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The Kingfish in the Sunday Edition: Senator Huey P. Long's Media Presence, 1932-1935

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Friends of Drake Library, Supplemental Research Statement

As with every history paper, this assignment started with secondary sources. The Drake Library provides all Brockport students with access to numerous databases full of scholarly sources, but JSTOR has been my constant choice for historical articles. Having selected many subjects from my own interests and the restrictions placed on the assignment, the presence of a lengthier scholarly discourse on Huey Long than the others influenced me to choose him as a topic, as well as guided me towards a less frequently covered area of his life and historical record. The library provided me access to this database both on and off campus, granting me the flexibility to work with top-quality scholarship wherever I was. Without a background based on what other scholars have said about a topic the author of any work of history is rudderless, and I appreciate deeply that our campus' library grants all students access to articles which would otherwise require individuals to subscribe for access.

After reading and digesting the secondary sources, I needed access to primary documents. Here again the library's resources proved useful. Newspaper archives of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Washington Times*, and other national publications are accessible through the library's resources, and these proved to be quite helpful for gathering primary quotations to support my thesis. However, my primary source work did not stop with the Drake Library's resources. A tremendous number of my primary sources were gathered through the Louisiana State University's archive of historical Louisiana state newspapers – but this certainly should not be seen as an indictment of our school's library. Rather, the fact that LSU was willing to provide such wonderful and hard to find documents to the public proves the usefulness and effectiveness of a campus library, be it just five minutes' walk from me or over a thousand miles away. Every student should be aware of the fantastic resources that a library provides to them.

The Kingfish in the Sunday Edition:
Senator Huey P. Long's Media Presence, 1932-1935

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HST420

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This paper conforms to the Brockport Academic Honesty Code

Michael Fredette

Abstract:

Huey P. Long was the Democratic governor of Louisiana from 1928 to 1932 before his final political engagement, a 1932 to 1935 stint in the United States' Senate. Although brief, Long's unfinished term in the Senate left a tremendous amount of cultural detritus behind for the historian to examine. In this paper we study newspaper coverage of Long, comparing contemporary depictions of his tenure in local Louisiana media and in the national media. This is supplemented by mentions of Senator Long in scholarly periodicals with loftier aims. Long's almost daily presence in the country's media revealed unwritten rules of decorum in national publications, while demonstrating the lack thereof in smaller circulation local papers. Long was also notorious enough to appear in scholarly journals despite his short tenure in the Senate. In these journal articles one can see the confusion which his radical policies created among political scientists and economists, and the eerily familiar manner in which politically differing authors ascribed extreme titles from the other side to Long. This paper does not dedicate much time at all to Long's policies, nor his famous conflicts with colleagues and foes, nor his battles with the media he felt was representing him unfairly, and is focused entirely on what others said about him.

To many Republicans he was the 1930s' most loathsome Democratic demagogue. To some Democrats he was an existential threat to the party. Fascists derided him as a weak socialist, which must have befuddled the socialists who labelled him a fascist. His short time in the Senate came and went under the shadow one of the country's considerably textbook-hogging presidents, and yet he is still the only Louisiana Congressman my family could name at the

Thanksgiving dinner table. Yes, whatever your view of Huey P. Long, the notorious “Kingfish” made a splash in the nation’s history that ripples to the present.

While radio gained ground in the 1930s as America’s method of entertainment and news, the nation’s print media soldiered onwards as a key institution for the transmission of information and opinion. Within the pages of the country’s newspapers a political feud simmered for three years, centered on Louisiana Senator Huey P. Long. A former governor with a knack for creating controversies to be central in, Long would be an almost daily fixture of the country’s print media from 1932-1935. Through careful diction, emphasis, and omissions, editors, journalists, and authors created and presented highly disparate views of Long’s tenure in the Senate. The greatest division in the manner of Long’s depiction in print was between Louisiana’s local papers and national publications. Although today this clash seems muted, surviving print media coverage of Huey Long highlights curious dynamics of decorum at the time. This feud extended into higher-minded literature as well, making its way onto the pages of scholarly periodicals. There, Long’s radical ideas and methods created a confused and polarized discourse. Additionally, the recurrence of a certain subject in journal articles featuring Long reveals values which he played into to secure support.

