled him to send the owner a message. "Tell Manship that if he don't lay off of me, I am going to have to publish a list of the names of the people who are fighting me who have relatives in the insane asylum." Manship beat Long to the punch and published the threat in that front-page editorial, which said: "I have a brother, named Douglas Manship. He is in the East Louisiana Hospital...I might say, however, that my brother Douglas, whom Governor Long has brought into the discussion, is about the same age of the governor. He was in France in 1918 wearing the uniform of a United States soldier, while Governor Long was campaigning for office."³⁸

³⁵ New Orleans *Item-Tribune*, August 16, 1939; Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate*, March 19, 1929, 1.

³⁶ Baton Rouge *State Times*, March 18, 1929, 1.

³⁷ Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate*, March 18, 1929, 1.

³⁸ Baton Rouge *State Times*, March 21, 1929, 1.

The *Item* called Long's threat "the most vicious personal attack brought into Louisiana state politics in more than a generation."³⁹ Stories and editorials condemning his intimidation of Manship appeared in virtually every newspaper in the state, and whispers of a possible impeachment circulated the Capitol. Long felt no compunction repeating the abuse a few weeks later, while during a speaking tour to raise public opposition to impeachment he said that "they say I made a terrible offense because they say the insanity of this young man, the brother of Manship, is due to shell shock in the World war. That ain't so--it is due to a venereal disease, the records show."⁴⁰

Just when press opposition reached a crescendo, Long ordered one of his last remaining allies in the statehouse, Speaker of the House John B. Fournet, to adjourn the special session *sine die*.⁴¹ Anti-Long forces, however, planned a counterattack in anticipation of his move to thwart impeachment. As Fournet initiated the move for adjournment, a House member rose without recognition with an affidavit in hand, signed by Long's former bodyguard who claimed the governor ordered him to assassinate Representative J. Y. Sanders, an outspoken critic of Long. Pandemonium broke loose in the House, "blood and fire shone from every pair of eyes," according to Long. "Amidst the wildest scenes of disorder, marked by general fist fighting," Long's opposition successfully blocked the move to adjourn.⁴²

The events of Bloody Monday, as it was later called, combined with the affidavit and the alleged "growing tide of resentment sweeping Louisiana," provided newspapers justification to demand impeachment proceedings.⁴³ The New Orleans press, the *Times-Picayune*, *Item* and

³⁹ New Orleans *Item*, March 21, 1929, 1.

⁴⁰ *Times-Picayune*, May 2, 1929, 1, 3.

⁴¹ *Times-Picayune*, March 23, 1929, 1.

⁴² Long, *Every Man A King*, 134; *Times-Picayune*, March 26, 1929, 1.

⁴³ Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate*, March 21, 1929, 1.

States, harmonized in their plea to rid the state of Long. In a front-page editorial the *Times-Picayune*, previously considered the most tolerant of the large newspapers toward Long, plainly stated its intentions to “support any properly organized movement to compel Governor Long to vacate his office.”⁴⁴ The *Times-Picayune* explained that Long was “temperamentally and otherwise unfit to hold the office. His tactics and methods reveal him to be a cruel political tyrant, willing to resort to almost any expediency to carry out his own wishes and purposes.”⁴⁵

The *State Times* and *Morning Advocate* described Long’s administration as a “reign of tyranny and lawlessness” and said that he “flouted the law,” “violated the Constitution,” and “sustained himself by bullying and by threats.”⁴⁶ The *Manship* papers urged lawmakers to “re-established constitutional government in the statehouse” and move forward with impeachment because “free men--decent men, who respect themselves and who love their state can do no less.”⁴⁷

The “Sinews of War” and the Impeachment Circular Campaign

Nineteen impeachment charges were drafted overnight by a small group of legislators and lawyers. In addition to the assassination affidavit and his intimidation of *Manship*, among the other charges were that he bribed lawmakers with state jobs, misappropriated state funds to purchase a car, and a catch-all article of impeachment that cited his temperamental unfitness and incompetency. Long immediately formulated plans to resist removal from office and counter the negative publicity teeming from the press. He felt that he needed to do something to “acquaint the people with the facts” of his enemies politically motivated impeachment ploy.⁴⁸ He always

⁴⁴ *Shreveport Journal*, March 23, 1929, 1.

⁴⁵ *Times-Picayune*, March 27, 1929, 1.

⁴⁶ *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, March 26, 1929, 1.

⁴⁷ *Baton Rouge State Times*, March 26, 1929, 1; *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, March 26, 1.

⁴⁸ Long, *Every Man A King*, 146.

turned to his base of support in moments of crisis. However much the “better elements” in Louisiana hated him, he always maintained the loyalty of the masses.⁴⁹

Long rarely, if ever, addressed accusations made against him head on. During impeachment, he diverted attention from the charges by obscuring the reasons why his opposition sought to impeach him. By simplifying the reasons for impeachment into the tax on Standard Oil, he reframed the context of the indictment he faced as a vindictive persecution at the hands of a deep-rooted, malevolent force. He dismissed allegations against him in one broad sweep, as illustrated by the first circular he distributed during impeachment that bore the title, “The Same Fight Again--Standard Oil Company vs. Huey P. Long.”

Long issued the first of four circulars he distributed during the impeachment fight on March 28, two days after the formal initiation of impeachment proceedings. The text of the circular read, in part, “Newspapers of Standard Oil Company Battle to Keep this Nefarious Corporation...From Paying Any Reasonable Tax at All...People of Louisiana: I had rather go down to a thousand impeachments than to admit that I am the governor of the State that does not dare to call the Standard Oil Company to account so that we can educate our children and care for [the] destitute sick and afflicted. If this State is still to be riled by the power of the money of this corporation, I am too weak for its governor....They’ve fought me harder this time than ever before. Where they poured out hundreds in other fights, they have poured out ten thousand in this one. They have covered their newspapers front, inside and out with every imaginable lie and vilification; they have stormed the State House to where the weak hearted feared even for the life and safety of my supporters and myself. By a process known only to them they have been able to either ‘take over, to beat over or to buy over’ some in whom I had reposed respect and

⁴⁹ Beals, *The Inside Story of Huey Long*, 12.

confidence and for whom I yet indulge a charity...I cannot answer newspaper lies every hour, minute and second. Standard Oil newspapers are now, as a matter of association, compelled to cover up the nefarious interest. They told you they would impeach me if I tried to carry out my platform on which I was elected and they are now trying to do it.”⁵⁰

A small box of text in the center of the circular contained a speech by pro-Long Representative George Delesdernier of Plaquemines Parish with the title “Cross of Gold.” “Nineteen hundred years ago the Great Teacher who fought for the crippled, the lame, the halt and the blind was damned, vilified, persecuted and then crucified because He went about His work,” the speech read. “You here, now fighting Huey P. Long, have fought him always. But, it is not Long you are fighting. You are striking at the people who are poor and downtrodden and you are trying to crucify the most real man they have ever had in this State who works for them and risks his own position before he would turn them down. I’ll go down fighting like a man, like a follower of that Teacher,--I’ll not cast my vote against that man whom you tried to force to forget his oath to humanity,--I’m for Huey P. Long first, last and all the time. When I used to read of him I never could credit him with so much sincerity for humanity, and never until I saw him risk himself and dare the forces of power and plunder who threaten his destruction, unless he yielded, did I think a man like him existed in this State. You are trying to crucify him on a Cross of Gold. Beware,--you’re acting against him. There is a power even on earth above you to which you must account. I VOTE NO.”

Long wrote the text of every circular he ever issued. During the impeachment fight he relied on state employees of the Highway Commission to distribute the mass of materials, which according to Long proved to be so effective that a circular could be placed on the porch of

⁵⁰ “The Same Fight Again--Standard Oil vs. Huey P. Long,” circular, OS:W, box 1, folder a, SW.

practically every home in the state within a day.⁵¹ He boasted that “the newspapers have ever since been rendered powerless in politics in Louisiana.”⁵² The use of government resources to produce the circulars, however, prompted an investigation by House members disgusted by how he “completely demoralized” the Highway Commission “from top to bottom,” and turned it into a “Long machine” that operated for his own benefit.⁵³

The circular inevitably stirred controversy in the legislature when a senator moved for it to be included in the official Senate journal to provide lawmakers with the full text, to which another senator refused. “I object to this sort of slander and libel against this body being printed in its official journal. It is too cheap to be dignified in that way.”⁵⁴ The inclusion of the “Cross of Gold” speech in the first circular especially outraged the high-minded gentlemen that ruled Louisiana. The Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate* ran a front-page editorial that said Long’s “private propaganda pamphlets” took a great many liberties, “not the least of which is the printing of an alleged speech by Representative Delesdernier of Plaquemines Parish, likening the gravely charged executive to Him whom all men revere as too sacred for comparison.”⁵⁵ That day outraged lawmakers demanded in a resolution that Long furnish the names of members he insinuated Standard Oil bought and bribed.

The press was equally critical of Long’s propaganda. He precluded any chance of fair treatment by singling out the newspapers in his brazen accusations. Of the largest papers in the state, the full text of the first circular, the first ever written by Long that directly connected the press with corporate influence, appeared only in the *Times-Picayune* and *New Orleans Item*. On

⁵¹ Burton L. Hotaling, “Huey Pierce Long as Journalist and Propagandist,” *Journalism Quarterly* 20, (1943): 25.

⁵² Long, *Every Man A King*, 151.

⁵³ *Shreveport Times*, April 10, 1929, 1.

⁵⁴ *Shreveport Times*, March 29, 1929, 1, 11; *Shreveport Journal*, March 28, 1929, 1, 18.

⁵⁵ *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, March 20, 1929, 1.

page seventeen under the headline “Standard Oil Co. Blamed by Governor Long for Trouble with State Legislature,” the *Times-Picayune* placed the text of the circular alongside a separate article that quoted legislators who demanded Long prove his ludicrous allegations, which they branded as “rank libel and slander reeking with insult and typical of Huey P. Long.”⁵⁶

The New Orleans *Item* published the full text of the circular, including the “Cross of Gold” speech, under a headline that said Long was spreading “poison” with his “latest libel.”⁵⁷ The *Item* called the “demagogic” circular “the same old stuff by which Long has always tried to inflame the country people against the Cities and against the business interests.” The article containing the circular finished with a call to action. Readers of the *Item* were requested to inform the paper “if they observe any employe [sic] of the State of Louisiana engaged in their neighborhoods in the circularization of private propaganda for Huey P. Long.”

The *Shreveport Journal* and New Orleans *States* published an Associated Press story that contained five paragraph excerpts from the first circular, which contained approximately twenty paragraphs of text in total. The *Journal* article included evocative commentary that Long “vented his wrath” on Standard Oil, which he thrust under “the burning light of the impeachment arena” after he charged that “its agents instigated the accusations from murder plotting to official misdemeanors.”⁵⁸ In reference to his accusations against “the Standard Oil newspapers,” the *Journal* asserted that “the newspapers are not to blame. Newspapers, generally, not only believe in fairness, but demand it. Any newspaper with the courage of a flea will fight for the rights of its town or city, its parish, and its state. To do otherwise would be sidestepping a public duty.”⁵⁹

The following day the *Journal* published a lengthy letter written by a former state senator who

⁵⁶ *Times-Picayune*, March 29, 1929, 17.

⁵⁷ *New Orleans Item*, March 28, 1929, 1.

⁵⁸ *Shreveport Journal*, March 29, 1929, 1.

⁵⁹ *Shreveport Journal*, March 29, 1929, 1.

issued a “stinging rebuke” that said Long stood repudiated by the “Bar of Public Opinion.” The ex-senator assailed Long’s “chronic intoxication with power,” and the “wholly insincere waving of [his] little red flag of bolshevism against” Standard Oil.⁶⁰ That letter, which filled three full columns, also appeared in the Shreveport *Times*.⁶¹

The New Orleans *States* also published a handful of excerpts from the first circulars, but neither of the Baton Rouge papers nor the Shreveport *Times* published any text from the first circular.⁶² Despite their unwillingness to publish the text of the circular, every large newspaper vociferously discussed and condemned the circular to varying extents.

