



**Above:** Huey Long, shown here as a teenager, was the seventh in a family of nine children. **Opposite page:** Huey Long may have provided the best description when he told reporters, “I am *suis generis* (one of a kind), just leave it at that.”

# Huey Long

As you read, look for:

- Huey Long’s political career and his influence on the state, and
- vocabulary terms **impeachment**,  **censor**, and **Share Our Wealth program**.

The power of the Mississippi River brought the flood of 1927. The power of Huey Long brought political change just one year later. Huey Long was elected governor in 1928.

Who was Huey Long? Even people in other states know he was the governor of Louisiana, and his name is more widely known than any other political figure in Louisiana. Only Charles Lindbergh was photographed more by the journalists of the day.

People who lived in Huey Long’s Louisiana were seldom mild in their opinions of him. They either loved him or hated him. Some of the poor considered him a saint. Newspaper notices giving thanks to St. Anthony and St. Jude sometimes added thanks to Huey Long. In some homes, his picture sat on mantels alongside the religious statues.

What did this governor do that made him so different and so controversial? He liked to describe himself as one of a kind. When questioned about his methods, he replied, “The end justifies the means.” In other words, he considered it acceptable to use power in any way necessary in order to help the people. Some described him as ruthless and power hungry. He controlled all local and state government jobs, and he fired teachers who did not agree with him. People who received state jobs were expected to contribute regularly to his campaign fund. This system was called “the deduct,” since money was deducted from state employees’ pay. Long made a point of destroying his enemies and was merciless in his personal attacks on his political opponents.

## Huey Long’s Early Life

Huey Long’s rough road to power in Louisiana began in Winn Parish. He was born near Winnfield on August 30, 1893. The political views of his hometown may have influenced his thinking. Winn Parish was the home of the Populist movement in Louisiana, and in 1912 the Socialist candidate for president got 36 percent of the parish’s vote. Both of these groups believed that wealth was distributed unfairly, and Long certainly would have heard conversations about these ideas. However, his father was not a Populist; he led a middle-class life in





**Above:** This is an early portrait of Huey Long and his wife Rose. Rose completed his U.S. Senate term.

the community. Long's brothers and sisters resented his later claims of a poor, deprived childhood, which they considered lies to get votes.

From his earliest days, Long was lively and restless. The rule of the day said children should be seen and not heard, but Huey Long ignored this. He gave his opinion whenever he pleased, and he was not reserved with any adults. As a teenager, he went to Baton Rouge to compete in a debate. He did not win, but he informed the wife of the superintendent of education that a bunch of professors had cheated him. He also told her that he intended to become the governor and would remember that she had been nice to him.

Huey Long was always described as brilliant, even by his enemies and by the national political leaders who knew him. Although he had an amazing memory, he was never a good student because he did not concentrate. The year he was supposed to enter the seventh grade he decided to skip that grade. When school started, he just showed up and enrolled himself in eighth grade. Later, he quit high school before he graduated because of an argument with the school principal. Other students described him as a bossy boy who would not take any role other than the star. When the playground game was baseball, he would not play if he could not pitch.

His first jobs were as a traveling salesman, where he learned the art of selling himself to the public. Some of these early sales jobs took him from door-to-door in rural Louisiana. His first political strength came from the contacts he made on the road. Later, when he entered politics, he returned to these buyers to ask for their votes.

He met his future wife, Rose, in Shreveport and for a while continued his sales jobs. But his next career move was to enroll in law school at Tulane. Before completing the program, he arranged for a private bar exam (test to become a lawyer). He said he did not have the time or money to continue classes and was ready to go to work. This incident shows his boldness in going after what he wanted. No one had ever received such special arrangements.

After he passed this test, he returned to Shreveport to practice law. By 1918, he was impatient to start his political career. He had told his wife he planned to be the governor, a U.S. senator, and then the president of the United States. But because of his age (he was only 24), the only statewide office he could hold was on the Railroad Commission (which was later renamed the Public Service Commission).

Huey Long intended to use the commission to gain statewide recognition and power. In his first statewide campaign, Long introduced a new technique—he mailed campaign letters to the voters. He also borrowed money to buy a car, returning to visit rural residents he had met while a

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Huey Long served on the Railroad Commission from 1918 until 1926, and was the committee's chairman for five years.

salesman. Winning his election to the Commission, he worked for low utility rates. He also started his lifelong battle with Standard Oil Company, whose pipelines were regulated by the commission.

