

THE KING IS DEAD

1935

Huey Long was rightfully concerned about his safety. He looked around to make sure the six armed guards he had commissioned from the Louisiana State Police were close at hand. His enemies were outraged at the control he still wielded over state government. Rumors of assassination plots were rampant. He had already faced death threats, arson attempts, and a drive-by shooting at his home in New Orleans. Only a couple of months earlier, he had discovered an assassination plot against him when one of his associates reported on a secret meeting of an "assassination club" in New Orleans, attended by four Louisiana congressmen, New Orleans Mayor Walmsley, former Governors Parker and Sanders, and Dr. Carl Weiss (sometimes spelled Wise), a man whose name would soon be etched in the annals of Louisiana history. Others in attendance at the meeting included doctors, attorneys, businessmen, and sundry upper-class citizens who opposed Huey's ideas to bring the people of his state out of illiteracy and poverty.

Huey Pierce Long Jr. had come a long way. Born on August 30, 1893, in Winnfield, a small rural community in the piney woods of

THE KING IS DEAD

north-central Louisiana, he had already beaten the odds against his success. Growing up in one of the poorest parishes in the state in a large, close-knit farming family collided with the oppressive social conditions that existed in 1920 Louisiana. Growing up as the seventh of nine children, he decided early on to champion the common man. He was bright and energetic, skipped the seventh grade, and then failed to graduate because he opposed the addition of a mandatory twelfth year of schooling. Huey won a scholarship to Louisiana State University in a statewide debating competition, but because he couldn't afford textbooks, room, or board, he became a traveling salesman at seventeen, routing the benefits of cooking oil, canned goods, and patent medicines.

He was a successful salesman, married, and seemed headed for a prosperous future. When sales opportunities in a faltering economy dried up, he took up law. At the age of twenty-one, less than a year into the three-year program at Tulane Law School in New Orleans, Huey petitioned to take the bar exam and passed. He returned to Winnfield to practice law, never having earned a single educational diploma. Providing free education to all children would later become a legacy of his political career.

In 1918 he was elected state railroad commissioner for the northern district of Louisiana and in 1922 became chairman of the Public Services Commission (the new name for the Louisiana Railroad Commission) and successfully advocated for lower telephone, gas, and electric rates and railroad and streetcar fares. Huey balked against the ruling hierarchy and sought to replace long-standing cronies with his own supporters, gaining control of the Hospital Board, the Highway Commission, the Levee Board, and the Dock Board. By this time he was the father of a daughter and two sons.

He won the governor's race in 1928 on the platform of public education and social reform. Louisiana's illiteracy rate of 22 percent

was the highest in the country—only one in four adults could read, and only half of Louisiana's school-aged children attended school. His cry that "Everyman is a king" resonated through the land, and he won the election by the largest margin in the state's history: 92,941 votes to 3,733. His closest opponent refused to face him in a runoff. At Huey's inauguration, more than fifteen thousand supporters flocked to the capital to see one of their own take the oath as governor.

Huey's commitment to a political agenda of social reform and change was a lightning bolt to a corrupt, elite political system. As governor he built roads and bridges, made free school books available, improved public education and healthcare, and fought for the voting rights of all citizens. His run-ins with the entrenched political stalwarts and the Ku Klux Klan became common stories in the daily newspapers.

When the Great Depression of 1929 rolled in, he was more determined than ever to champion the common man. He felt he could do more in Washington, D.C., and so in 1930, he sought and won a U.S. Senate seat. He hoped his "Share Our Wealth" program would be the cure for the country's ailing economy and a beacon of hope for the disenfranchised masses. He left his old friend, Alvin King, president of the state senate, to act as governor while he was away.

Though he might have been fearful as he neared the capitol in Baton Rouge, the man called "Kingfish" was undaunted in his mission this day, September 8, 1935. Huey excitedly climbed the steps of the Louisiana State Capitol and looked out over the twenty-seven acres of formal gardens and landscape and toward the Mississippi River. He was proud to think that he had made the beautiful and modern state capitol a reality. Just four years earlier, while governor, he had convinced the legislature that a new, efficient building would

save the state money. To get the go-ahead to build a large public edifice during the years of the Great Depression was a hard sell, but Huey was confident—after all, he had been a very successful salesman. He reminisced how when the first vote fell four votes short of the two-thirds majority needed, he went into action. While the Speaker of the House ordered a roll call vote, he quickly circulated through the legislative chamber, encouraging a few more supporters to vote in favor of his building. The vote passed. The 450-foot, tallest state capitol in the United States was completed in fourteen months for only \$5 million. This price tag included limestone for the exterior and Vermont and Italian marble for the interior.