The press called the first circular an attempt to divert attention from the impeachment charges. The Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate* described the circular as “the usual cry of ‘Stop Thief’ by the perpetrator of the crime,” “a familiar ruse by the governor himself,” and “his chief trick in his bag of tricks,” but that “this time he will find that it will not work. The governor is about through fooling the people with his wild statements and cheap demagoguery.”⁶³ The *Advocate* asserted “He is seeking to build a smoke screen behind which to hide, and he is trying to make this screen out of an attack on the Standard Oil company, and a defense of the ‘lame, halt, and the blind, and the poor little school children,’ suddenly so dear to him.”⁶⁴

Newspapers especially chided Long for his shameless publicity and unanimously condemned his use of state employees and taxpayer funds to produce the circular. An Associated Press story that appeared with slight variations in a handful of large papers, commented that “while the rest of the town took a Good Friday holiday,” a small army of state employees

⁶⁰ *Shreveport Journal*, March 30, 1929, 1.

⁶¹ *Shreveport Times*, March 31, 1929, 24.

⁶² *New Orleans States*, March 29, 1929, 1.

⁶³ *Baton Rouge State Times*, March 28, 1929, 1.

⁶⁴ *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, March 29, 1929, 1.

“prepared copy for the governor’s organ.” The governor “resorted to his own press because the daily newspapers of the state turned against him editorially and advocated impeachment.”⁶⁵

The Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate* discussed how Long targeted rural Louisianians with his publicity campaign, and despite the fact that the circulars were “at a premium” in Baton Rouge, where they were printed with the aid of the state Highway Commission and at the direction of Long, “they evidently were not intended for local consumption, but rather for more remote sections of the state...where Mr. Long’s policies since becoming governor are perhaps less well known than in the more densely populated areas.”⁶⁶ His “publicity program” did not touch on any of the nineteen impeachment charges, the *Shreveport Journal* explained. He merely engaged in the “usual demagogic program” which he “carried to such a successful fruition in the past.”⁶⁷

Long quickly issued a second circular within days of the first on March 30. The second circular, titled “They Condemn Long Because,” did not carry his explicit signature, rather it was signed “Paid for by Supporters of Huey P. Long,” likely in response to press criticism of his “publicity tactics.” The masthead of the second circular included a list of eleven of Long’s achievements during his first year as governor. The opening text of the masthead read “They Condemn Long Because--(1) He paid the Highway deficit of \$4,500,000, and is building paved roads; (2) He gave school children free school books; (3) He put natural gas in New Orleans; (4) He took care of tuberculosis sufferers...” The circular provided a detailed account of each accomplishment, and one point in particular addressed newspapers. “The last administration’s debts of the Board of Liquidation amounted to \$970,793.38. The newspaper statements that there

⁶⁵ *Times-Picayune*, March 30, 1929, 1; *Shreveport Times*, March 20, 1929, 1; *Shreveport Journal*, March 30, 1929, 3; *The Town Talk*, March 30, 1929, 1.

⁶⁶ *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, March 30, 1929, 1.

⁶⁷ *Shreveport Journal*, March 30, 1929, 1.

were no debts left, are untrue.” The circular concluded with the statement “When the Standard Oil Company sounded its rattle, showed its fangs and sprang at Huey P. Long, the old system of plunder and corruption assembled in Baton Rouge like a flash and began to beat against the walls of civil government with a thousand chains of iron.”⁶⁸

In addition to the circular, Long mailed a copy of a letter to various leaders in rural parishes with a request to distribute his propaganda. “My Dear Friend, I am in the fight of my life,” he pleaded, “The Standard Oil Company lobbyists and lawyers are here. They have filled this city with enough money to burn up a wet mule. The Old New Orleans Ring is here. They have the newspapers clogged from one end to the other. They are spreading every kind of false propaganda. It is the same old fight. My effort has been to compel the Standard Oil Company to pay the kind of taxes you have been paying (in fact about one-tenth of what you are already paying) and because of that they are laying their line to try to ruin me. Please get these circulars to the people in every nook and corner. Have them write and wire their members of the Legislature both in the House and the Senate against the underhand cross of the low-down manipulators who want to ruin any man they cannot control. Sincerely your friend, Huey P. Long.”⁶⁹

Long intended the circular to appear as the organic expression of his supporters, but the letter exposed his design. The Baton Rouge *State Times* assailed the second circular as “an insult to intelligence,” and that his “latest libel sheet...while purporting to come from the ‘supporters of Huey P. Long’ by its very verbiage shows that it was prepared by none other than Huey P. Long himself.”⁷⁰ In spite of the fact that the *State Times* published the entire text of the second circular

⁶⁸ “They Condemn Long Because,” circular, OS:W, box 1, folder a, SW.

⁶⁹ *Times-Picayune*, March 31, 1929, 1.

⁷⁰ Baton Rouge *State Times*, April 1, 1929, 1.

on page thirteen, the paper decisively refuted the list of Long's accomplishments presented in the circular point-by-point in a front-page editorial. In addition to the *State Times*, the New Orleans *Item*, ironically, is the only other paper that published the full text of the second circular.⁷¹

The *Shreveport Journal* defended Louisiana newspapers from Long's circular attack, saying that although the "smoke screen, which he frequently throws when criticized--that the Standard Oil company dominates all those who oppose him--might artfully be used to his advantage in some cases, it hardly seems credible that he can cram down the throats of any sensible people the thought that publishers and editors of newspapers throughout the state are sold out--lock, stock and barrel to corporation interests."⁷² The *Shreveport Times* argued the same point in a front-page editorial, that the governor was "flooding the state with propaganda" that intimidated Standard Oil "bought the legislature and the press to put him out of office," in an attempt to draw "a red herring across the trail."⁷³

The New Orleans *States* opined that "No unfaithful official ever felt the halter draw with good opinion of the law--nor of the press if it had a part in his undoing. That is a sufficient explanation of why Huey P. Long, about to be dragged to the bar to face charges of high crimes and misdemeanors against the state, now on the radio and in pamphlets, printed by the hundreds of thousands at the expense of the taxpayers and distributed by the forces of the highway commission, is declaring that the newspapers in the larger cities of the State, like the members of the legislature, have been bought by the Standard Oil and are trying to destroy him."⁷⁴

The *Times-Picayune* did not publish the circular but published the letter in which Long alleged Standard Oil filled the capital with "enough money to burn a wet mule." The *Times-*

⁷¹ New Orleans *Item*, April 1, 1929, 4.

⁷² *Shreveport Journal*, April 1, 1929, 13.

⁷³ *Shreveport Times*, April 2, 1929, 1.

⁷⁴ New Orleans *States*, April 1, 1929, 8.

Picayune informed readers that Long regretfully did not offer any denial of the nineteen impeachment charges; he merely professed his usual “cry of Standard Oil bribery,” that corrupt forces conjured up the indictment he faced.⁷⁵

Long embarked on a stump tour throughout the month of April to build public resentment against the impeachment proceedings and to tell his rural supporters “what the newspapers will not print.”⁷⁶ He spoke to throngs of his supporters about the “filthy newspapers” that “deliberately distorted facts,” and how Standard Oil bought members of the legislature in order to “crucify him on the cross of personal hate” like Jesus Christ.⁷⁷ Long said in one speech that the newspapers stopped telling about the “crowds” that turned out to hear him speak.⁷⁸ Newspapers that did publish his remarks introduced them with commentary such as “the speech of the governor was a typical one, full of statements that without a stretch of the imagination could be called ‘wild’ and filled with vituperation against persons, newspapers, and others opposing him.”⁷⁹ Wherever Long spoke newspaper stories followed that branded him an “unmitigated liar,” and “cheap demagogue.”⁸⁰ The press condemned the “abuse” he hurled at newspapers, who “dared to oppose him in his nefarious schemes.”⁸¹

The Shreveport *Times* surmised that Long’s “old time barnstorming appeals to public sympathy” demonstrated the “Bourbonism in his make up.” In spite of “the lessons of adversity, he cannot shake off old habits,” the *Times* said, “He has not discovered that the methods he formerly used to throw dust in the eyes of the people have lost their force. They are as stale and impotent as yesterday’s dishwater. Once upon a time violent outbreaks from Huey carried

⁷⁵ *Times Picayune*, March 31, 1929, 1, 9.

⁷⁶ *The Town Talk*, April 19, 1929, 1.

⁷⁷ *Weekly Town Talk*, April 27, 1929, 6; *Shreveport Times*, May 4, 1929, 18; *Monroe News-Star*, May 4, 1929, 1.

⁷⁸ *Shreveport Times*, April 23, 1929, 1.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Shreveport Journal*, April 23, 1929, 1; *Shreveport Journal*, April 5, 1929, 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, May 14, 1929, 1.

conviction to the people of Louisiana. While wild at times, they bore the ring of sincerity. Very often his political circulars trespassed the bounds of legitimate publicity, but the people who thought him a new Moses excused his methods and focused their attention on his policies and purposes, which appeared to be honest. But, the people of Louisiana were fooled--badly fooled--and they have come to realize it...There are very few men and women of intelligence who still believe in the truth and honesty of Governor Long's circulars."⁸²

Meanwhile, sensational witness testimonies delivered in the House impeachment proceedings covered the pages of the press. One witness, a "hula dancer," told how the governor was "plenty lit" with alcohol the night he ordered militia raids on gambling houses. According to her testimony, Long--a married man--held her "around the neck on his lap" the night of a studio party and "general whoopee" in the French Quarter earlier that year.⁸³

Newspapers especially relished publishing that of more than a score of rural newspapers where Long formerly found his most substantial support, not one came to the governor's defense, whom "they once championed unquestioningly."⁸⁴ The "voice of Louisiana is further lifted in protest against the infamous mis-rule of Huey P. Long," a Baton Rouge *State Times* editorial clamored, "the rural press of the state condemns his tyranny and dire practices in office."⁸⁵ The *Shreveport Journal* explained how his propaganda was "falling on deaf ears," and that his appeals to rural parishes did not evoke a response similar to years past.⁸⁶ The *Journal* reported that an examination of twenty-five rural newspapers revealed that not one defended him. Fourteen of those papers, either with their own editorials or with editorials credited to other

⁸² *Shreveport Times*, March 31, 1929, 4.

⁸³ *Shreveport Journal*, April 25, 1929, 1.

⁸⁴ *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, March 31, 1929, 1.

⁸⁵ *Baton Rouge State Times*, April 1, 1929, 6.

⁸⁶ *Baton Rouge State Times*, March 30, 1929, 1; *Shreveport Journal*, March 30, 1929, 1.

newspapers, condemned the chief executive “in no uncertain terms.” The *Journal* concluded its report with a list of the rural newspapers that explicitly condemned the governor. The New Orleans *Item* similarly told of the “universal sentiment” in favor of impeachment throughout the state and published a collection of excerpts from editorials that appeared in eighteen separate Louisiana newspapers.⁸⁷

A number of small rural newspapers did, in fact, condemn Long in no uncertain terms. The *Crowley Post-Signal* described Long as “vehement but not convincing” in his reference to the “lying newspapers as authors and broadcasters of the charges raised against him.”⁸⁸ A *Richland Beacon News* editorial explained that in light of recent developments, only a very “prejudiced” individual who “willfully blinded himself to the facts,” would hold out against the proposition of “demanding the removal of this mad man in the governor’s chair.”⁸⁹ When Long took to the radio to argue his case, the *Monroe News-Star* branded his activities as “far beneath the dignity of his office” and another example of the “evil publicity” tactics he used to divert public attention from his own “malodorous actions,” and strike at his opponents, “not by logic and reason, but by playing upon the emotions.”⁹⁰ The *Monroe News-Star* called Long “his own worst enemy,” and that he alone deserved blame for the “crumbling” of his support.⁹¹ Standard Oil “did not make the statement about Publisher Manship which disgusted the state.”⁹²

The *Planters Press* in Bossier City asked readers in an editorial, “Is there such a thing as honor in the mind of our reigning monarch, Governor Huey P. Long today? Has he not lived and associated with the good people of our State long enough to realize that this is not Italy or

⁸⁷ New Orleans *Item*, April 2, 1929, 8.

⁸⁸ *Crowley Post-Signal*, April 4, 1929, 2.

⁸⁹ *Richland Beacon News*, March 30, 1929, 4.

⁹⁰ *Monroe News-Star*, March 26, 1929, 4.