## Huey Long as Governor

By 1923, he was ready to run for governor. Although he did not win, he surprised many politicians with the large number of votes he received. He ran again in 1927. Huey Long prepared for this second race by analyzing his first. He realized that he needed the support of the Acadian Catholic farmers in addition to the Protestant hill farmers. He then supported Catholic candidates in other races and campaigned on their behalf. In another effort to win South Louisiana votes, he selected a running mate who could campaign in French.

In his first campaign for governor, he had used the new medium of radio to speak to the people of Louisiana. During his second campaign, station KWKH of Shreveport gave Huey free radio time. Another of his campaign techniques was to use trucks with sound systems. He used those trucks to travel through rural areas, speaking to voters. He gave over six hundred campaign speeches and mailed out flyers all over the state. Louisiana historian Glenn Jeansonne said Huey Long's campaign promises were different because "the concept of the state government acting like Santa Claus was new to Louisiana, previously it had acted more like Scrooge."

**Below:** After he was elected governor in 1928, Long worked for such social reforms as improving the roads and providing free school books for children.





The strategy worked. In 1928, Huey Long was elected governor. When he won the election, the whirlwind began. The rural people who supported him said, “He hit the ground running and never stopped.” Huey Long had big plans for himself and his state.

### Positive Steps

Getting the state on the road to progress meant paving the road first—literally. By 1930, there were 23 million cars in Louisiana, up from 3 million in 1920. Louisiana was stuck in its muddy roads. Automobiles required better roads. State law had to be changed to get enough money to replace gravel roads with paved roads. But the constitution did not allow the state to borrow money to build roads.

Governor Long convinced the legislature to change the law and begin the road building. Huey Long’s road plan put a few miles of paved road in each parish so that the people could see how good the road was and demand more. This meant support for more state bond issues to raise money to build roads.

Better roads were just one of Long’s campaign promises. By the 1920s, free textbooks were provided to schoolchildren in many other states—but not in Louisiana. Huey Long made free textbooks his crusade. Many of the children in Louisiana attended Catholic schools. In order to get around the issue of using state money for textbooks in church-run schools, Long insisted that the books were for the children individually and not for the schools.

Major opposition to his plan for free textbooks came from Shreveport. The people there believed that giving the books to the church schools was unconstitutional. Also, as Mayor L. E. Thomas said, "This is a rich section of the state. We are not going to be humiliated or disgraced by having it advertised that our children had to be given the books free."

Huey Long's method for handling this opposition is a good example of how he operated. The state owned eighty acres of land that were needed for the new airbase planned for the area. The governor informed Shreveport's leaders that if they were so well off they did not need the textbooks, they did not need the airbase either. He would talk about deeding the state land for the airbase to them when they agreed to back his free textbook plan. He later said that he "stomped them into distributing the books."

Other Long programs involved taxes. The poll tax was abolished. The poor supported Huey Long, and he wanted to make sure they could all vote. When the homestead exemption was enacted, property was taxed only on the amount above a certain value. This helped protect a person's home from being seized to cover a tax debt. During the Great Depression, many people could not pay their property tax, and their farms and homes were seized. The homestead exemption was an effort to stop these losses.

## Growing Opposition

As Long pushed for his programs, his style offended more and more people. Many people thought his personal crudeness and character were inappropriate for a governor; he seemed to make a point of not being a gentleman. His verbal attacks on critics and opponents were ruthless, and his favorite target was big business. His feud with Standard Oil Company over regulations and taxes became legendary.

Huey Long believed profits earned by big business in the state were too high and that big business did not do enough in return. He needed more money to fulfill his promises, and he wanted the business interests to pay for his programs. In 1929, he started an effort to raise the oil severance tax. Standard Oil led the fight against this tax increase.

By this time, Long's opponents had enough backing in the state house of representatives to bring impeachment charges against him. (**Impeachment**

is the process of bringing charges of wrongdoing against a public official while that person is still in office.) An ugly, bitter political fight followed. The chamber of the house of representatives was a wild scene. One representative walked across the desks to get to the front of the room. He later accused an opponent of throwing a punch and cutting his face.

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At the time, Standard Oil had a number of oil wells and a major refinery in Louisiana.



**Above:** Earl Long, Huey's younger brother, visited state senators one by one to obtain their signed agreement to vote against removing Huey from office.

