

The Dead Guy Interview

Huey Long
(Aug. 30, 1893-Sept. 10, 1935)

WITH
MICHAEL A. STUSSER

BELATED OBITUARY:

HUEY "KINGFISH" LONG WAS ARGUABLY ONE OF THE MOST SKILLED POLITICIANS IN AMERICAN HISTORY—ALBEIT IN THE MOST UNUSUAL AND UNORTHODOX SENSE POSSIBLE. Long grew up on the

wrong side of the railroad tracks, then raised hell as governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 and as U.S. Senator from 1932 to 1935. And although the log cabin he grew up in was three stories high, the Kingfish claimed he knew poverty and worked hard to spread the wealth.

Long never finished high school, yet found a way to take the bar after only one year at Tulane Law School. Passing the exam with flying colors (he's said to have had a photographic memory), he began a career suing people on behalf of the little man. By age 25, he'd ridden his platform (which bashed Standard Oil) to an appointment on the state railroad commission and then onto the Public Services Commission.

After becoming governor of Louisiana in 1928, Long didn't adopt the most standard practices. He started by building a new governor's mansion, then stole, cheated, and manipulated his way to unparalleled power as America's Boss. He also launched his own newspaper, the *Louisiana Progress*, to which every state employee was "obligated" to have multiple subscriptions. Outraged by his radical calls for welfare legislation, social services, and the redistribution of wealth, foes called him a fascist (after all, it was the era of Mussolini and Hitler)—but Long's constituents didn't care. The Kingfish could deliver the goods.

As governor, Long made pork barreling a part of his game, and in doing so, paved

12,000 miles of rural roads, created a law that made textbooks and night classes available to everyone, built free hospitals, and started a program to ensure that there was a school within walking distance of every kid in the state. All the while, he operated like a ruthless dictator, paying off cronies and threatening to crush anyone who got in his way—including federal officials. Playing by his own rules almost got the Kingfish impeached in 1929, but he was never convicted. The hard-to-keep-down type, Long was elected to the U.S. Senate the next year. Of course, that didn't necessarily mean he stopped being governor. He held on to that post until he hand-picked a successor, and only after his "helpers" were in control in his home state did he finally resign the governorship and take his Senate seat in Washington in 1932.

Not surprisingly, Long set his sights on the presidency, but he was burdened by an increasing fear of assassination. Sure enough, a month after announcing his candidacy in 1936, he was fatally shot by Dr. Carl Austin Weiss, whose father-in-law (Judge Benjamin Pavy) was one of Long's longtime political opponents. The Kingfish's last words were, "Don't let me die, I have got so much to do."

Michael Stusser: Can I call you Kingfish?

Huey Long: I reckon. The name came from a character on the "Amos 'n' Andy" radio show, George "Kingfish" Stevens, who ran the Mystic Knights of the Sea.

MS: Lots of labels have been tossed in your direction—communist, buffoon, fascist, Despot of the Delta, Caesar of the Bayou. How would you describe yourself?

HL: Find out for yourself. I wrote an autobiography [*Every Man A King*] at the tender age of 39. Too much bein' said about me without me sayin' it.

MS: Could you give us the synopsis?

HL: You love the labels, eh? Well, I suppose I'd call myself an anti-corporate populist. But that misses the part about being an innovative, cantankerous, revolutionary rabble-rouser, now doesn't it?

MS: How 'bout dictator?



“I’d call myself an anti-corporate populist. But that misses the part about being an innovative, cantankerous, revolutionary rabble-rouser, now doesn’t it?”

HL: Dictator? You ever hear of a dictator who widened the base of suffrage in his state? Or repealed a poll tax that kept the little fellow from voting? Dictators do that?

MS: Yeah, but you took control of *all* the taxation. And you hired all the police and ran the state militia. In fact, in 1934, you used your influence to abolish the local government altogether and make a law that only you could appoint state employees.

HL: Uh huh.

MS: Citizens had no say in what was going on. I’m just sayin’, it’s kinda like a dictator.

HL: Listen—I messed around a good bit with what went on ‘cause Louisiana’s loose; things would’ve gotten out of hand if I hadn’t. They came to me with problems, looked to me for leadership, and I gave it to ‘em. And let’s not forget: When I ran for governor in 1928, I won 93,000 votes; the other guy had 3,700. *[It was the largest vote margin in the state’s history.]*

MS: You loved to campaign, didn’t you?

HL: I loved spreadin’ my message to the good folks of Louisiana.

MS: Ease up, Kingfish. You’re starting to sound like a used-car dealer.

HL: You’re lucky I’m dead, boy! Did you hear about the two gents who tried to blackmail me during my senate campaign?

MS: Yes, Mr. Long. You had them kidnapped until two days after the vote. It’s a good example of why opponents hated your methods.

HL: Hey, I learned all those tricks from them when they were tryin’ to keep me out. Them corrupt bellyachers used to run the state for themselves. Don’t feel real bad for ‘em now, do ya?

MS: What did you think about the racial conflict in your state?

HL: There were too many ignorant white people with hatred in their hearts from the Civil War. They didn’t want black folk to go to school, so I opened night schools instead.

MS: And were they part of your other programs?

HL: Hell yes. I’m for the poor man, see? Black people are entitled to homes just like all of us. Got to give ‘em clinics, too—keep ‘em healthy. I tried to do things for everybody—blacks, whites, don’t matter. My issues are power and economics; I’m stayin’ out of race and religion. Don’t want that fight.

MS: Tell us a little about Hattie Caraway.



HL: Senator Hattie Caraway. She was the first woman to get elected to the Senate, and my own party decided not to support her re-election! I said I’d help her—I liked her ideas—and she won two-to-one. I would’ve brought Roosevelt down, too, if I’d had the time.

MS: Speaking of Roosevelt, FDR called you one of the most dangerous men in America.

HL: Yep, but he just didn’t have the nerve to support my best idea.

MS: Which was?

HL: The Share-Our-Wealth program—a national redistribution of fat-cat riches that put caps on incomes and would have confiscated inheritances of more than a million dollars.

MS: It’s a wonder that never took hold.

HL: Listen, sonny, my idea was to guarantee an annual income to families and a homestead. That sounds radical, then I’m radical.

MS: You made a habit of bashing the rich.

HL: Boy, it was 1935. The Great Depression was five years old and there were 10 million unemployed. What should I have done, praised ‘em? Rockefeller, Morgan, and the lot ... 4 percent of the people owned 85 percent of the wealth! That ain’t right.

MS: You once said you’d be happy to leave political life once your dream for America was realized. True?

HL: We’ll never know, will we? But I will say this: We’re still not even close to bein’ there. Alleviating the lot of the dispossessed? Feeding the hungry? Closing the gap between rich and poor? I shoulda been president. The country needs me more than ever.

MS: Do you think the rich had you assassinated?

HL: Naw. Carl [Carl Weiss, the man who fatally shot Long] was just angry I was puttin’ his daddy out of a job. [Weiss’ father-in-law was a Louisiana judge about to be gerrymandered.] But if he hadn’t done it, somebody else probably would have.

MS: It’s a shame we’ll never know what you would have done as president.

HL: Just read *My First Days in the White House* [published posthumously]. That’ll tell you all about it.

MS: Thanks for meeting me, sir. And I love the pajamas. Nice touch.

HL: Come see me in Louisiana anytime. And tell me, how’s my favorite city, New Orleans, holding up? Greatest city in the world!

MS: Have a mint julep, sir. In fact, I’ll have one, too ... 🍷