⁹¹ *Monroe News-Star*, March 30, 1929, 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*

China?...Tell your representative for the sake of humanity and to save our good state from absolute ruin, to get busy and do something that will put an end to this monarch's reign."⁹³ The *Pointe Coupee Banner* in New Roads appealed directly to lawmakers: "Legislature and Senate! Be men, forget everything, but the honor of Louisiana, and rid us of this Gubernatorial Calamity."⁹⁴

The Baton Rouge *Morning Advocate* noted the "interesting" reaction of the rural press, and how Long "resorted to the time-worn sham of posing in the picturesque but unconvincing role of a martyr going down to oblivion 'for the sake of the people.' This sort of political gab went out of fashion a long time ago...elections were swayed and political battles won by waving a red flag and shouting pretty but empty phrases at an open-mouthed constituency. That day is gone forever, and Governor Long insults the intelligence of the state of Louisiana when he makes use of such tactics now."⁹⁵ A separate *Morning Advocate* article told how the impeachment proceedings evoked condemnation not just from the rural press, but from journalists in other states who branded Long a "tyrant," or in the words of the *Montgomery Advertiser*, "a low grade demagogue, a pure example of the political blatherskite." The *Advertiser* called Long "reckless" in his characterizations of his opponents, who he branded "as vicious persons governed by unworthy motives."⁹⁶

Long issued two other circulars titled "The Press Swings the Bull Whip" and "The Standard Oil Regulars" on April 4 and 29 respectively.⁹⁷ These two circulars did not appear anywhere in the six largest newspapers of the state, or anywhere else in the press, aside from a

⁹³ *The Planters Press*, March 30, 1929, 3.

⁹⁴ *Pointe Coupee Banner*, March 28, 1929, 2.

⁹⁵ *Baton Rouge Morning Advocate*, March 31, 1929, 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹⁷ The "Bull Whip" circular, despite extensive searching, could not be located by this researcher or by any previous researcher.

single stanza from a clever poem featured in the “Bull Whip” circular that appeared in the Baton Rouge *State Times*. The stanza read: “No pistols, perhaps, do they pack on their hip, but the newsies are certainly there with the whip. And this is their song, which they shout high and strong: Get out all your hammers and sock Huey Long.”⁹⁸

Long distributed the “Bull Whip” circular at a mass meeting he organized in Baton Rouge on April 4, two days before the House voted on the first article of impeachment. Before the meeting he warned his supporters to watch out for the “lying newspapers,” and “pay no attention to anything they say” because they might announce the meeting was called off, or say that he had resigned.⁹⁹ He “uttered defiance and enmity” toward newspapers of Louisiana during his two-hour speech that day, and denied the assassination charges levied by his former bodyguard. “They try to tell you I tried to have the little numbskull killed,” he told the crowd, “I don’t mind what the newspapers and my enemies say about me, but I did expect loyalty of my friends.”¹⁰⁰ Long apparently singled out a newspaper photographer from the crowd and ordered him to remove his equipment from the building. Cries of “break up the plates” and “throw him out” accompanied the photographer's departure.¹⁰¹

Newspapers said the circular he distributed at that meeting had “little news in it except his own propaganda.”¹⁰² In his “usual circulars notable for their defamatory and lying statements,” the Shreveport *Times* noted, “he represented himself as a sort of modern Savonarola, whose enthusiasm for liberty and detestation of common abuses at Baton Rouge had drawn down upon him the menacing wrath of beneficiaries of the old order....This demagogic

⁹⁸ Baton Rouge *State Times*, April 11, 1929, 1.

⁹⁹ Mass meeting flier, OS:W, box 1, folder a, SW.

¹⁰⁰ *Times-Picayune*, April 5, 1929, 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Baton Rouge *State Times*, April 11, 1929, 1.

appeal lured many, among them the pity of it is some good men and women. They heard Governor Long proclaim himself a martyr in their behalf. They heard him pillory his enemies-- not as enemies of Huey P. Long but as the foes of popular and honest government. They heard him give himself a character purer than that of the mountain snow.”¹⁰³

By the time Long issued the fourth and final circular of the impeachment fight on April 29, the House had already voted on seven of the nineteen total impeachment charges, and sent them to the Senate for trial on May 14.¹⁰⁴ Long discussed the “pretended grounds of impeachment” in the last circular and how newspapers were in on the “deal.” “Something has happened to them,” he wrote. Long believed Ewing may have conspired with his enemies to concoct the whole impeachment scheme and intimated as much in the last circular when he called attention to an article that appeared in Ewing’s Shreveport *Times*. The “Wilful, False, and Illegal Claim” made in the *Times* article explicitly stated that four Senators who previously supported Long were expected to cast their votes against him when the question of impeachment came before the Senate. “How is this for honesty of purpose on the part of the newspapers?” Long asked in the circular, “In one breath they admonish Senators that they are judges, sitting as a High Court. In the next they make the claim that the whole thing is fixed in advance and the impeachment case is pre-judged...I challenge him (Ewing) to name all these Senators and explain how he obtained the information he claims to about their attitude or to publicly apologize for his sinister attack. Who fixed these men, Mr. Ewing? How did they fix them? Answer this claim or else apologize.”

Two days after the Senate convened to try the impeachment charges, the president pro tempore of the Senate presented a petition signed by fourteen other senators who declared that

¹⁰³ Shreveport *Times*, April 9, 1929, 1.

¹⁰⁴ *Times-Picayune*, April 27, 1929, 1, 3.

any impeachment charges voted on after April 6 were invalid on the grounds that the special session Long ordered formally ended on that date, and charges filed afterward violated constitutional provisions for impeachment proceedings. The fifteen signatories of the “Round Robin,” as it was named, prevented the two-thirds majority needed to vote for conviction, and thus, Long adjourned the Senate trial by a clever procedural trick typical of his style and escaped his imminent political doom.

Newspapers, however, did not relent in their campaign against Long, nor did they ever fail to call attention to any favor he did for those fifteen loyal Robineers afterward.¹⁰⁵ Ewing’s *States* said Long merely obtained a “mistrial and his release on bail.”¹⁰⁶ The “ugly issue” of impeachment, according to the *Shreveport Journal*, remained on the record as “unfinished business.”¹⁰⁷ Manship’s Baton Rouge papers said Long was “still under indictment for high crimes and misdemeanors,” and that “let there be no mistake about this--he has not been vindicated.”¹⁰⁸ The *Times-Picayune* reiterated its support for any “properly organized movement to compel” the governor to vacate his office, and that despite the failure to remove him by impeachment, recalling Long remained an alternative.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

The press and the New Orleans Ring chose an inopportune moment to initiate impeachment proceedings against Huey Long. By 1929, the loyalty of his supporters was impossible to reverse. Charges brought forth during impeachment carried little weight in their minds. He obfuscated the reasons why his opponents sought to remove him from office by

¹⁰⁵ Long, *Every Man A King*, 172.

¹⁰⁶ New Orleans *States*, May 19, 1929, 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Shreveport Journal*, May 17, 1929, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Baton Rouge *State Times*, May 17, 1929, 8.

¹⁰⁹ *Times-Picayune*, May 17, 1929, 1.

reducing impeachment into a single issue: because he threatened the power of Standard Oil. He convinced his supporters that the “nefarious corporation” conjured up impeachment in order to “tear the state wide open” and remove the governor from office who dared to challenge its rule.¹¹⁰ The timing of the press and anti-Longites’ drive to remove him from office shortly after he proposed the tax politicized and cast doubt on the whole affair, irrespective of the truth of any allegations brought forth. The magnitude and intensity of opposition to Long for “merely proposing a tax,” made his defense all the more convincing. For his supporters, the idea that Standard paid off lawmakers or compromised the press did not require a stretch of the imagination.

The press, too, chose the wrong moment to strike at Long. Newspapers’ naked hostility appeared to align them with the interests of Standard Oil and Long’s sworn political enemies in the conservative establishment. While newspapers stated their position in terms of honest government, it was clear that impeachment was politically inspired from start to finish. An examination of factional alignments in the Senate offers proof that the end of impeachment was a foregone conclusion.¹¹¹

The impeachment of Long illustrates how the press finds itself between a rock and a hard place with respect to populist leaders. On the one hand, the duty of journalists as government watchdogs requires them to criticize official acts that violate the law or pose a significant threat to the balance of power and other democratic principles. On the other hand, their criticism is never divorced from the divisive and politically polarized context in which it appears, which ultimately works to the populists’ advantage. Long used newspapers’ hostile editorial stance as evidence to claim that the press as a whole was driven by the same impure motives as his

¹¹⁰ *Shreveport Journal*, March 29, 1929, 1.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

conservative detractors and that the whole lot were not to be trusted. While he did suffer a casualty from impeachment—newspapers would no longer oblige his publicity tactics—the press’ hostility offered Long a new enemy to attack.

Impeachment was the ultimate low point in Huey Long’s political career, save for his assassination. As the following chapter will show, however, he rebounded from impeachment by creating his own newspaper and by using his enemies’ hostility as a way to sustain public attention and support for his leadership.

Chapter III. ***“The Louisiana Progress! A New Sort of Newspaper”***

Governor Huey Long emerged from the impeachment fight of 1929 “vindictive beyond description.”¹ “Everybody who ain’t with us is against us,” he said, most of all the press.² The “enemy” newspapers opposed “every other progressive step in this state and the only way for the people of Louisiana to get ahead is to stomp them flat.”³ The newspapers’ hostility appeared to vindicate him. The press “may have thought that all of the propaganda carried in their columns would do me less than good,” he said. “On the contrary it redounded to my advantage and greatly pleased the folks of both city and country.”⁴ The “feudal lords” of Louisiana and their “prostituted press,” according to a loyal supporter, “so misled and mind washed against the name of Huey Long,” failed to recognize the great respect he enjoyed “among a wide variety of prominent and intelligent men.”⁵ Knowing this, Long decided to run for the U.S. Senate in 1930. In that campaign, he promised a crowd of supporters of French-decent in south Louisiana he would act even more indecently than he had been in the past. He shouted: “I have too much Cajun blood in me to be dignified!”⁶ Long did not actually have any Cajun ancestry but made good on that promise.

In addition to an active stump tour, radio broadcasts, and circulars, Long relied extensively on newspaper publicity during his 1930 Senate campaign just as he did throughout his career. This time, however, he created his own personal press organ, *The Louisiana Progress*.

¹ George Ginsberg, interviewed by T. Harry Williams, n.d., box 19, folder 76, THW.

² Elmer Irey, *The Tax Dodgers: The Inside Story of the T-men’s war with America’s political and underworld hoodlums as told by William J. Slocum* (New York: Fireside Press, 1949), 88.

³ *The Louisiana Progress*, March 27, 1930, 1.

⁴ Long, H. *Every Man A King* (National Book Company, 1933), 200.

⁵ Gerald Smith, *Huey P. Long: A Summary of Greatness* (Dewey H. Tucker, 2011), 11, 33.

⁶ *Times-Picayune*, August 21, 1930.

Louisiana elections were “won and lost in the newspapers,” but every paper in the state had turned against him, as the previous chapter illustrates.⁷ After short circuiting impeachment, it dawned on Long that he could fight back against his opponents and the press by starting his own newspaper.⁸

Many attest that Long always intended to run for the U.S. Senate, although not as early as 1930. The sudden announcement of his candidacy was not as hastily organized as it appeared, however. He used *The Progress* to set the agenda for that campaign nearly four months in advance. The paper introduced and built support for what would become the single issue of the whole campaign, his “Good Roads” program for building modern roads and highways across the state. Despite his attempts to placate his political enemies, the threat of the impeachment charges still lingered, and he needed a way to put them to rest once and for all. He framed that election as a referendum on his leadership. If he won it would force his enemies to capitulate. If he lost, he would resign.

Above all, Long created *The Progress* in 1930 for two reasons. First, the sheer magnitude and intensity of press opposition would be difficult to counter with circulars; he needed a more practical mechanism to bypass the hostile press and flood Louisiana with an unfiltered and constant stream of propaganda. At first glance *The Progress* resembles an ordinary paper, with a sports page, editorial section, local news stories, letters to the editor, advertisements and cartoons. Upon closer inspection the paper’s content appears to be carefully woven together into a coherent pro-Long narrative that oriented readers toward his version of reality.

The second reason Long created *The Progress* is that posing as a professional newspaper added a perception of credibility and legitimacy to his claims otherwise unachievable in a

⁷ *Time Magazine*, January 30, 1928, 10.

