

OUR POLITICAL MONSTROSITIES

BY FRANK R. KENT

I

THE extraordinary degree to which the country has become conscious of Huey P. Long since his entrance into the United States Senate, not so many months back, makes his case a particularly interesting one. A year or so ago this tough young fellow, with his loud mouth and boorish ways, was just a local Louisiana politician who had achieved national notoriety through his clownish performances as Governor — such as receiving distinguished foreign visitors in his pajamas — and through the effort to impeach him upon a variety of charges, some of them of a criminal nature. To-day he is a national figure and a party factor, holding his state in the hollow of his hand, a recognized force in the nomination of a President of the United States, the only Senator with three votes instead of one, not a man to be lightly dismissed or shoved aside. In the past six months there have been a dozen or more magazine articles printed about him. They have described his motley career, pictured his curious character, spread before the people the innumerable coarse stories and colorful incidents in which he shines as the blatant hero.

During the recent lame-duck session of Congress, when he conducted a filibuster that degraded the Senate and brought down upon it an unusual denunciatory deluge, the newspapers gave him literally hundreds of columns of space. His name and face appeared

with astonishing regularity upon the front pages. He practically blotted out the leading publicity seekers in the Senate, thereby making of himself a source of deep discouragement to the other demagogues. In a single session he became the most talked-about and written-about Senator, extremely disgusting, of course, to persons of taste and intelligence, but, since these constitute an exceedingly small percentage of the whole, inoffensive to the bulk of the people — and interesting.

It is not the purpose of this article to dwell upon the now familiar record and personality of the man, nor to recount his amazing performances, public and private, since coming to Washington. Rather, I should like to discuss what appear to be three fundamental questions raised by the situation. First, how do essentially cheap and shoddy fellows achieve real political power and obtain high political office in a great state? Second, what is the formula by which they translate their state power into national notoriety? Third, what, if anything, can be done to stop them?

II

As to the means by which men like Long get into public office, it seems to me simple enough. In a nation where the suffrage is universal and unrestricted, a great many things happen in elections that defy logic and reason.

Most surprising results are accidentally obtained in the curious popular tides that periodically run in America. Some of the men swept into Congress and state offices by the Democratic wave of last November constitute shocking examples of the utter inability of emotionally excited voters to discriminate or distinguish. But the Longs — for, despite his overplayed individualism, Huey is a type and not unique — the Longs are not accidents, and do not ride in on the tides.

How, then, do they get in? The soundest explanation lies in the moronic underworld theory of that wise old Kansan philosopher, William Allen White. Last year, during the campaign, Mr. White, in describing the character and calibre of the thousands of voters who followed, and so nearly elected Governor, 'Doctor' John Brinkley, the goat-gland man, whose radio was taken away from him and whose license to practise medicine was revoked, wrote: 'In every civilization there is a moronic underworld which cannot be civilized. It can be taught to read and write, but not to think, and it lives upon the level of its emotions and prejudices.' The Brinkley voters did not know what the word 'moronic' meant, but they did know that 'underworld' meant something wicked. Indignant, hundreds of them wrote in to Mr. White, denouncing him for slander, insisting that they were Christians of good character and high standing in the church. Mr. White replied that he had not meant they were bad, but just dumb.

To those who, like myself, believe that the great bulk of the voters belong to this moronic underworld, the success of the Huey Longs needs no other explanation. By nature endowed with the gifts that appeal to the emotional and prejudiced masses, these men need only the right opportunity and a cer-

tain political shrewdness. Sometimes they miss the mark, as Huey once did, but he hit it squarely the second time. The eminent goat-gland specialist, who promised to build a lake in every county to improve the climate, failed by a narrow margin in Kansas, and the Reverend Bob Shuler — who I am told charmingly combines the more striking qualities of Aimee Semple McPherson, Cole Blease, and Tom Heflin — by a wider one in California. But Huey, whose simple and appealing programme is to take their money away from the rich and give it to the poor — Huey won.

It was on some such note as this that he was elected Governor. It is on some such note as this that such men are always elected. When the gullible nature of the electorate is considered, the surprising thing is, not that the Longs get into public office this way, but that so few of them do. It really is not much of a trick. The real trick is to stick in after they have got in. Most of them do not. A lot of them simply flash in the pan, flop back into the discard after a brief space. One can look back and recall quite a number who strutted for a time on the political stage, but lacked the power to hold on. Magnus Johnson, the bellowing bull from Minnesota, is an excellent example, and there are plenty of others.