Several motifs emerge when comparing local and national media coverage. One such is omission; outlets wishing to inculcate positive views of Senator Long would simply leave out the bad news. On Saturday April 15, 1933, the Vermillion Parish paper *Abbeville Progress*’s front page reported that Ray Blayloch of Bolton High School took the heavyweight boxing championship under the heading “Championship In 1933 Boxing Goes to Baton Rouge,”¹ and

¹ “Championship in 1933 Boxing Goes To Baton Rouge,” *Abbeville Progress*, April 15, 1933, p. 1.

that the states' magnolias were beginning to bloom under the heading "Louisiana at the Peak of Its Beauty At This Season."² The town's other publication, the *Abbeville Meridional*, seemed to take a more serious tack, reporting "Chevrolet Dealers Note a Sharp Resumption of Retail Buying"³ in economic news and republishing President Roosevelt's announcement of "Child Health Day,"⁴ although it did somewhat hamper its credibility with the column headed "Napoleon Bonaparte Said to be Buried in Lonely Grave Near New Orleans."⁵ On this same day, the Senator Huey Long stood accused of tax evasion⁶ on the front page of the *New York Times*, but the headline "Huey Long's Taxes Are Investigated" does not seem to have made much of an impact back down in Vermillion.⁷ In their next prints the following Saturday the *Meridional* only mentioned Long with regards to a highway program, and the *Progress* was occupied by a successful strawberry harvest and the largest ever gathering of performing elephants in Madison Square Garden.

Of course the absence of national politics in what amounts to local papers is hardly unheard of, but the *Meridional* and *Progress* were far from apolitical. In that same April 15, 1933 issue the *Progress* ran a column with thirty-two points in favor of levying universal sales taxes. The column argues vigorously against talking points that sales taxes would harm manufacturers or farmers and asserts that under the "current system less than 30 [or possibly 20, the number is poorly scanned] of the people pay taxes."⁸ The *Meridional's* April 15 edition

² "Louisiana Is At Peak Of Beauty At This Season," *Abbeville Progress*, April 15, 1933, p. 1.

³ "Chevrolet Dealers Note a Sharp Resumption of Retail Buying," *Abbeville Meridional*, April 15, 1933, p. 1.

⁴ Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Child Health Day: Proclamation," republished in *Abbeville Meridional*, April 15, 1933, p. 1.

⁵ Agathine H. Goldstein, "Napoleon Bonaparte Said to be Buried in Lonely Grave Near New Orleans," *Abbeville Meridional*, April 15, 1933, p. 1.

⁶ In particular, Long was accused of dodging taxes laid specifically on large incomes – not entirely relevant to the topic at hand, but still a fun piece of irony.

⁷ "Huey Long's Taxes Are Investigated," *The New York Times*, April 15, 1933, p. 1.

⁸ "Sales Tax," *Abbeville Progress*, April 15, 1933, p 2.

included a column mocking “Drys” decrying the repeal of Prohibition as the work of “so-called liberals, backed by the ‘Bill of Rights’”⁹ asserting that Drys “refuse to abide by the expressed will of the majority.”¹⁰ These papers were vocal about issues of national political relevance, but chose to leave their state’s senator’s woes off the page.

Long’s character was another common topic in print, with articles featuring the Kingfish’s eccentricities sometimes making front page news. In December of 1933 *The Associated Press*’s report on Long’s request to be exempted from the Washington Social Register (a sort of exclusive elites-only contact list – like Yellow Pages but only for people with a bathroom in their house for every digit in their bank account) found its way to the front page of *The New York Times*. Long wished to have himself removed on the grounds that he would not like to be part of a high society that “never learned to dunk corn pone properly in potlikker”¹¹ and out of a desire to “save embarrassment for those who had placed it there.”¹² Other articles written to highlight buffoonery and missteps appeared fairly regularly. According to a late-night update by *The Associated Press* Senator Long’s threat to filibuster the 1934 Farm Mortgage Bill if his papers detailing the conference report on the bill were not located was defused when he located the documents folded in his pocket where they had been all along.¹³ Some editorial pieces carried graver messages for Long. Arthur Krock, *The New York Times*’ Washington correspondent, wrote one such piece primarily focused on the Senate’s unwritten rules. Long’s penchant to trample “Senatorial courtesy” by upholding appointments odious to his colleagues,

⁹ Quotation marks written, air-quotes and eye roll implied.

¹⁰ “Sale of Beer Legalized – And Now We Are “Wet,” *Abbeville Meridional*, April 15, 1933, p. 4.

¹¹ In New York English: “never learned to dip their thick cornbread in the broth-like liquid created when boiling collard greens or beans.”

¹² “Huey Long Refuses Social Register Listing; Finds People Can’t Dunk Their Corn Pone,” *The Associated Press*, re-published in *The New York Times*, December 16, 1933, p. 1.