⁸ Long, *Every Man a King*, 188.

circular. His circulars, known for their libelous content, carried his explicit name and endorsement. The open use of propaganda was an easy target for criticism, as the previous chapter illustrates. *The Progress*, on the other hand, presented itself as the “official state journal,” a medium that appeared independent of his editorial control and influence.⁹ He established a professional distance from his publicity tactics to make criticism of his enemies appear more credible and genuine, and praise for his achievements less contrived. Although the public quickly realized who was behind the paper, *The Progress* continuously assured readers of the integrity of its editorial policy. It pledged to be “just as vigorous as the occasion demands.”¹⁰ *The Progress* co-opted the function, form and standards that guide professional journalists and ensure they are perceived as holding a legitimate authority over creating the news. “If you see it in the Progress...IT’S TRUE,” one ad in the paper claimed, *The Progress* was “filling a long felt need” in Louisiana.¹¹

The sense of legitimacy afforded by a newspaper is important for how Long used *The Progress* for his senatorial campaign in 1930. Impeachment impressed on him that an effective counter to hostile publicity required that he undermine journalists’ authority as arbiters of the truth. The circulars he used to fight removal foreshadowed the most salient feature of his paper, that is, his attempts to discredit negative publicity and undermine the legitimacy of the mainstream press, the subject of this chapter. Just as Long attacked established politicians, *The Progress* attacked established newspapers then presented itself as an alternative. In the polarized state of the communication environment his supporters could choose to avoid hostile publicity of Long by picking up a copy of *The Progress* instead. “Get your friends to see the truth,” the paper

⁹ *The Louisiana Progress*, March 27, 1930, 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, July 17, 1930, 8; April 10, 1930, 3.

said, “Don’t let them be misled by the lying propaganda spread throughout this state by the lying newspapers of New Orleans.”¹²

Many scholars have described how Long emerged from impeachment with a renewed intensity and vindictiveness, and how he created *The Progress* to establish an organ of political support and influence. No scholar, however, has examined the strategies Long used in *The Progress* to undermine public trust in established dailies and their influential publishers as a way to discredit their criticism and reassert his own political legitimacy. This chapter will classify and examine three strategies Long relied on to attack the press during his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 1930, and which he continued to use long after his victory in that election.

“The Old New Orleans Ring and their Lying Newspapers”

Long always kept a symbol of his opposition to attack. The consolidation of his enemies into a single class made them a more convenient target for his criticism and allowed him to obscure the reasons for their opposition. He framed and simplified political issues into a struggle between the “plain citizenry” versus the corrupt elite, so he could cast himself in the role of heroic challenger to the status quo and fighter for “the people.” Pitting social classes against one another left no room for partisan disagreement. Self-preservation, he suggested, motivated his opposition to protect their tenuous grasp on political power by whatever means necessary, even if that meant persecuting an innocent man, or obstructing his progressive plans to bring the state into the modern era. When the press turned on him during impeachment, he associated established newspapers--for the first time in his career--directly with the political and economic elite. He argued that the two were indistinguishable from one another and driven by the same

¹² Ibid., July 17, 1930, 1.

impure motives. “Crying the same cry” as his opposition was the press, Long claimed, which they “owned and controlled lock, stock and barrel.”¹³

The “unholy three of New Orleans newspaperdom,” the “pompous” *Times-Picayune*, “slip-shod” *States*, and “smart-aleck” *Item*, comprised the figurehead of the press to which Long directed his wrath.¹⁴ The papers’ influential publishers Colonel Robert Ewing, Marshall Ballard, and Esmond Phelps, according to *The Progress*, were “of one mind, united, no matter how weird that may appear to the public eye.”¹⁵ These “imperial owners,” erstwhile sworn enemies who once vilified each other with atrocious and scandalous attacks, now joined together in an “unholy alliance” to make “mud pies to hurl at Governor Huey P. Long and his fight to make Louisiana's future prosperity a certainty.”¹⁶ It was generally understood that “the politics of these daily newspapers is one and the same,” *The Progress* pointed out, “lately these newspapers have adopted a plan of writing one article for all the papers.”¹⁷ “It must be a wonderful treat to see these three gentlemen holding their little tete-a-tetes.”¹⁸ Cartoons in the paper regularly depicted the dailies as a three-headed snake that hissed “Lies, Lies, Lies.”¹⁹

Nearly every mention of the press in *The Progress* referred to the three New Orleans dailies. On occasion it mentioned their “midget counterparts,” or Ewing’s Shreveport *Times* and Monroe *News World*, and Charles Manship’s Baton Rouge *State Times* and *Morning Advocate*.²⁰ Turning the spotlight on New Orleans, one of the largest Southern cities at that time, was a strategic consideration. The *States*, *Times-Picayune* and *Item* were the largest papers in the state,

¹³ Ibid., May 22, 1930, 4; April 24, 1930, 8.

¹⁴ Ibid., April 17, 1930, 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., May 29, 1930, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid., May 29, 1930, 8; August 7, 1930, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., April 10, 1930, 1.

¹⁸ Ibid., August 7, 1930, 3.

¹⁹ Ibid., July 19, 1930, 1.

²⁰ Ibid., May 15, 1930, 1.

and the conservative element of Louisiana, the “Old Regulars” or “the Ring,” controlled all of Louisiana politics from that city.²¹ The New Orleans clique, comprised of the governor’s long standing political foes who led the impeachment fight, commanded a massive voter bloc and could swing any state-wide election.²² Proximity to and involvement with the center of conservative politics made the New Orleans newspapers’ politically influential publishers a convenient target for his abuse.

Not long after impeachment another notable group of his enemies organized in New Orleans, known as the “Constitutional League,” a group of aged conservative politicians and corporate lawyers led by former governors John Parker, who sued Long for libel in 1921, and Ruffin Pleasant, both known as sworn enemies of Long.²³ The League united under the mission of preventing Long from treating the constitution like “a scrap of paper,” but according to *The Progress*, the “Constipational League,” as Long dubbed it, along with the Ring and their secret newspaper allies, worked “hand in hand together” to destroy the governor.²⁴

Any political element that stood in his path, especially established newspapers, *The Progress* explained, fought Long and his program because they lost their ability to “dictate to” and “supervise” the state’s executive, and feared his power.²⁵ Long’s public falling out with Robert Ewing, known as a “behind the scenes” leader of the Ring and who vigorously opposed Long after impeachment, added convincing evidence to his claims.²⁶ “Never before in the history of this state has a public official been hounded, abused, vilified and lied about,” *The Progress*

²¹ Allan Sandler, *Huey Long’s Louisiana* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), 23.

²² Margaret Martin, “Colonel Robert Ewing, Louisiana journalist and politician” (master’s thesis, Louisiana State University, 1964), 31.

²³ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 422.

²⁴ Long, *Every Man A King*, 184; *The Louisiana Progress*, June 26, 1930, 1.

²⁵ *The Louisiana Progress*, April 24, 1930, 4.

²⁶ Martin, “Colonel Robert Ewing,” 31.

proclaimed, “and for the sole and only reason that he turned a deaf ear to the demands of the ring.”²⁷ Their hatred was born of “jealousy and greed.” They sought “to deluge the public by hiding the coarse hair of the ravening Wolf under the downy fleece of the harmless sheep.”²⁸ With “clumsiness” they took up “the mantle of Ananias,” the dishonorable biblical character who guised his malicious identity with charitable acts in the pursuit of personal glory.²⁹

While the state legislature convened for the first regular session after impeachment, and before Long formally announced his candidacy for the 1930 Senatorial campaign, he used *The Progress* to continuously belabor his enemies’ secret alliance with the press. He conjured up an unflattering spectacle for the mayor of New Orleans and leader of the Ring, Semmes Walmsley, by ordering an investigation into the city’s finances. *The Progress* asked readers “the question on everyone’s lips,” did the city press receive bribe money from Walmsley and the Ring to prevent an audit?³⁰ It appeared that “Colonel Bow-Wow Ewing, Old Maid Phelps and Editor Ballard” were “laying up a smoke screen to deceive the people into believing that everything is in ship-shape order at City Hall.”³¹ A cartoon showed Ewing on his knees praying. “O Lord, let not the sinful eye of Huey look upon the hidden mysteries of our municipal bookkeeping,” he pleaded.³² Another cartoon titled “The United Association of Public Fakers,” showed the three publishers corralled around a table with Semmes Walmsley at one end and at the other, J.Y. Sanders, the House member Long allegedly ordered his bodyguard to assassinate.³³

Apparently, political demands went both ways. Ballard, the city administration’s “mouthpiece,” who “for years thought himself to be the guiding light of the Old Regular Party,”

²⁷ *The Louisiana Progress*, July 24, 1930, 4.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, April 24, 1930, 4; May 22, 1930, 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, May 15, 1930, 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, July 19, 1930, 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, June 12, 1930, 4.

³² *Ibid.*, June 5, 1930, 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1930, 1.

admitted that he controlled Walmsley, a *Progress* story alleged.³⁴ Esmond Phelps, the “Mussolini” of the *Times-Picayune*, likewise controlled Walmsley and “muzzled” the mayor when he strayed from the script supplied by that *Times-Picayune* “political dictator.”³⁵ Colonel Ewing, the puppet master of them all, hand-picked governors and swayed local elections through his influence with the Ring and his position as a Democratic national committeeman, a post Long attempted to force him to resign.³⁶ “The big mogul has established a royal rule in this state,” Long explained, “He sends his golf-playing, gum chewing little squirt of a son up to North Louisiana to rule the slaves there while he as the big papa sits in a swivel chair as the mighty monarch in New Orleans.”³⁷

“The newspapers have been in politics for money as well as pastime,” a *Progress* article explained, “The tin can politicians of this state are now jingling gold coins in their pockets. The lying newspapers of the state have their coffers full of glistening talents.”³⁸ Apparently Marshall Ballard of the *Item* “sat with John M. Parker and apportioned out places at the public swill trough.”³⁹ Colonel “Bow-wow” “seems to have been purchased outright,” the paper claimed, “His front page is covered with slimy innuendo and downright lies directed at Huey P. Long.”⁴⁰ Pay-offs to the press were allegedly made through massive ad purchases by corporations and state agencies. *The Progress* published copies of \$3,000 worth of advertising contracts drawn up between the three papers and a former anti-Long commissioner of the Department of Conservation who Long ousted from his position.⁴¹ The newspapers were not only “pilfering” for

³⁴ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1930, 4; May 29, 1930, 1, 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, April 3, 1930, 1; July 19, 1930, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, April 10, 1930, 8; Martin, “Colonel Robert Ewing,” 52.

³⁷ *Times-Picayune*, May 2, 1930, 9.

³⁸ *The Louisiana Progress*, April 10, 1930, 8; August 7, 1930, 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, May 8, 1930, 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, August 7, 1930, 4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, May 1, 1930, 8.

their own gain “but for the welfare of their families,” per *Progress* reporting.⁴² Esmond Phelps, “the political dictator” of the *Times-Picayune*, used his position at the paper to place his brother-in-law Arthur Hammond on two state payrolls “at the very time that the *Times-Picayune* was conducting one of its two-faced campaigns against dual office holding.”⁴³ The New Orleans dailies formed “a trust octopus whose tentacles extend even to Baton Rouge, Shreveport and Monroe,” the *Progress* asserted.⁴⁴

For nearly four months Long pushed conspiracies about his enemies’ collusion in the columns of *The Progress*. His attacks did not appear periodically, but as a consistent theme in every issue of the paper. As previous chapters illustrate, he used newspaper publicity to raise the salience of an issue, direct public attention toward facts he could slant in his favor and set the stage for an event to follow. In this case, he was plotting ways to pass a \$68,000,000 bond issue through the legislature--where tempers still flared from impeachment--to fund his “Good Roads” program for building a network of modern highways throughout the state. In anticipation of opposition to the program, he insinuated his political enemies colluded with the press, so that when it failed he could discredit negative publicity and have somewhere to place blame.

When the New Orleans publishers initially caught wind of Long’s plan to propose the issuance of more road bonds, they requested proper safeguards be established for the dispensing of the funds. The measure would never pass without the New Orleans delegation, and Long had no intention of compromising, but he played up the appearance of a good faith attempt to negotiate with his opponents. His assertions of the dailies’ collusion with his enemies had some basis in fact. Mayor Walmsley said he was “of the same mind as the publishers,” that the city

⁴² *Times-Picayune*, June 8, 1930, 6.