**Opposite page, above:** The Old Governor's Mansion was built in 1930 during Huey Long's term. It is said that Long wanted to be familiar with the White House when he became president so he had it duplicated in Baton Rouge. **Opposite page, below:** This is the bedroom of Long's daughter Rose in the Old Governor's Mansion. It can now be seen at the Old State Capitol.

## Lagniappe

In 1946, Robert Penn Warren published *All the King's Men*, a novel said to be based on the life of Huey Long. This book won a Pulitzer Prize.

**Right:** Oscar K. Allen (seated) was handpicked by Huey Long (standing right, next to Allen) to become the governor in 1932. He continued Long's programs until his death in office in 1936.

The house of representatives brought seven charges of impeachment against Governor Long. The impeachment was the ultimate battle of his life. His brother Earl had fought many childhood battles for Huey; once again he stepped in to help. Earl Long visited state senators one by one and obtained their signed agreement to vote against removing Governor Long from office. This document, called the "Round Robin," was signed by fifteen senators—enough to block Long's opponents. Huey Long himself always blamed this incident for his vicious political methods. He said, "I used to get things done by saying 'please.' That didn't work and now I'm a dynamiter. I dynamite 'em out of my path."

## Huey Long as Senator

Long became even more aggressive as he headed toward his political goal. The next step in his planned path to the White House was the U.S. Senate. He ran for the Senate in 1930, after he had been governor for only two years. He won the race, but he refused to take the oath of office or leave the state until he had full control. Lieutenant Governor Paul Cyr had become an enemy because he was too independent. Huey Long did not intend to allow him to take over as governor. Long manipulated the situation so that he could leave Alvin O. King, president of the senate, in charge as the acting governor.

Then he arranged for O. K. Allen to be elected as the new governor. Allen was so widely known as Huey Long's puppet that he was accused of signing anything put in front of him. Earl Long once said that a leaf blew in the window and Allen signed it, because he thought "Huey had sent in another bill."

Under Huey Long's control, Governor Allen continued the social programs. Charity hospitals provided medical care for the poor. The Louisiana State Uni-





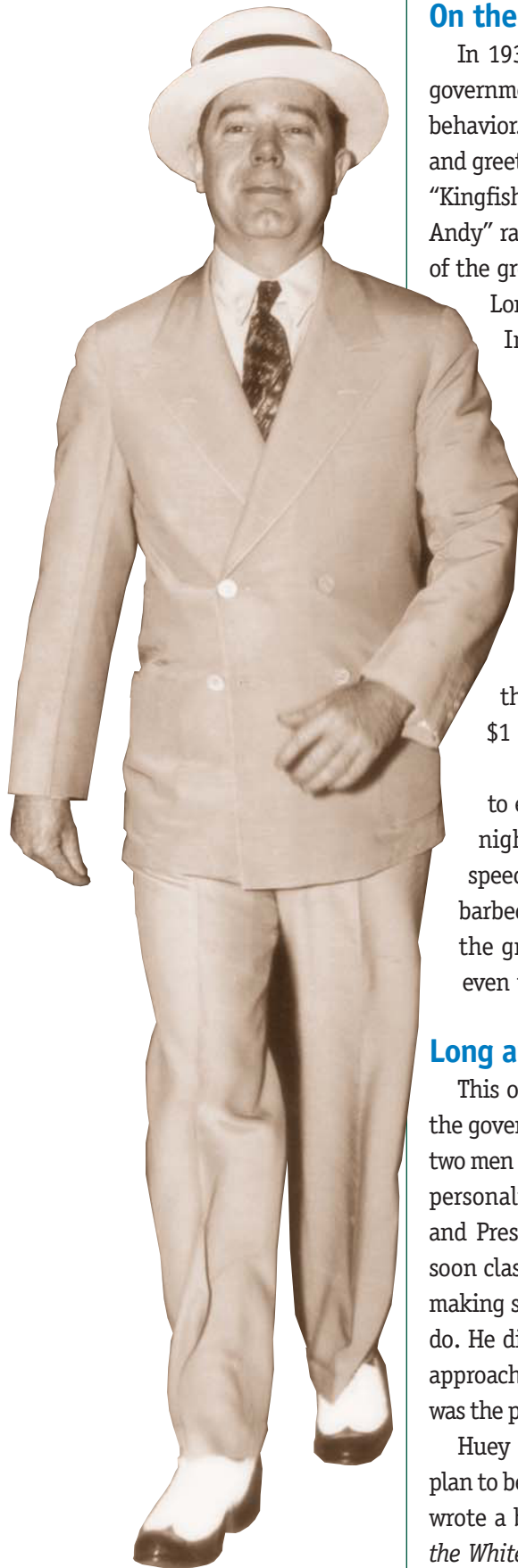
versity (LSU) Medical School was established in New Orleans. The main growth of the campus occurred during this era. New buildings were constructed and funding increased.