It is not enough, in this business of the cheap charlatan slipping into high office, merely to have mass appeal in the sense that a woman has sex appeal. If that is all he has, the inevitable reaction sweeps him out as easily as he was swept in. He does not 'make good.' His alluring promises are unredeemed. The show he puts on as an executive or legislator is not nearly so entertaining as the one he gave as a candidate. The disillusionment is complete, and the moronic underworld of voters, with inherent fickleness, turns to a new

demagogue at the first chance. To achieve the sort of political power that does not evaporate overnight, these mass-appeal fellows, who override and defy the intelligent and substantial elements of their states, have got to possess, as Mr. Long possesses, other qualities; and these answer that second question: 'How do they hold on?'

III

They hold on by building themselves a political machine and running it. To do this requires political cunning and organizing capacity. It involves a combination of ruthless resourcefulness, an intimate skill in the game of precinct politics, and whole-hearted concentration upon control of the party primaries, which are the key to all politics. The primaries are the gates through which all candidates for office must pass before they can get on a ticket. Control of that gate is control of the party. It can be acquired only through machine methods. The flash-in-the-pan fellows lack the qualities for construction and operation of the machine. The Longs have those qualities, which explains why one class drops back while the other goes forward.

From the day he was elected Governor, Mr. Long shrewdly and calculatingly devoted himself to the construction of a machine that would perpetuate his Louisiana power and retain him in office indefinitely. Not neglecting the mass appeal, and without great effort keeping his moronic underworld following entertained sufficiently to hold their interest, he concentrated his real energies upon putting together an organization which would dominate the Democratic primaries. To this end he effectively utilized, not only every scrap of the gubernatorial patronage, which means some ten

thousand and more jobs, but all the resources of the state. The cunning and completeness with which this was done enabled Huey to win the battles waged against him, to save himself by a hair from impeachment, to elect himself to the Senate, to substitute a creature of his own to succeed him as Governor, to elect his personal counsel as his Senatorial colleague, to dominate all but one of the Louisiana House delegation, to force the publisher of one of the hostile New Orleans newspapers to eat out of his hand—in short, to reduce his opponents, who include the best people in the state, to a condition of complete impotence.

It sounds like the achievement of a superman, but it is not. One might think that, to attain such complete domination of a state, Mr. Long would have to possess inherent qualities of greatness in addition to his mass appeal and the shrewd and unflinching use of his job to build a primary-controlling organization—but such is not the fact. Nor is his achievement unique in our great free country in which the people rule. It has been done before; it will be done again. The real prototype of Mr. Long is 'Big Bill' Thompson of Chicago, who so long held that great city by the throat, who dominated state as well as municipal politics, who last year, almost single-handed, nominated the Republican candidate for Governor through control of the primary gate, who, still a potent party force, may easily return to the vital office which for so many years he degraded. Thompson's job of holding on to what he had gained was vastly harder than Long's. He operated in a city containing half again as many people as the whole State of Louisiana, and with him the primaries, while vital, were merely preliminary to the general election—a hurdle which does not exist in the one-party common-

wealth presided over by Long. Fundamentally, however, the two men and their methods are much alike. Their political bloods would match. A perfect transfusion could be made.

Thompson with his live rats in their cage, his indecent tirade against the British King, whose nose he advocated punching, and his lurid promises of a greater and grander Chicago, afforded the same kind of mass appeal to essentially the same class of voters as does Long with his denunciation of the multimillionaires, his reference to himself as the 'Kingfish,' his insistent repetition that 2 per cent of the people have 80 per cent of the money. Equally coarse, equally insincere, neither believing for a moment in his own stuff, both grasping completely the importance of the primary, they play the game in the same calculating way, use the same methods, and have attained pretty much the same degree of national prominence. Thompson, for the moment, is out of office, but holds the primary key just the same — and his return is on the cards. Long has slipped from one high office to another, because a primary nomination in his state is equivalent to an election, the independent and intelligent element has no chance to make its weight count between two major parties, and the primary key is all that is needed.