⁴³ *The Louisiana Progress*, May 8, 1930, 8.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1930, 4.

administration would not support Long's proposal without a guarantee of some oversight authority of the bond's expenditures.⁴⁵ Long, of course, demanded full authority over the funds, and the negotiations ended with a signed declaration from the three publishers stating their explicit rejection of his demands for "absolute and unrestrained control."⁴⁶

The papers' denounced the bond issue for his infrastructure program in no uncertain terms. "Kill The \$60,000,000 Road Bond Issue!" read the title of one *Item* editorial.⁴⁷ The reasons for opposition to the program "commended themselves to the guiding forces in the Old Regular Organization," the *Item* explained, which viewed the levy of additional taxes as unnecessary.⁴⁸ Rather, the legislature should concern itself with "the millions in road bond funds already in the hands of the state administration."⁴⁹ Charles Manship's *State Times* took a similar position, saying it would contribute "whatever small amount it can to block his schemes for wholesale wasting of public funds, and his efforts to build up a further political machine for himself."⁵⁰ The *Times-Picayune* warned that a vote for the \$60,000,000 bond without proper safeguards "is the same as putting this vast sum of money at the personal disposal of the governor."⁵¹

The press' publicly visible rejection of the program gave Long ammunition for a counterattack. In lieu of support in the legislature and from the New Orleans political faction, he turned to his real base of power, the ordinary citizens who voted him into office. He cleverly proposed to rewrite the state's law through a constitutional convention, during which only a simple majority was needed to submit the road bond issue to a state-wide vote by the people.

⁴⁵ *Times-Picayune*, April 18, 1930, 1.

⁴⁶ Baton Rouge *State Times*, March 11, 1930, 1, 14.

⁴⁷ New Orleans *Item*, April 2, 1930, 10.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Baton Rouge *State Times*, April 16, 1930, 6.

⁵¹ *Times-Picayune*, April 15, 1930, 9.

The convention was a stroke of political genius. Long had already built up public support for his highly popular modern infrastructure plans. In addition to months of excessive lauding of the “Good Roads” proposal in *The Progress*, funds from a 1928 bond issue were already spent on a scattered system of disconnected highways, which Long used to whet the public’s appetite for the next phase of the plan to link up all the parts. Injecting resentment of the political elite into the issue probably mobilized support more than anything else. “In spite of all the dirt that the Old Regular gangsters and the Constitutional League can throw in your eyes... in spite of all the misrepresentation they can print in their papers,” *The Progress* reiterated, only one question was up for debate. Are voters “going to let the Ring and their papers run things,” or would they pass on the issue themselves?⁵²

The press continued to vigorously oppose the plan on the grounds that Long was not interested in building roads, but rather “passionately interested in securing absolute personal control of some sixty-eight millions of additional road-bond moneys for the promotion of his own selfish ends and advantage.”⁵³ At one point amid negotiations over how to conduct the convention, which took place in front of a large crowd of public spectators in the Senate chambers, Long delivered more abuse to the press: “Submit the good roads program to the people... The opponents have two newspapers in Shreveport, one in Monroe, one in Alexandria and three in New Orleans and the Old Regular ring. What do you have to fear?”⁵⁴

Inevitably, it seemed, the Ring and their newspapers, “reinforced by a coterie of anarchistic Constitutional Leaguers,” sprung from the woodwork to arrange a filibuster and kill the chances for a convention.⁵⁵ The New Orleans dailies “and other ring-dominated sheets

⁵² *The Louisiana Progress*, July 17, 1930, 4; June 26, 1930, 2.

⁵³ *Times-Picayune*, July 4, 1930, 8.

⁵⁴ *Baton Rouge State Times*, July 3, 1930, 8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, July 17, 1930, 1.

throughout the state were ordered to open up their mud batteries and all responded with a unanimity worthy of a decent cause,” according to the *Progress*.⁵⁶ From the first day to the closing hour of the legislative session “the sole aim of the minority was to discredit the present state administration,” one House member said. “They are not fighting Long the man, but are trying to crucify Long the politician, because they know that unless he is relegated to private life,” he would “build up such a following in Louisiana that it would be impossible for the city grafters to again secure control.”⁵⁷

With no possibility of passing the measure by legislative means under the prevailing circumstances, he announced his candidacy for the U.S. Senate on July 17 in a front page exclusive of *The Progress*, with the Good Roads program as the sole issue of his platform.⁵⁸ He found a winning campaign promise. The incumbent and Long’s competitor, Joseph Ransdell, joined by the Ring, J. Y. Sanders, and the New Orleans dailies, signed an open declaration against his program, as alleged by *The Progress*.⁵⁹ “Long Runs For Senate,” a *Progress* headline trumpeted, “Race Will Force Ringster’s Stand On Highway Issue.”⁶⁰

A cartoon introduced “The Campaign Organization of Feather-Duster Ransdell, Who Will Wage Fight Against Good Roads.”⁶¹ The front-page caricature lampooned the elderly, stately Ransdell, who earned his “feather-duster” nickname with his bushy mustache. The infamous three-headed snake of the New Orleans press appeared alongside the candidate, along with J.Y. Sanders, Semmes Walmsley, Robert Ewing’s son John D. “Squirt” Ewing of the

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., July 24, 1930, 4.

⁵⁸ Ibid., July 17, 1930, 1.

⁵⁹ Ibid., July 17, 1930, 1.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., July 24, 1930, 1.

Shreveport *Times*, and “Desperate Esmond” Phelps of the *Times-Pic*, who asked “Whar’s Semmes?” while swinging a lasso over his head.⁶²

Running for a higher office upped the ante. Long piled all of his chips on the table to bet on one throw of the dice. “This campaign shall serve as a referendum to the people,” he said.⁶³ A victory would reassert his control over state politics and put the impeachment charges to rest once and for all. His enemies would be forced to capitulate and pass the Good Roads program. If he lost, he would resign.

“The Losers of this Dirty Deal are the People of Louisiana”

The logical conclusion of associating the press with the political establishment was to claim hostile newspapers, like the conservative elite, were an enemy of the people. They were united under the same cause of fighting to maintain their position atop the social hierarchy by obstructing Long’s ability to work on behalf of the people. In anticipation of the Ring and the newspapers’ guaranteed opposition to his candidacy, he cleverly framed the election as a referendum on the ideal of popular sovereignty and used the Good Roads program to illustrate that symbolic ideal with a tangible, winning political issue. A vote against Long was not just a vote against an extensive system of modern infrastructure. “This is a campaign,” he announced in *The Progress*, “to decide whether people have any right in government.”⁶⁴ “If you believe that Louisiana is to be ruled by the people, that the poor man is as good as the rich man, that the people have a right to pass on issues themselves; if you believe that this is a state where every man is king but no man wears a crown, then I want you to vote for Huey Long for the United States Senate. That is the platform I am running on.”⁶⁵

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., July 17, 1930, 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid., July 17, 1930, 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., August 7, 1930, 1.

Just as he simplified the reasons for impeachment into a single issue, Long simplified the 1930 campaign into his pledge for Good Roads to pigeonhole his opponents into an unpopular position against progressive reform and to obscure the reasons for their opposition. The oppositional press, he suggested, was seeking to deny the will of the people. According to *The Progress*, the New Orleans dailies “do not represent any of the people, not even the people of New Orleans.”⁶⁶

Claiming the press was an enemy of the people vis-a-vis its opposition to modern infrastructure also allowed him to deflect attention from his troublesome record as governor, which his enemies weaponized against him during that campaign. Long rarely, if ever, addressed their criticism head on, and chose to only discuss issues he could slant in his favor. Plus, blame language reminded his supporters of their common identity and a sense of linked fate. His enemies’ mouthpiece, the “lying newspapers,” would print “any kind of lie to keep the constructive work of the state administration from continuing,” *The Progress* claimed, “The losers of this dirty deal are the people of Louisiana.”⁶⁷

Ewing, Ballard and Phelps, with “renewed vigor” and “blood in their eyes,” according to *The Progress*, frantically waged a battle to prevent a Long victory and the people from having paved highways.⁶⁸ The papers, on the other hand, set out to tear down the “smoke screen” he created by presenting the Good Roads program as the sole issue of the campaign.⁶⁹ “Everybody is for good roads. That goes without saying,” an editorial in Ewing’s *States* said, “it would be to the liking of the Governor, of course, if the issue could be circumscribed as he proposes.”⁷⁰ The

⁶⁶ Ibid., August 7, 1930, 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid., April 10, 1930, 1; July 17, 1930, 4.

⁶⁸ Ibid., August 7, 1930, 3.

⁶⁹ *Times Picayune*, July 27, 1930, 1.

⁷⁰ *New Orleans States*, July 18, 1930, 4.

real issues of the campaign were “his flagrant violations of the constitution; his attempts to wreck the government of New Orleans,” and the “failures, oppressions and outrages” of his two years in office.⁷¹ His intention for that campaign was to establish “a tyrannical Long oligarchy of indefinite duration.”⁷² On one occasion the *Item* plainly stated that “If a majority of the voters of Louisiana are stupid enough to favor any such enormous increase to their bonded indebtedness, it is their privilege to say so. But they will undoubtedly deserve whatever happens to them afterward.”⁷³ *The Progress* capitalized on such editorials, “These enemies of progress even boasted that the people did not know what was good for them and what was bad for them. One of their leaders went so far as to say, ‘To hell with the people.’”⁷⁴

Throughout the campaign, the press continued to rehash the slew of charges brought against Long during impeachment that they claimed he yet to clear from his name. Chief among the criticism was his temperamental unfitness. In the words of the *Times-Picayune*, “the race is between Louisiana’s distinguished senior senator and the eccentric whose fantastic and flagrant performances as governor have earned him national reputation [sic] as a freak.”⁷⁵ Many papers claimed that Long was too incompetent and untrustworthy to handle such immense sums of state money and administer such an extensive highway building program.⁷⁶ The inconclusive end to impeachment delegitimized Long’s reign, Ewing’s *States* argued, “with an unscrupulous and mentally and morally irresponsible Executive at Baton Rouge, it is sure there can be no fair expression of the popular will.”⁷⁷ *The Progress* called the *States*’ position “an almighty flimsy

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *New Orleans Item*, July 17, 1930, 14.

⁷⁴ *The Louisiana Progress*, August 7, 1930, 3.

⁷⁵ *Times-Picayune*, July 23, 1930, 8.

⁷⁶ *Baton Rouge State Times*, April 17, 1930, 4.

⁷⁷ *New Orleans States*, July 1, 1930, 10.

platform to support the bulky frame of the publisher of that bladder and the heavily camouflaged reasons why it is trying to spike progress at every turn.”⁷⁸

The New Orleans dailies, still bitter from impeachment and determined to prevent Long from basking in the glory of a political victory, opposed his Good Roads program and sought to “bring the state to disaster,” he claimed, in order to accomplish his ruin.⁷⁹ Defeating Long was a zero-sum game. The “ringsters” and their newspapers would destroy him with whatever lies necessary in order to “prevent a free rule of the people,” *The Progress* explained, because they were “of that old school which makes rulers and bosses of public officials and subjects out of the people.”⁸⁰ Ewing, Ballard and Phelps were “the worst losers in the world and like all bad losers continue to antagonize the thousands of clear thinking citizens of this state by hurling insults at their intelligence.”⁸¹

The Progress regularly pointed out the hypocrisy of newspapers’ editorial opposition to his progressive measures they once applauded. “THEY WONT PRINT THE TRUTH BECAUSE IT'S KILLING THEM,” *The Progress* belted out.⁸² “They won’t dare print the great benefits and economies that Louisiana will enjoy with the passage of Governor Long’s highway plan because it will reflect credit on Huey P. Long,” who, “unlike his Constitutional League predecessors, won’t jump through their hoops and ride a bicycle backwards.”⁸³ The newspapers “fight paved roads in their editorial columns while they yowl about the dangers of gravel roads in their news columns,” *The Progress* asserted, “These three papers want to have ducks swimming around in holes in the highways. They want loose gravel to make good accident stories.”⁸⁴

⁷⁸ *The Louisiana Progress*, July 10, 1930, 4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, August 14, 1930, 4.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1930, 2.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, July 10, 1930, 4.

⁸² *Ibid.*, April 17, 1930, 4.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1930, 4.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, July 10, 1930, 4; May 1, 1930, 5.