The grand stairway now before him led up to the fifty-foot entrance door of the art deco capitol. He wasn't aware yet that this would be the last staircase he would walk up or down. U.S. Senator Huey Long was in Baton Rouge for a special session of the Louisiana legislature. A number of bills were before the legislature, including a measure to gerrymander one of Long's opponents, Judge Benjamin Pavy, out of office. Huey was there to throw his support behind this bill. His friend and ally, Oscar K. (O. K.) Allen was governor. Some say he was just Huey's puppet and that Huey was still in control. Just two months before, Long had announced his candidacy for the 1936 presidency and was basking in the light of a bright political future.

Long stepped confidently through the large doors of his beloved capitol and entered Memorial Hall. It felt like home as he took purposeful strides to his meeting in the governor's office. When he emerged back into the corridor with Supreme Court justice John Fournet at his side, his bodyguards quickly surrounded him, but trouble was lurking. Fournet first noticed the strange look on Huey's face, and then spied a flourished .32 automatic gun. A flurry of panicked activity ensued. Gunshots rang out explosively.

The actual details of that day are still debated. The generally accepted version is that Judge Pavy's son-in-law, Dr. Carl Weiss, who had been at the "assassination club" meeting, was upset at Long's appearance in the capitol to oust Pavy. Weiss approached Huey in the corridor and shot him at close range in the abdomen. Huey's bodyguards immediately opened fire on Weiss. Others report that Weiss had only taken a swing with his fist at Long and, in the melee, a bullet from one of Long's bodyguards ricocheted off the marble pillar and hit Huey in the lower spine.

In either case, the capitol was rife with bullets from the flurry of shots, and today the pockmarks are still evident. The corridor filled with smoke as Huey staggered down the hallway, grasping his side with his right hand. He descended the grand stairway, was helped into a car, and taken to the nearby Our Lady of the Lake sanitarium. Weiss was killed instantly. The number of shots fired is not known. Thirty bullet wounds were found on the front side of Weiss' body, twenty-nine on the back, and two bullet wounds were found in his head. It was impossible to determine how many wounds were caused by the same bullet entering and exiting.

At the new four-story medical facility run by the Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady, it was determined that surgery was necessary to repair the bullet hole in Long's abdomen. A call was sent out to two of the finest surgeons in New Orleans to get to Baton Rouge immediately to perform the operation.

In 1928, Louisiana had only 331 miles of paved roads and Huey had launched an infrastructure program to construct three thousand miles of roads. Ironically, one of Huey's pet roadway projects, a new eighty-mile concrete Airline Highway to connect New Orleans and Baton Rouge was under construction at the time of the shooting. The New Orleans surgeons were forced to take the old River Road, a lengthy, twisting road along the bank of the Mississippi River. As

fate would have it that tragic day, they had a car accident along the way. Dr. Arthur Vidrine, the attending physician, would have to perform the surgery. During the two-hour operation, Dr. Vidrine repaired two small wounds in the colon and abdomen. When the two surgeons finally arrived from New Orleans, they determined that one of Long's kidneys had also been injured. Surgery was imperative, but by this time Long was too weak to survive another operation.

Long's family was also en route to Baton Rouge from New Orleans. They took the new highway despite the construction hazards, his two teenage sons removing barricades as they raced to their father's side. By his bedside Long's sister, Lucille, repeated the Kingfish's plea, "God, don't let me die! I have so much to do!" At 4:06 a.m., on September 10, Huey Long died of internal bleeding at the age of forty-two. His book, *My First Days in the White House*, was published posthumously. His widow, Rose, was appointed to fill Huey's seat in the Senate and was later elected to the position, making her the second woman elected to the U.S. Senate.

Huey's death made news headlines around the world, and more than two hundred thousand mourners, eight times the city's population, traveled to Baton Rouge to pay their respects. Long's casket was carried down the steps of the Louisiana State Capitol, and the Rev. Gerald Smith led the procession to Long's interment on the grounds of the State Capitol he had built. Long is now immortalized by statues at the Louisiana State Capitol and the U.S. Capitol.