IV

Of course, the national fame of the Thompsons and Longs is based almost entirely upon the space given them in the newspapers, and this is a tremendous asset to them. The newspapers, fully aware of the fact, are powerless to avoid conferring the benefit. These men make news — and news it is impossible not to print. They thrive upon editorial denunciation, ridicule, and scorn.

'Big Bill,' for example, had no better issue than the *Chicago Tribune*, which, in campaign after campaign, assailed him with unrestrained and completely justified violence. Not only is the spectacle of a personal battle between an individual and a great newspaper highly entertaining to the people, but the bulk of them invariably sympathize with the individual. They are on his side. They like to help him get the better of these great engines of publicity, whose back-stage editors are the self-chosen guardians of public morality, the impersonal public mentors and political critics. It is more or less a natural human reaction, from which many a demagogue has profited. Thompson certainly did in Chicago, and the shrewd Huey so completely capitalized the united journalistic opposition in New Orleans that, as stated above, one newspaper caved in, gave up the fight, and is to-day supinely pro-Huey. And Huey, with his tongue in his cheek, is supporting one of its owners for a Federal post. 'I know how to handle these blankety-blanks,' he says; and apparently he does.

It is since he came to the Senate that the national notoriety achieved by Huey as a mass-appeal Governor charged with many ugly things, and an exponent of theatrical coarseness, has been expanded until he is to-day a topic of discussion all over the land. This, of course, has been done through the newspapers. Publicity is the chief aim of nearly all Senators. Without publicity of some kind they might as well not be in Washington. There are a few who are content to earn their publicity by hard work, by consistency in following their convictions, and by supporting or proposing constructive measures. The majority, however, compete for newspaper space by alertly seizing the dramatic moment for oratorical eruption upon some subject

with news value. Success depends upon the relative keenness of their theatrical instinct, their adroitness in presentation, and the previous extent to which they have garnered reputation-building publicity. There are quite a few Senators whose complete time is given over to the hunt for publicity. These men are always engaged in concocting schemes for first-page headlines, and their greatest misery is to miss fire. A good many of the mediocrities are content to 'make' their state papers, but the more able and eloquent aim always for the great metropolitan journals. In the last session of Congress, Huey practically smothered both classes, easily outdistancing all the rest in the frequency of his first-page appearances. A sufficient number of these at once made him good magazine material. Thus his publicity blankets the country, the moronic underworld of the nation regards him as a great man, his position at home is buttressed, and the distaste of the small and ineffectual intelligent minority is deepened.

All this he achieves through the simple expedient of giving a good show. He came to Washington with the reputation of being a crude, rough-and-tumble politician, with an unsavory record and a bad tongue. In Washington he has lived up to his reputation. Blatantly blowing his own trumpet, proclaiming himself the Kingfish, denouncing men of great wealth by name, assailing his party leaders, violating written as well as unwritten Senate rules, filibustering for days at a time, deluging the Senate with words, posing, posturing, and performing all the time. It is all staged stuff, but it makes news. Every correspondent has to write it; every newspaper

has to print it. And whether he is favorably or unfavorably presented makes little difference. Sarcasm and invective alike roll off his back like water from the well-known duck. Thick-skinned and impervious to any barb, the Longs and Thompsons want above all else to be noticed, and noticed they are bound to be if they give the sort of show that makes news.

It is easy enough to say that the newspapers should ignore him, but that is not only impractical — it is impossible so long as he craftily plays his part and his show continues to be entertaining. As to stopping him, there is no method by which these Longs and Thompsons can be stopped so long as they hold the primary key and do not lose their balance. The combination of cunning, political skill, and mass appeal is a pretty strong one — strong enough to enable those specially endowed to stay a long time and go a long way.

In the end, they stop themselves. Like Heflin, they become obsessed with their own drivel; they take themselves seriously, grow dull and tiresome. Popular interest subsides, their show flops, and then they are through, because it takes the combination to carry on. Or, occasionally, they swell with egotism to the bursting point, lose their sense of safety, overplay their hand, and thus destroy themselves. Sometimes publicity produces this condition and result, for it can be politically poisonous as well as nourishing. The natural egotist does not take it in large doses without some danger. It sometimes feeds the vanity and destroys the cunning. It seems to me that there are certain indications already that this is happening to Huey Long.

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