On the rare occasion that Long addressed criticism of his temperament, he said he was “forced” to reply to the lying newspapers “in language they could understand” so that they could not “draw a muddy curtain over the clean, clear-cut issue of Good Roads.”⁸⁵ More often than not, Long did not address his enemies’ attacks, instead he suggested it was evidence of their personal hatred for everything he symbolized.

Long was going to see to it that citizens constitutional rights were not “relegated to the swill troughs of newspaper hokum,” *The Progress* assured readers, “NO NEWSPAPERS OR CHEAP-GRAFTING POLITICIANS ARE GOING TO DEPRIVE YOU OF YOUR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS AS CITIZENS.”⁸⁶ The Ring politicians and their “lying newspapers,” *The Progress* proclaimed, “have fought him so bitterly, so unmercifully, and so unfairly that they would have killed or driven any other person insane long ago. There is not another man in Louisiana that could have held up under that strain.”⁸⁷

“Just Three Sorry Old Has-Beens”

In addition to connecting newspapers with the corrupt political elite to suggest the press worked against the interests of the people who they were pledged to represent, the third prong of Long’s attacks on the press entailed maligning the character, competency, integrity, and personal attributes of the New Orleans dailies’ publishers. Such ad hominem attacks suggested that the publishers’ lack of professional ethics and good character precluded them from holding any authority over the truth. Not only did ridicule of the publishers shift negative attention from Long, his iconoclastic responses to their regal scorn appealed to the ordinary, unrefined citizens who he represented.

⁸⁵ Ibid., September 11, 1930, 4.

⁸⁶ Ibid., July 10, 1930, 4.

⁸⁷ Ibid., August 7, 1930, 3.

Long enjoyed making jokes about his enemies. “It was not venom in him that made him do those things. He thought they were funny,” according to one of his confidants, “He would laugh about each one of them.”⁸⁸ He relished using the insulting nicknames and slurs *The Progress* affixed to the New Orleans newspapers and their publishers. While some of his affrontery could be characterized as jocular, other attacks were uglier, more vicious and calculated. In addition to the common monikers “lying newspapers” and “enemy newspapers,” *The Progress* included names and phrases such as Colonel “Buck” and “Bow Wow” Ewing, “Old Maid Phelps,” “Kingfish Phelps,” and “The Old Lady of Camp Street” (The *Times-Picayune*),⁸⁹ “just three sorry old has-beens,”⁹⁰ “scab newspapers,”⁹¹ a “gang of traitors,”⁹² “the newspaper trust of New Orleans,”⁹³ “filthy scandal mongers,”⁹⁴ “the United Association of Public Fakers,”⁹⁵ “dictators of politics” and “mighty Machiavellis of the broken promise and double-cross,”⁹⁶ the “rotten press,”⁹⁷ “enemies of progress,”⁹⁸ “plundering plutocrats,”⁹⁹ the “power drunk press,”¹⁰⁰ and the “millionaire political lords of Louisiana.”¹⁰¹

Such defamatory epithets frequently appeared in equally defamatory cartoons, which were featured on nearly every front page of *The Progress*. Long hired Trist Wood, a freelance cartoonist who formerly worked at the *Item*, when he started his paper. He told Trist “go get the

⁸⁸ Charles Frampton, interviewed by T. Harry Williams, n.d., box 19, folder 68, THW.

⁸⁹ *The Louisiana Progress*, June 12, 1930, 4; June 19, 1930, 1; May 8, 1930, 4.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, April 24, 1930, 1.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1930, 1.

⁹² *Ibid.*, May 1, 1930, 5.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, May 8, 1930, 1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1930, 4.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1930, 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, July 3, 1930, 4.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, July 31, 1930, 7.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, August 7, 1930, 3.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, August 7, 1930, 4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, April 17, 1930, 1.

¹⁰¹ *Times-Picayune*, April 29, 1930, 10.

best drawings that you can of the hi-moguls of these newspapers.”¹⁰² Long distributed massive single-sheet print outs of the cartoons to rural areas for his illiterate supporters to enjoy. Despite running for a national office, he discussed very few issues of national importance during his campaign. He faced criticism for his campaign’s lack of substance, and while he briefly attempted to touch on subjects like flood control or foreign policy, he recognized his supporters were equally uninterested in national issues as he was and quickly switched back to his attacks.¹⁰³

Trist’s cartoons throughout the 1930 senatorial race, described as one of the nastiest campaigns in Louisiana political history, continuously berated and ridiculed Ewing, Ballard and Phelps with odious caricatures and innuendo. Ballard frequently appeared in cartoons with hypodermic needles protruding from his body. Apparently in 1924, Ewing’s *States* first depicted Ballard smoking “hop” in a cartoon as an explanation for the “many amazing things” written in the *Item*, which *The Progress* used to suggest as an explanation for the paper’s hostile editorial stance.¹⁰⁴ A sardonic cartoon, titled “Planning To Battle Against Good Roads,” showed Semmes Walmsley towering over the three publishers, Ballard with needles in his arms, and a caption that said “You gotta hand it to hop that he’s always fulla pep and bright ideas.”¹⁰⁵ “Snake-in-the-grass” Phelps looked tall and lanky in the cartoons, with a large beak-like nose and a perturbed look in his eye. “That bald headed old hypocrite from Lafayette Square,” *The Progress* said about Phelps, “really ain’t worth discussin.”¹⁰⁶ Ewing’s obese caricature wobbled around and on a handful of occasions appeared alongside a handsome and physically fit Long.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Long, *Every Man A King*, 188.

¹⁰³ Williams, *Huey Long*, 468.

¹⁰⁴ *The Louisiana Progress*, May 29, 1930, 8.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1930, 4.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1930, 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, August 28, 1930, 4; September 18, 1930, 1.

One illustrative cartoon, titled, “Convicted--For the Forty-'Leventh Time!” depicted a metaphorical court of public opinion, with the three papers standing trial for domestic abuse of a woman who symbolized truth.¹⁰⁸ Another cartoon, titled “The Mud Roads Quartet Sings For Its Supper,” showed Ransdell, Ewing, Phelps and Ballard singing, “We want no roads! We want no roads! But please don’t get us wrong! Our Reason’s O.K. --We do not want the glory to go to Long. Don’t blame us for our attitude! It’s got us fairly stunned to think--Great Scott!--Our gang won’t get a chance at that Good Roads fund.”¹⁰⁹

“How the mighty have fallen!” one editorial in *The Progress* snickered, “The once powerful New Orleans press” were left without “honor, respect, truth and the power to think straight.”¹¹⁰ When Colonel “Buck” Ewing failed to retain his post as the vice-president of the Associated Press, *The Progress* wrote that “undoubtedly” the directors of the AP “realized that the colonel was perhaps not as spry as he was in the old days and took into consideration that they really need a virile young man.”¹¹¹ *The Progress* pulled no punches when it went after Ewing’s son with nicknames like John “Squirt” Ewing, the “Clown Prince of the Bow-Wow dynasty,” and “Shreveport’s Little Boss--The Bragging ‘Shreveport Times’ Boy Wonder.”¹¹² John Ewing responded on one occasion by calling Long “an impeached thief and scoundrel.”¹¹³ *The Progress* added insult to injury when it published a speech in which Long said, “people seem to be afraid of Charlie Manship. Let me tell you there never was a bigger coward on the Lord’s green earth than that fellow.”¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., May 15, 1930, 1.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., August 7, 1930, 1.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., July 3, 1930, 4.

¹¹¹ Ibid., May 1, 1930, 4.

¹¹² Ibid., July 24, 1930, 1.

¹¹³ *Times-Picayune*, August 20, 1930, 1.

¹¹⁴ *The Louisiana Progress*, April 17, 1930, 8.

No shortage of stories appeared in *The Progress* that detailed the malice, spite, and conniving of the New Orleans dailies. The papers, for example, celebrated the death of two pro-Long legislators.¹¹⁵ They plotted to deprive citizens of voting at the primaries in 1930.¹¹⁶ They wanted felons in the state penitentiary to “live in luxury,” and advocated for inmates to murder correctional officers.¹¹⁷ They deliberately tried to politicize state agencies for financial gain.¹¹⁸ They attempted to drive the needy from the state hospital because they were “bitter and angry because the death rate at Charity hospital under the administration of Governor Huey P. Long has been slashed.”¹¹⁹ They supported the red light district and “commercialized vice.”¹²⁰ They punished newspaper boys of New Orleans who lived on the meagre earnings of selling papers with an ultimatum: if they sold copies of *The Progress* they forfeited the right to sell the three dailies.¹²¹

Long was the first governor in the history of Louisiana “with courage and conviction enough to tell the newspapers flatly to ‘Go to Hell,’” a *Progress* editorial claimed.¹²² “Is it not a fact gentlemen that public confidence in the New Orleans papers has been destroyed since their united effort backed by a vicious determination has sought to defeat and destroy everything constructive Governor Long has proposed?”¹²³ Their campaign to defeat Long with “lies, venom, treachery, stealth, hi-jacking, coercion, intimidation, bribery, felonious assault, framing and

¹¹⁵ Ibid., June 19, 1930, 1.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., April 10, 1930, 1.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., May 1, 1930, 5; September 4, 1930, 1.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., April 24, 1930, 1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., Sept 11, 1930, 1.

¹²⁰ Ibid., April 17, 1930, 4.

¹²¹ Ibid., May 8, 1930, 1.

¹²² Ibid., May 22, 1930, 4.

¹²³ Ibid., May 22, 1930, 4.

every other wicked endeavor known to man,” the *Progress* said, “will go down in Louisiana history as the foulest this state has ever know.”¹²⁴

Conclusion

Huey Long emerged the victor in the 1930 U.S. Senate race, where he carried 53 of 64 parishes and trumped Ransdell by nearly a fifteen-point margin at the polls.¹²⁵ Despite the fact that senate races in Louisiana ordinarily attracted fewer voters than elections for governor, he more than doubled his 1928 vote in New Orleans. He broke a large number of voters away from Ring control and forced his opposition to capitulate. The day after the election the “Constipational League” disbanded, and the Old Regulars agreed to strike a deal with Long to pass the Good Roads bond measure. Additionally, the Orleans delegation promised to support a resolution to formally withdraw the impeachment charges.¹²⁶

Long created his own newspaper to establish a direct and unfiltered channel of communication with voters. *The Louisiana Progress* provided a way to bypass the hostile press and keep his base in tune and energized. He used it to tout his achievements, explain his positions and future plans, and orient public attention toward subject matter he could spin in his favor. *The Progress* was key to building and maintaining public confidence in his leadership. The paper did not disappear after the election, despite a change in publication from weekly to monthly issues. While serving as a U.S. Senator, he renamed the paper to *The American Progress*, which he published for five more years until his assassination in September 1935.

Keeping himself in the limelight was only half the battle. Long also needed to fend off negative publicity. His attempts to undermine public trust in the New Orleans dailies was a

¹²⁴ Ibid., September 11, 1930, 4.

¹²⁵ Sindler, *Huey Long's Louisiana*, 71.

¹²⁶ Shreveport *Times*, September 14, 1930, 1.

specific type of attack that went beyond mere criticism. Journalists maintain the public's trust by adhering to professional and ethical principles such as objectivity, balance, fairness or neutrality, and by highlighting the importance of their democratic role and the constituents who benefit from their work.¹²⁷ How politicians and citizens address the press is central to its authority and ability to appear legitimate. Long serves as an example of how politicians can undermine the press by using the same logic journalists rely on to argue for their legitimacy against them. He associated the New Orleans dailies and their publishers with the political establishment to suggest they were "newspapers of the regime," who were out-of-touch with ordinary citizens and driven by impure motives. He branded the papers an enemy of the people that lied and manipulated the public to advance their own political agenda. He denigrated their professional reputations by claiming their incompetence, irrelevance and personal attributes or shortcomings prohibited their claim to any form of social authority.

This chapter serves as a framework for how populists seek to undermine the press, and this thesis more broadly shows why disdain of the press is a common denominator among populists. Populist leaders use the press until it no longer benefits their interests. They seem to inevitably draw the criticism of the press, either once installed in power or before, and respond with an intensity unmatched by mainstream politicians.

¹²⁷ Arjen Van Dalen, "Rethinking journalist-politician relations in the age of populism: How outsider politicians delegitimize mainstream journalists," *Journalism* 1, no.18 (2009): 3.