The relationship Huey Long had with LSU was complicated. He felt entitled to lead the band, coach the football team, and hire and fire anyone there. This heavy-handed control also led to a censorship incident. In 1934, when the student newspaper at LSU published a story he had tried to **cancel** (to remove or suppress), he had the newspaper staff expelled. He commented, "I like students, but this state is putting up the money for that college, and I ain't paying anybody to criticize me."

Long also demonstrated his belief in control of the press by operating his own statewide newspaper, the *Louisiana Progress*, which printed exactly what he wanted it to say. He used cartoons to ridicule his opponents. Their faces were added to buzzards, goats, hogs, and other animals, which were then labeled with insulting nicknames, like "turkey buzzard Walmsley." (T. Semmes Walmsley was the mayor of New Orleans.) The *Louisiana Progress* was even distributed by state workers during their workday.

**Above:** Huey Long felt entitled to lead the LSU band. Here he is leading the marching band between two drum majors.





## On the National Stage

In 1932, when Huey Long believed he had total control of the Louisiana government, he finally reported to Washington. There he continued his showy behavior. On his first day in the Senate, he broke the rules by smoking a cigar and greeting everyone loudly. He wanted to inform the other senators that the “Kingfish” had arrived. Long had adopted that nickname from the “Amos and Andy” radio show. The Kingfish character was the head of the lodge, the boss of the group.

Long set about acquiring national attention with his economic program. In those depression years, the poor listened eagerly to any voice promising delivery from their misery. Long called his program “Share Our Wealth,” and he used as its slogan “Every man a king.” The continuation of this quote from William Jennings Bryan was “and no man wears a crown.” Huey’s critics said he certainly planned for one man to wear the crown—Huey P. Long.

Long’s radio broadcasts offered the promise of the American dream. His **Share Our Wealth program** proposed to end poverty by giving every family a minimum income of \$5,000 a year. The program would be paid for taking more money from the wealthy through taxes. Long said no one should have an income of more than \$1 million a year.

The program would also provide old-age pensions of \$30 a month to elderly people who had less than \$10,000 in cash. People living in the nightmare of poverty wanted to believe him. One of his most popular speeches attacked big business. He compared America’s wealth to a great barbecue. He accused the richest men in America of taking “85 percent of the grub.” The audiences cheered when Long said the greedy could not even use all they had and should share their wealth with everyone.

## Long and Roosevelt

This outspoken and radical new senator had arrived in Washington just as the government was battling the depression that began in 1929. Although the two men shared some ideas, the strong personalities of Senator Huey Long and President Franklin D. Roosevelt soon clashed. Long had spent his life making sure no one told him what to do. He did not intend to change this approach just because the other man was the president of the United States.

Huey Long made no secret of his plan to become president, and he even wrote a book called *My First Years in the White House*. Some political ana-

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Before his planned run for the White House, Huey Long organized “Share the Wealth” Clubs all across the nation. He claimed that the clubs had more than 5 million members.

lysts say that Long's pressure affected Roosevelt's New Deal programs. The **New Deal** was the name given to the programs enacted by Congress to deal with the problems and hardships caused by the Great Depression. Many historians believe the New Deal programs offered more benefits for the people, including social security and the minimum wage, because so many Americans believed Long's promises of sharing the wealth. Roosevelt once described Huey Long and General Douglas McArthur as the two most dangerous men in America.

## Huey Long's Last Days

Despite the excitement of Washington politics, Huey Long had no intention of allowing Louisiana to function without him. He returned to Baton Rouge frequently, usually directing Governor Allen to call a special session of the legislature. Between August 1934 and September 1935, seven special sessions of the legislature passed 463 bills. These bills gave Long even more power and added more programs to the state government.

In the fall of 1935, Long had several plans to put in effect. He wanted to pass laws giving him control of the New Deal programs in the state. (President Roosevelt had blocked Long's efforts to control this money.)

