Huey Long and Immoderation (Extremism)

I can analyze Huey Long’s story to examine examples of how immoderation or extremism can sabotage ambition.

Essential Vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>immoderation</td>
<td>Acting in excess or to an extreme. Lacking restraint.</td>
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<tr>
<td>moderation</td>
<td>The avoidance of excess or extremes.</td>
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<td>demagogue</td>
<td>A political leader who seeks support by appealing to the desires and prejudices of the masses rather than by using rational arguments.</td>
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<td>parish</td>
<td>The state of Louisiana is divided into 64 parishes, which are similar to counties in other states. There are various forms of government being used within the parishes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>patronage</td>
<td>In politics and government, a spoils system (also known as a patronage system) is a practice in which a political party, after winning an election, gives government jobs to its supporters, friends (cronyism), and relatives (nepotism) as a reward for working toward victory.</td>
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Narrative

Louisiana governor and senator, Huey Long, had an unrestrained ambition for power. During his political career, he dedicated himself to getting and keeping power. To that end, he believed he must destroy all his enemies. He also played a demagogue and used modern technology such as the radio, cars, and planes to appeal to the people. He promised them that he would destroy wealth and privilege and make “every man a king” in his popular slogan. In the process, he seized near total control of Louisiana, presided over an empire of corruption and ill-gotten wealth, and won widespread popularity in his state and across the country during the Great Depression. Huey Long practiced immoderation as a leader bent on having his will done.
Long was raised in rural northeastern Louisiana, where many struggling farmers lived. The struggling farmers had been supportive of the Populist movement in the 1890s and even voted for Socialists in high numbers. Long was an intensely active and moody youth who craved attention. He never finished high school but eagerly took to sales jobs. He loved traveling the countryside in his used car, talking with people, persuading them to buy his wares, and mostly selling his personality. He was actually learning a great deal about politics and campaigning.

Long took some classes at Tulane law school and passed the bar exam thanks to an intense period of reading law. After a halting start, he eventually earned good money in his legal practice, but most importantly, used it to make contacts and enter politics. He was elected to the Louisiana Railroad Commission in 1918 after campaigning hard with citizens and local leaders in the rural parishes of the state.

Long used his position on the commission (later renamed the Public Service Commission) to attack corporations like Standard Oil and the telephone company for the good of the common citizen. In 1924, he ran for governor on a platform of free textbooks in schools, modern roads, and toll-free bridges — all without raising taxes. He also challenged the power of the “Old Regular” political machine in New Orleans that controlled the state. He employed modern technology with cars, radio, and loudspeakers to reach the people. He had a loud voice, big personality, and colorful way of dressing that appealed to people. He came in third but was building his political base.

Four years later, Long ran for governor again and held nothing back. He amassed a large political war chest of unreported cash from his wealthy supporters and used the money to campaign and live extravagantly. He paid for radio time, and distributed circulars in every parish, and made generous bribes. He learned to use local leaders and sheriffs who fraudulently controlled elections in their parishes. The people of Louisiana saw him fighting for them against the corporations and New Orleans machine. They looked the other way at the excesses.

Governor Long immediately used the power of his office to amass great power. He used patronage to fire thousands of government workers and give the jobs to his supporters. All the state and local agencies, boards, and commissions came under his control. He strutted through the state legislature, ordering it to pass his bills for free textbooks, cheap natural gas, and taxes on oil companies. The National Guard raided gambling and prostitution houses in New Orleans without a warrant and seized hordes of untraceable cash for the governor. Contracts to build roads had a lot of money skimmed off the top, and the people thus drove on poorly-built, unfinished roads. The Long administration flaunted the rule of law.

Long ran into trouble when he called a special session of the legislature in early 1929. His political enemies organized resistance to his overbearing governance. They ejected him from the legislature, resisted his bills, and passed 19 articles of impeachment for corruption and other charges. The Louisiana house impeached Governor Long. He took his case to the people, holding mass rallies and using state vehicles and friendly sheriffs to circulate posters like a campaign. After 15 state senators signed a document that they would not vote to convict and remove the governor from office, the legislature was forced to drop the charges.
After his narrow victory, Long went after his enemies with a vengeance. He purged any who supported impeachment from legislative committees, fired friends and family of the impeachers in government jobs, and destroyed the New Orleans political machines by canceling projects for the city. His opponents complained that Long was a dictator and demagogue, but he wielded virtually uncontested authority in the state.

Long ran for the U.S. Senate in 1930 and employed his usual tactics. Massive amounts of patronage and money went to the parishes. Long took control of local government jobs such as police officers, firefighters, and teachers. State employees had 10 percent of their salaries withdrawn for political contributions to the governor’s campaign. The Long organization started a partisan newspaper, Louisiana Progress, to publicize his greatness.

Long easily won the seat in the senate thanks to the pervasive corruption. However, because he was concerned that his lieutenant governor would not faithfully execute his will in the state, Long did not leave the governor’s mansion until 1932. He only went to Washington, D.C. when a handpicked successor won the election. He was ready to win a national audience. He wanted to be president.

Over the next few years, Senator Long tried to bully his way into power. He claimed credit for Franklin Roosevelt’s presidential election in 1932 after making speeches for him in a few states. He filibustered many New Deal programs because he did not think they redistributed wealth to the people enough. He wrote an autobiography, Every Man a King, to try to make his name a household word across the country.

Long finally hit upon his big idea to win a national audience and the presidency. He began “Share Our Wealth” clubs with a populist message to destroy concentrated wealth and give it to the people. He proposed confiscating any incomes over $1 million and wealth over $5 million. Every family would get a guaranteed income of at least $2,500, every retiree over 60 would receive a government pension, every veteran would receive a bonus, every student would get a free college education, and every adult would be guaranteed a job. The problem with the unrealistic plan was that the numbers simply did not add up. Still, Americans joined the clubs and heard Long on the radio.

Long claimed 7.5 million Americans belonged to Share Our Wealth clubs. He was planning to use his following to run for president in 1936. He did not think he could win but rather prevent
FDR from getting elected. He would then win in 1940. However, on September 8, 1935, despite being surrounded by bodyguards, he was shot and killed by a young assassin in Louisiana.

During the 1920s and Great Depression, Huey Long found a receptive audience for his populist attacks on the wealthy and corporations as millions felt left out because of the rapid changes brought about by modernization and the development of a mass society. They overlooked his corruption, demagoguery, and immoderate politics that destroyed the rule of law and a healthy democracy because he promised them a better future. If they had looked more closely, they would have seen past the slogan that Long wanted to make himself a king.

**Analysis Questions**

1. How did Long’s work as both a salesman and a lawyer prepare him for a later life in politics?

2. Especially in his early political campaigns, Long employed unconventional tactics and displayed a big personality. Why do you think this appealed to the people of Louisiana?

3. Long promised to provide free textbooks, modern roads, and toll-free bridges without raising taxes. What are the dangers in a republic of leaders promising citizens services that the country can’t afford? How is this an example of immoderation?

4. What tactics did Long use to win the position of the governor? How did they violate the rule of law?

5. What ideas did the “Share the Wealth” club propose? Why did these ideas appeal to Americans? In what ways did the proposals lack the virtue of moderation?