Conclusion

While serving as a U.S Senator for Louisiana in 1933, Huey Long ran into Arthur Krock, a Washington correspondent for the *New York Times*. Baffled by the *Times*' coverage of him, he asked why the paper published lengthy accounts of his speeches if it opposed him editorially. “We have this foolish idea that the news columns should be honest,” Krock responded, “and since you make the news, we print it.” Long responded with a revealing comment. He said “Goddamn it! I wouldn’t run a newspaper that way if I owned one.”¹ Ironically, he did have his own newspaper at that time. *The American Progress* ran at a circulation of more than 360,000 per issue, and sometimes 1,000,000 for a special issue.² He made a point to never feature his enemies’ statements unless sandwiched between his criticism.

By his own admission, the legacy of Huey Long raises important questions about how the news media can elevate the voice and ideas of disruptive outsiders. He used the press to catapult himself into one of the most notorious political careers in American history. His lust for authority and personal power fueled his obsession with press attention. His political calculus always included a consideration of how events would unfold under the critical eye of journalists. Despite his progressive ideals and the good he may have accomplished, once installed in power he blasted through democratic guardrails in the pursuit of more power, a tendency that populist leaders exhibit. Where the scrutiny of “watchdogs” in the press may have elicited broad public condemnation for any ordinary politician, Long was immune. The common people who supported him fiercely loved him precisely because he flouted the rules and in the process

¹ T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Knopf, 1969), 454.

² Burton L. Hotaling, “Huey Pierce Long as Journalist and Propagandist,” *Journalism Quarterly* 20, (1943): 26.

“peeled off the aristocratic veneer of politics.”³ They believed that a politician who wishes to do good “may have to do some evil to achieve his goals.”⁴

The impact of Huey Long’s reign endured in Louisiana for decades after his untimely death with surrogates who emulated his style of politics--a testament to his appeal. More recently he has reemerged as a topic of interest with the rise of Donald Trump, an equally divisive character. Trump’s claims of “fake news” are unmistakable echoes of Long’s damnation of the “lying newspapers” nearly a century before. As this thesis illustrates, the two men have more in common than just their disdain for the news media. Despite transformational advancements in communication technologies that many attribute to Trump’s success, his reliance on the same provincial publicity tactics that Long used to rise to political stardom reveals the centrality of the news media to populist movements in a manner that transcends time and place. The answer to “how did this man get elected?” which appeared countless times during their turbulent careers, is not unique to either man. Their careers serve as generalizable examples of how populists, by continuously appearing in the press, can leverage the power of the news media to establish political influence and win support, and later, when the press inevitably turns against them, how they navigate a hostile media environment.

Political Legitimacy

One explanatory narrative of Donald Trump’s unprecedented victory in 2016 was that social media gave him the freedom to articulate his ideological perspective and propagate disinformation that intensified partisan polarization without the filter of the news media.⁵ Huey

³ Carleton Beals, *The Inside Story of Huey Long: America’s Amazing Threat to Democracy* (Philadelphia: Lippincott & Co., 1935), 17.

⁴ Williams, *Huey Long*, X.

⁵ The *New York Times*, August 28, 2016; Jacob Groshek and Karolina Koc-Michalska, “Helping Populism Win? Social media use, filter bubbles, and support for populist presidential candidates in the 2016 election campaign,” *Information, Communication & Society* 20, no. 9 (2017): 1390.

Long's circulars are also credited with his success and, to a certain extent, serve as an early prototype of Trump's Tweets. He resorted to circumventing the press with his propaganda leaflets when he wanted to control the presentation of his ideas, attack an enemy, or set the public agenda by thrusting a new issue into debate.

While their personal methods of propaganda distribution were crucial for sustaining support, Tweets and circulars do not explain their initial electoral success. Citizens' mere exposure to appealing views may pique their interest, but a positive reception does not inherently translate to political support. As political outsiders who stood in opposition to every mainstream norm and expectation, voters had little reason to believe that Long or Trump were legitimate and serious contestants with the know-how to be effective once in office on the basis of their propaganda alone.

Above all, voters grant "the right to rule" on the basis of evaluations of a candidate's legitimacy and effectiveness.⁶ Citizens' assessments are determined according to ideological and pragmatic considerations, or their beliefs of how the political system ought to function.⁷ The leader whom they cast their vote for must represent a style of rule that is morally valid and achieves outputs that benefit the common good.⁸ Voters judge effectiveness according to a candidate's personal attributes and the coherency of the policies they advocate, and generally voters must feel there is something to be gained by supporting a particular candidate.

Political aspirants who rise through the party system are granted legitimacy during the "invisible primary," where they make direct appeals to party leaders and major donors who, in

⁶ Honorata Mazepus, "What Makes Political Authorities Legitimate? Students' Ideas About Legitimacy in Five European Democracies and Hybrid Regimes," *Contemporary Politics* 23, no. 3 (2017): 308.

⁷ Linda Bos and Wouter van der Brug, "Public images of leaders of anti-immigration parties: Perceptions of legitimacy and effectiveness," *Party Politics* 16, no. 6 (2010): 779.

⁸ Mazepus, "What Makes Political Authorities Legitimate?," 308.

turn, confirm or deny the aspirant's electoral viability and worthiness to advance the party's objectives. Establishing legitimacy is a negotiated process, which for populists entails bypassing the political elite to appeal directly to ordinary citizens.

By undermining the legitimacy of establishment politicians and officials, populists claim authority for themselves. They claim to be "untainted" by power on the basis of their location outside the established political hierarchy and, thus, place themselves in a more credible position to criticize mainstream figures, institutions, and practices. They take advantage of common citizens' perceptions that politics has "escaped popular control" and that they have been shut out of government by corrupt politicians and an unrepresentative elite, so that they can offer themselves as a solution.⁹ Acceptance of populists' logic depends solely on their ability to convince potential supporters that they are indeed not a part of the entrenched power elite.¹⁰ Personal attributes like charisma, relatability, and authenticity are a key factor of populists' ability to appear persuasive. Ultimately, citizens' expectations and perceptions determine a populists' ability to establish their legitimacy.

The Status Conferral Mechanism of Mass Media

The news media play a central role in the formation of public perception and opinion, especially within political contexts. The decisions of journalists, newsroom staff, editors, and broadcasters exert a powerful influence on a variety of social processes. The most central function of mass media is "setting the news agenda," or focusing public attention on a select few issues and individuals around which public opinion forms.¹¹ Because the larger world of public

⁹ Robert Barr, "Populists, Outsiders and Anti-Establishment Politics," *Party Politics* 15, no. 1 (2009): 32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹¹ Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (1972): 176.

affairs is “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind,” average citizens necessarily rely on the media to orient their attention and order the public’s priorities.¹²

The mass media play a significant role in whether or not a populist’s persuasion will take effect. In the context of mediatization the simple fact of not appearing in the news media communicates that an individual is not serious enough of a political contestant to be worthy of public consideration, granted citizens are even aware they exist. This logic underpins the assertion that the mere exposure to appealing messages found outside of the bounds of the news media is not enough to convince audiences that a political aspirant is a serious contender who is worthy of their potential support.

Consequently, mass media enhance populists’ ability to claim legitimacy by establishing their public importance. In 1940, scholars Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton first defined the status-conferral mechanism of mass media, one of the oldest and most enduring media theories, as a process by which status accrues to those who merely receive attention in the media.¹³ The mass media “bestow prestige” and enhance the authority of individuals and groups by legitimizing their status. Recognition by the press testifies “that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one’s behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice.”¹⁴ Audiences subscribe to the circular belief that “if you really matter, you will be at the focus of mass attention and, if you are at the focus of mass attention, then surely you must really matter.”¹⁵

¹² Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 29.

¹³ Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton, *Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1948), 21.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The need for status and legitimacy explains the draw of political outsiders in particular to the news media. In contrast with the “behind-the-scenes” activities of party-linked candidates during the invisible primary, populists engage in highly visible public activities with the hope that by catching journalists’ attention, they can appear within a medium that enhances their importance and by extension their ability to convince potential supporters of their legitimacy and worthiness. The inherent value of appearing in the news media is that it provides a vehicle to propagate messages to a broad audience in a uniform and coherent manner, but this is of secondary importance to populists who devise their own schemes for spreading their ideas, such as how Long and Trump relied on circulars and Tweets.

Not just *if* but *how* populists are initially presented by the news media determines their ability to persuade potential supporters. Most populists and political outsiders fail before they even begin because the news media brands them *persona non grata*. As the “Fourth Estate” of democratic government, the press guards against radicals who espouse destructive political views and embolden social conflict. Citizens, too, prefer leaders who will uphold the integrity of democratic principles, institutions, and practices. To be successful, populists must strike a delicate balance between presenting themselves as opposed to the elite establishment without appearing to oppose the democratic system of government all together.¹⁶

Long and Trump strategically “toed-the-line” of acceptability during the insurgency phases of their careers. Their attacks focused on the elite political establishment not the political system as a whole. Trump, in fact, frequently harped on “law and order” and celebrated constitutional protections like free speech, gun ownership and other individual liberties. Long, driven by different ideological beliefs, advocated for economic equality, taxpayer-funded social

¹⁶ Andreas Schedler, “Anti-Political Establishment Parties,” *Party Politics* 2, no. 3 (1996): 293.

programs, and “clean” government. Journalists, many of whom were “muckrakers” on the forefront of progressive reform, were often sympathetic to Long’s activities. In fact, prominent newspapers applauded a number of his legislative objectives during his first year as governor.¹⁷

As the following section will illustrate, positive press treatment during the insurgency phase of populists’ careers is an often neglected yet central most factor of their success, and they commonly assume an active role in orchestrating their press appearances.

The Press as a Populist Tool

Huey Long’s activities as a young lawyer earned him a degree of local recognition and status, as chapter one illustrates, due to his active interest in publicizing his activities in local newspapers. His local reputation was useful for his local campaign for the Railroad Commission, but in order to win a higher office, such as governor or beyond, required that he establish a state-wide presence and build support in urban areas that were controlled by the conservative elite. Once seated on the commission, he used the powers of that office to lay the groundwork for his formal introduction to the broader population of Louisiana voters. Over a period of nearly six months he strategically issued statements to the press to raise the issue of corporate monopolization and direct public attention toward “the Pine Oil situation.” More important than the details of that issue, was the chief opponent of his activities, the Standard Oil Company. By targeting a powerful multinational corporation, whose influence ran to every seat of power in the state, he lifted himself from the fringe of local politics and made himself a relevant object of public interest.

¹⁷ Adolph Goldsmith, “A study of objectivity of treatment of Governor Huey P. Long by six Louisiana daily newspapers during Long’s first eleven months in office” (master’s Thesis, Louisiana State University, 1967), 103.

The press introduced Long to Louisiana voters at the political rally in Hot Wells that hot summer day in 1919 but he orchestrated the opportunity for himself. He stole public attention from the formal opening of the gubernatorial contest--an officially sanctioned event--where the presence of virtually every important political figure in Louisiana made press attention a guarantee. His sensational speech presented a news story too intriguing to ignore. Half-baked allegations and ridicule of the Southern gentlemen who ruled Louisiana, who sat in the very crowd to which he delivered his remarks, added color and excitement to his performance. That single speech in Hot Wells determined the course of the rest of his career. Thereafter, the press waited to see who the next victim of his assaults would be and pounced on the sensational details carefully crafted by Long himself. Each time he went on the offensive was like a new episode of a made-for-TV drama series.

In a similar fashion, Donald Trump laid the groundwork for his 2016 presidential bid years in advance. His appearance at the 2011 Conservative Political Action Conference, the nation's largest annual gathering of right-wing activists, is credited with jump-starting his political career.¹⁸ He delivered remarks at CPAC an additional three times before officially running in the 2016 presidential election. His appearance in 2011 ignited rumors of a possible presidential bid in the 2012 election and established his political relevance insofar that it earned him countless invites to popular cable news programs, such as "The View" on ABC and "Fox and Friends" on Fox News. Trump's signature issue was the "Birther" conspiracy, or the claim that President Barack Obama was an illegitimate president on the basis of his supposedly fraudulent birth certificate.¹⁹ As with Long and Standard Oil, Trump's savage vilification of Obama propelled him to the forefront of American politics.

¹⁸ *New York Times*, March 12, 2016.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, September 16, 2016.