He also wanted the legislature to pass a bill designed to punish a political enemy. The bill would gerrymander Judge Benjamin Pavy's district. (To *gerrymander* means to set the boundaries of a political district in an unfair way.) The new judicial district would include mainly Long supporters, a sure way to defeat the judge in the next election.

On a hot September night in 1935, the judge's son-in-law came to the State Capitol. Dr. Carl Weiss was a small, serious-looking man in a white linen suit. Shots blasted in the marble corridor on the first floor. After an encounter that lasted only a few minutes, Dr. Weiss lay dead on the floor, shot more than fifty times. Long's bodyguards had emptied their guns into Weiss's body.

Although he had been shot, Senator Long ran down the corridor, spitting blood and holding his stomach. He was rushed to the then-nearby Lady of the Lake Hospital, where surgery was performed. Huey Long died two days later on September 10.

The shattering events of that night in Baton Rouge still puzzle the world. Questions have no clear answers. What provoked the incident? Did Dr. Weiss fire the actual shots that hit Huey Long? Was Long hit by bullets from more than one gun? Was the medical care Huey Long received correct?



**Above:** Dr. Carl Weiss, the son-in-law of Judge Benjamin Pavy, shot Huey Long (opposite page) on September 8, 1935. Questions about the assassination, however, still linger.



**Above:** More than 175,000 people attended Huey Long's funeral at the State Capitol. Long was buried on the grounds of the State Capitol.

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The "Old" Governor's Mansion is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The property is now maintained by the Foundation for Historical Louisiana.

For more than fifty years, theories and stories about the assassination have circulated. As recently as 1996, a researcher received permission from the Weiss family to exhume (remove from the grave) Carl Weiss's body for study. The researcher could not make any new conclusions. The state police also reopened the investigation because some of the evidence, including the gun that Weiss supposedly used, was recovered. The new official investigation concluded that the 1935 investigation was correct. Dr. Carl Weiss fired the bullet that killed Huey Long.

After Huey Long left the scene, his legacy of roads, bridges, hospitals, and free textbooks remained. Two buildings in the capital city tell his story as clearly as anything else he left—the governor's mansion and the Capitol building.

When Huey Long became governor, he did not like the drafty, old governor's mansion. He had a crew of inmates from Angola State Prison tear down the old house and had a new mansion built on the same site. People say Huey Long wanted it to look like the White House, because he planned to be president.

### A Legacy of Scandals

Huey Long's death left his supporters without a leader. During Long's political career, he had made sure no one became strong enough to challenge his power. After his death, many arguments flared. Finally, Long's supporters agreed

on Richard Leche as the candidate for governor. Elected in 1936, he continued most of Long's programs.

Leche differed from Long in his attitude toward business. Governor Leche created a state Department of Commerce and Industry and showed his support of business by agreeing to a one cent sales tax. Business leaders wanted sales taxes instead of more business taxes; Long had opposed sales taxes because he thought they were not fair to the poor.

Governor Leche did continue Long's programs to help the poor. As he spent more and more money, however, rumors of theft and corruption spread throughout the state. Newspapers started investigating those reports.

By 1939, Governor Leche had resigned, saying he had health problems. But the United States government soon convicted him of mail fraud, saying he had carried on illegal dealings through the mail. He was sentenced to ten years in the federal penitentiary. He was also accused of making money from oil that was sold without paying the severance tax, but he was not convicted of this. At one point, Leche was reported to have said, "When I took the oath of office, I didn't take any vow of poverty."

Some of the worst scandals involved Louisiana State University. The president, who had been appointed by Huey Long, fled the state with funds belonging to the university. The person in charge of the building programs was accused of taking kickbacks (illegal bribes) for contracts. With the money and stolen building materials, he had built himself a mansion filled with black marble and gold bathroom fixtures.



**Above:** Governor Richard Leche is seen leaving the Governor's Mansion with his wife and son following his resignation from office amid rumors of corruption. He was succeeded by Lieutenant Governor Earl Long.

## Check for Understanding ✓

1. What did Huey Long do when he lost his first race for governor?
2. Name two positive actions by Governor Huey Long.
3. What are two reasons why some people opposed him so strongly?
4. What was Huey Long's ultimate political goal?
5. What did Long talk about on his national radio broadcasts?
6. How did Huey Long die?