¹³ “Missing Papers Found in Huey Long’s Pocket,” *The Associated Press* republished in *The New York Times*, June 19, 1934, p. 3.

filibustering “legislative pets of other Senators” to advance his own, and threats to campaign in other states would “end on the point of loneliness.”¹⁴

A number of published letters to the *New York Times*’ editor delivered comedic takes on Long’s tumultuous time in the Senate. One, by a gentleman from New Jersey, said “Long should be lauded” for his most recent of several filibusters, but wasn’t sure why Long had done it – “I have forgotten what [his cause] was, and assume that he was probably wrong, as on almost all questions.”¹⁵ Another, writing from Baltimore, praised Long for his time wasting ability as a “blatherskite,”¹⁶ reasoning that as pointless as the Kingfish’s ramblings were, at least it prevented the rest of the Senate creating legislation which would pour his and other taxpayers’ contributions “down innumerable rat holes.”¹⁷ The *Times*’ letters section often featured input from comedian and actor Will Rogers, who made Long a repeated target for his ribbing. Rogers expressed a measure of admiration for Long, with his ability to “out-talk” his opponents (though it is unclear if he meant in terms of rhetoric or endurance) and for having “just enough of a sprinklin’ of the truth of what has been going on in our high finance.”¹⁸ However, his admiration did not grant Long immunity, and Rogers did criticize Long for his resistance to the Glass-Steagall Act of 1933¹⁹ and his abuse of the filibuster power.²⁰ While these letters are of course only the opinion of a reader, their number and inclusion without published foils make it fair to conclude that the editors held the same opinions as their contributors.

¹⁴Arthur Krock, “In Washington: Senate as a “Club” Finds Huey Long Is a Problem,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 1934, p. 22.

¹⁵S.L.G Knox, “Laurels for Huey Long,” *The New York Times*, June 21, 1935, p. 18.

¹⁶Essentially someone capable of talking at length while getting nowhere, and worth 71 points in Scrabble.

¹⁷John Smith, “Commending Senator Long,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 1933, p. 12.

¹⁸Will Rogers, “Will Rogers Thinks Huey A Match for Whole Senate,” *The New York Times*, January 14, 1933, p. 15.

¹⁹Rogers, “Will Rogers Puts His Faith In the Bank Bill’s Author,” *The New York Times*, January 26, 1933, p. 21.

²⁰Rogers, “Mr. Rogers Sees the Kingfish As Our National Emblem,” *The New York Times*, January 16, 1933, p. 17.

Negative opinions of Senator Long appeared in both national and Louisiana publications, but what divides the two is the level of decorum. As shown above, nationally syndicated criticisms of Huey Long pulled their punches. Humor and sarcasm were used to express frustrations without the bite of hostility, and even more serious reprimands were couched in lofty language to appear impartial. Local Louisiana papers, however, often dropped this façade of civility. Take for example the Acadia Parish-based *Crowley Daily Signal*'s characterization of Long speaking in opposition of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. "Up jumped Long like a chubby jack in the box" – hardly the most polite journalism, though perhaps commendable for its use of imagery.²¹ Two years prior, the nearby *Rayne Tribune* ran a column entitled "Men Like Long Danger to United States." Quoting the former Socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas, the *Tribune* argued that Senator Long's particular breed of politics could lead the country to fascist dictatorship – but not Long himself, because "I [Thomas] don't think he is going to get anywhere nationally."²² A year later, in 1934, the *Tribune* ran a column titled "Lest We Forget!" which listed highlights from Long's past as Louisiana governor. In it, Long stands accused of graft, nepotism, fiscal imprudence, enacting petty reprisals, and outright abuse of power – grave charges and plainly stated, something *The New York Times* would not dare to publish.²³ *Crowley's Daily Signal* routinely moved beyond simply making Long out as rotund and childish. In early January of 1935 the *Signal* labelled Louisiana "Long's tumultuous... empire" and warned that a "revolt" against him was on the horizon.²⁴ On February 1, 1935, when reporting on the arrest of Long's rival Ernest J. Bourgeois the *Daily Signal* laid bare its opinion of the Senator. Bourgeois was the victim of Long's "dictatorship," arrested as

²¹ "Forces Opposed to Relief Bill Seeking Action," *Crowley Daily Signal*, March 12, 1935, p. 2.

²² "Men Like Long Danger To United States," *Rayne Tribune*, March 17, 1933, p. 4.

²³ "Lest We Forget!" *Shreveport Times*, republished in *Rayne Tribune*, June 1, 1934, p 2.