The influence of Trump’s celebrity status on his political success is frequently overstated. While he may have initially attracted media attention in 2011 due to the novelty of a well-known Hollywood socialite flirting with a possible bid for the presidency, the sense of political relevance he cultivated by 2015 when he announced his candidacy explains the sustained press attention of his campaign. Consider the failed campaign of Kanye West, a popular culture icon who is universally revered as one of the greatest artists of his generation, and who built a business empire worth over \$1.3 billion.²⁰ Yet, West only received incidental press attention during the 2020 election cycle--usually as an update on his non-existent chances.

What separates the successful celebrity-turned-politicians from the wannabes, and the populist winners from the losers, is a coherent communication approach and distinct ideological perspective. Despite their detractors who claim otherwise, the ability of Huey Long and Donald Trump to sustain the interest of the news media lie in the power of their shockingly coherent and relevant ideas. Hillary Clinton, the embodiment of an establishment politician who also just so happened to be Trump’s competitor in 2016, dubbed him “temperamentally unfit” and his campaign approach “dangerously incoherent.” His ideas were not actually ideas at all, she claimed, but “just a series of bizarre rants, personal feuds and outright lies.”²¹ Long’s political opponents just as frequently branded him a demagogue and “publicity hound” and urged the public to “ignore him entirely as too odorous for treatment.”²² Within the context of political media, however, news generally must have instrumental value to citizens.²³ While Long and

²⁰ *Forbes Magazine*, April 24, 2020.

²¹ *New York Times*, June 2, 2016.

²² *New Orleans Item*, October 2, 1921, 10.

²³ Megan Hodgkiss, “Newsworthiness Guidelines for a Socially Responsible Press: Aligning Definitions at the Intersection of Journalism, Ethics, and the Law” (PhD diss., Georgia State University, 2017), 8.

Trump initially attracted attention for staging some outrageous public spectacle, they used the opportunity to provide detailed explanations of their ideas and perspectives.

When Long delivered his Hot Wells speech in 1919, for instance, the press not only reported his statement that Standard Oil was “among the world’s greatest criminals,” but included his explanation of how exactly the corporation’s corrupt practices threatened independent oil producers.²⁴ Trump, during a 2011 interview for ABC’s “Good Morning America,” pivoted attention from his controversial “birther” comments to a discussion about how America had “never been so weak” and how exactly he would defeat the Libyan revolutionary Muammar Gaddafi, and protect the American economy from the threat of China if he were president.²⁵

While members of the political establishment do not understand their appeal, populist outsiders like Long and Trump present a version of reality that resonates on a deep psychological level with their supporters. As reformers, both men targeted social discontent by cutting through the noise of politics with pointed, relevant criticism and by addressing concerns of potential supporters with straightforward policy objectives. Their dependency on “systems of narration,” or the distinctive ideological ordering of political and social facts, presented their ideas in a compelling argumentative structure.²⁶

More importantly, “systems of narration” present messages in a suitable form for mass media. Aside from the newsworthiness of Long and Trump’s novel ideas, their ideas arrived in an argumentative structure that comported with the organizational logic of news production. The simplification of every political struggle by way of the “the people vs. the elite” style of

²⁴ New Orleans *States*, July 5, 1919, 10.

²⁵ Interview with Ashleigh Banfield, *Good Morning America*, March 17, 2011.

²⁶ Barr, “Populists, Outsiders, and Anti-Establishment Politics,” 32.

discourse that claims politics has escaped popular control produces easy to report news by structuring ideas and events in a cohesive and digestible form that guides readers through a narrative. Their simplified communication approach not only enhanced the likelihood of press attention but was itself a highly persuasive form of communication.

Trump and Long's Tweets and circulars in particular aided journalists work by presenting timely and ready-form content that was easy to incorporate into the news making process. The news media did not need to read between the lines, so to speak, to uncover what exactly they were promising to supporters, which explains the accuracy with which their statements and ideas were reported. The frequent appearance of Trump's Tweets and verbatim transcripts of Long's circulars in news reports shows the important role of their propaganda—they ensured the public's attention by delivering information to the press in a suitable form.

By the time Donald Trump won the Republican Party's nomination, and Huey Long the 1928 governor's race, their influence had deeply rooted itself in a class of loyal supporters. Their domination of the news cycle inoculated their anti-establishment persuasion to the extent that citizen's formerly uninterested in politics took bold stances. Inevitably, however, their disruptive behavior turned the once friendly press into their principal enemy.

Delegitimization of the Press

Support for populist leaders is virtually impossible to reverse once established. Despite conventional wisdom, when "watchdog" journalists seek to hold populist leaders accountable for their flagrant violations, their hostility works to the populists' advantage. As chapter two shows, Huey Long rebounded from impeachment by transforming press hostility into validation of his activities. His ability to obfuscate the reasons why his opponents sought to remove him from office lies in his supporters' willingness to subscribe to the reality he presented--a testament to

the potency of his particular “system of narration.” No matter how serious his opponents’ allegations or hostile the press’ condemnation, his supporters were converted to the religion of Huey Long. He did suffer a casualty from impeachment, though. The hostile press would no longer serve as a useful tool for propagating his messages, one of the central reasons why he sought its attention. Remaining in constant contact with supporters was essential to sustaining his support--populists’ sole claim to power.

Trump’s fall from grace with the press occurred far sooner in his political career than it did for Long. As the Republican field of candidates narrowed during the primaries and it became clear Trump would win the party’s nomination, the news media turned a more critical eye to his personal life and business dealings. In May 2016, the *New York Times* published a scathing article that revealed “unsettling workplace conduct” as detailed in the accounts of nearly 50 women who previously worked with Trump in various capacities.²⁷ Other pointed criticism followed, such as whether he avoided paying income tax, or his real estate company’s discrimination of Black tenants, and his problematic business ties with Russia. Previously friendly members of the media became his most hostile opponents, such as the hosts of “The View” on ABC, who, after inviting him to the program over eighteen times throughout his career, no longer found a single positive thing to say about his leadership.²⁸ Despite the media’s critical treatment it was impossible to reverse his influence. Journalists’ hostility vindicated Trump and caused his followers to double-down on their support. After all, elites’ hatred of populists is part of why their supporters find them appealing.

The dynamic between journalists and mainstream politicians is often contentious, sometimes cordial, but at its heart is an adversarial relationship. Huey Long and Donald Trump,

²⁷ *New York Times*, May 15, 2016.

²⁸ *New York Times*, May 22, 2019.

however, viewed the media with a zero-sum attitude. Either the press was a friend, or it was a foe. They actively courted journalists with praise or by showing preferential treatment but would launch an all-out attack in the presence of even the smallest amount of criticism.

Some argue that Long and Trump's vanity and egocentrism drove them to attack the news media as a way to repair their damaged reputations. Ultimately their motivation to undermine the news media is identical to why they attacked the political elite. By destroying public trust in the press, they undermined consensus and claimed authority over the truth for themselves. As chapter three shows, Long used the same logic that journalists rely on to claim their legitimacy against them. He connected the news media with the elite establishment to suggest journalists' hostility was driven by the same impure motives, branded the press as an enemy of the people, and claimed the "lying newspapers" would say anything to obstruct "a free rule of the people."²⁹ Trump once Tweeted that he was "draining the Swamp," and that the "Deep State and the Left, and their vehicle, the Fake News Media, are going crazy- & they don't know what to do."³⁰ He added "Don't worry, we will win!"³¹

According to Long, during and after impeachment newspapers became so hostile that their attention was worse than none at all. *The Louisiana Progress* not only served as the principal vehicle of his attacks on the press but was presented as a replacement to the press altogether. "Get your friends to see the truth," *The Progress* pleaded with readers, "Don't let them be misled by the lying propaganda spread throughout this state by the lying newspapers of New Orleans."³² He attacked the press with more than just words. In 1934, he proposed a 2% tax

²⁹ *The Louisiana Progress*, July 24, 1930, 2.

³⁰ Twitter, @realDonaldTrump, September 5 and 6, 2018.

³¹ Ibid.

³² *The Louisiana Progress*, July 17, 1930, 1.

on newspapers' advertising revenue, or as he described it "a tax on lying, 2 cents per lie."³³ On another occasion, after he learned that a *Times-Picayune* reporter leaked sensitive information from a confidential meeting, he ordered one of his bodyguards to "siege" the paper's offices, wreck the presses and put the *Times-Picayune* out of commission--an order his closest advisors thought went too far and refused to carry out.³⁴ He even created a State Printing Board for the purpose of determining which newspapers would be eligible to be "the official printer" for government news.³⁵

Donald Trump did not go so far as to create his own newspaper once the media turned against him, likely because he could rely on right-wing outlets such as Fox News and others that, to varying extents, were themselves engaged in a long-standing battle with other news organizations over claims of liberal bias. Not until Trump ventured into explicitly anti-democratic territory by attempting to undermine faith in the integrity of the 2020 election did Fox News finally waver in its support. Twitter likewise recognized the potential danger of Trump's claims of a "rigged" election and made the unprecedented decision to boot him from its platform, which proved to be an even bigger loss than Fox News. Trump was left without his most important political tool.

New Opportunities for Populism in an Evolving Media Environment

Many who once championed the internet as a democratizing force are left with deep concerns about how social media enables the spread of disinformation, exacerbates social unrest and facilitates the influence of unconventional and potentially dangerous characters. As this thesis reveals, however, the use of alternative media to reach supporters is not a new issue nor is

³³ William Ivy Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 279.

³⁴ Charles Frampton, interviewed by T. Harry Williams, n.d., box 19, folder 68, THW.

³⁵ Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm*, 301.

it unique to the Internet Age. Over a century ago, Huey Long used circulars, the radio and created his own newspaper to bypass media gatekeepers and reach supporters directly with intoxicating propaganda.

Social media does greatly enhance the ability of such activities because it lowers the barriers and removes the cost of distributing information. The herculean feat of Long's circular production demanded extensive funds and manpower to accomplish. His impeachment circular campaign, for instance, cost an estimated \$40,000 and hand-to-hand distribution of the mass of materials required a small army of state employees.³⁶ He had the newspapers "beaten to death," in his words, "so long as the money held out."³⁷ Before *The Progress* became self-sustaining with advertising revenue, each issue initially cost approximately \$6,000, which Long collected with his notorious "deduct system," in which he garnished state employees paychecks at a rate of 20 percent.³⁸ The costly and time consuming nature of issuing a newspaper or circular limited his ability to compete with the daily publication of oppositional newspapers.

Twitter, on the other hand, is instantaneous. "A strange thing has happened over the last couple of years," Trump reflected during an interview, "it's called Twitter. And I have this account with millions of people...I used to say I wanted to own a newspaper. This is better."³⁹ Twitter is better than a newspaper for more reasons than its timeliness, lack of cost and ability to reach massive audiences. Social media provides a new opportunity structure to political leaders: the ability to engage in an open dialogue with supporters and freely interact with other users' content. Trump not only sent messages but received them. The ability to keep his finger on the pulse of public opinion lent itself to messages crafted with ever increasing potency and

³⁶ Williams, *Huey Long*, 368.

³⁷ Long, *Every Man A King*, 151.

³⁸ Burton, "Huey Pierce Long as Journalist and Propagandist," 22.

³⁹ Trump on "The View," March 23, 2011.

relevance. Consequently, the technological affordances of social media also provide for more sophisticated methods of manipulating public opinion and perceptions of events and individuals, which politicians on both sides of the aisle have embraced.

Members of the news media must reckon not only with the role they have played in the emergence of radicals and populists from across the ideological spectrum, but how their open hostility toward Donald Trump in particular emboldened anti-establishment sentiment and, ultimately, how it led to the disintegration of truth and consensus. The role of the press as a government watchdog does not entail wading into the muck of partisan politics or assuming an active role in dismantling lies told by public officials, which inevitably backfires as this thesis reveals. Journalists must guard against the appearance of personal involvement in political affairs and strive to reflect the interests of ordinary citizens who benefit when the press holds political elites to account. The duty of journalists as a disinterested third party is to orient public attention through the objective presentation of facts. The antidote to lies is truth, not censorship, the prescription of “fact-checking” or naked hostility. Citizens’ who harbor anti-establishment resentment and who tend to view journalists as elites are not receptive to attempts by the news media to cultivate “the right way of thinking.” Journalists singular objective is to tell the truth and let the chips fall as they may.

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