²⁴ "Revolt Looms Against Long's Rule in State," *Crowley Daily Signal*, January 9, 1935, p. 1.

Huey returned to the “seat of his dictatorial empire” to conduct “his ‘murder plot inquiry.’”²⁵ ²⁶ Webster Parish’s *Signal Tribune*, published in Minden, shared another paper editor’s opinion that anyone who voted for Governor Long and his taxes was “so stupid.”²⁷ The *Signal Tribune* also characterized Long as controlling the vote in Baton Rouge with “a whip in one hand and a pistol in the other” and forcing lawmakers to “jump like frogs” to his command.²⁸ Even the *New Orleans Christian Advocate*’s editor, who rarely discussed politics save for prohibition, chose to criticize Long for “hang[ing] up his toga in Washington and com[ing] back down here to Louisiana to convince the people” that his gubernatorial pick was ineffective.²⁹ In contrast to the report that Long was simply too unrefined to fit with Washington high society, the *Christian Advocate* juxtaposes the image of the toga and “the people” to paint Long as a patrician attempting to beguile the average Louisianan. Admittedly, in comparison to contemporary journalism and opinion pieces the above examples are rather subdued – although it is somewhat of a rest for the eyes not reading a headline with “slams” in it for a whole two hours.

The contrast between what national writers and Louisiana’s journalists and editors published is striking. One dramatic example exists of a Monroe, Louisiana newspaper editor telegraphing an editorial for *The New York Times* to print. In his brief column the editor angrily accuses Long of “colossal egotism” and asserts that his only reason to join the Senate is “to do to the United States what he has already done to the State of Louisiana.”³⁰ This is perhaps the most severe transgression of the unwritten rules of decorum in nationally circulated press – one which seems to have been granted an exemption by the origins of the author and his criticism. Much of

²⁵ “Bourgeois, Head of Square Deal Group, Arrested,” *Crowley Daily Signal*, February 1, 1935, p. 1.

²⁶ Another case of quotes written, air-quotes implied.

²⁷ “Special Taxes Are Burdensome,” *The LaFourche Comet*, republished in *Signal Tribune*, November 1, 1932, p. 3.

²⁸ B. S. Alford, “Ark. Hill Dots,” *Signal Tribune*, August 28, 1934, p. 2.

²⁹ D. B. Raulins, “Editorial Observations” *New Orleans Christian Advocate* 79, no. 23, (June 9, 2019), p. 1.

³⁰ “Louisiana on Huey Long,” *The New York Times*, January 17, 1933, p. 18.

the extra emphasis placed by Louisiana's press can easily be attributed to the greater impact of Long's actions in their day-to-day lives, while national journalists had less occasion to write brusquely – usually only if the Senator managed to obstruct a piece of legislation that directly affected them. Another possible factor is that writers and editors felt an urgency to discredit Long to lessen his hold over Louisiana's politics. Unfortunately, even this softball assertion is reaching without insight from a reporter or editor's own records.

Imagine if you will that you have been transplanted into Vermillion Parish, Louisiana in the year 1934.³¹ With the *Rayne Tribune*, *Minden Signal Tribune* and *Crowley Daily Signal* all restricted in circulation to other parishes, how much would you really know about Senator Long's capers in Washington? National print media such as *The New York Times* might offer some insight, but its assertions are softened by carefully chosen language. Radio news could subsidize, but although more than half of American households owned a radio by 1934, you could find yourself in a "radio desert" so to speak – one where the average of ownership was much lower. These conditions make it possible to have a large, political naïve or under informed population. Combined with the difficult economic conditions of the Depression, the situation in 1930s Louisiana is noted in studies to give rise to political strongmen and demagogues – like Huey P. Long.³² Perhaps the poor availability of information to the public was a driving factor in public support for Long.

What if you were a particularly savvy, well informed reader – a scholar perhaps? What would you learn of Long from the quarterlies and journals? Even within his lifetime and short

³¹ Setting aside John Lewis Gaddis's opinions on the usefulness of time machines for historical study for the moment, at least (see *The Landscape of History*).

³² Rohini Pande, "Can Informed Voters Enforce Better Governance? Experiments in Low-Income Democracies," *Annual Review of Economics* 3 (September 2011), p. 215-237.

career in the Senate, Long became the subject of numerous articles published in scholarly journals and quarterlies. But for despite there being a fair amount of discourse, economists and political theorists never quite reached a consensus on who or what Huey Long was. Take for example John R. Commons, a Georgist economist writing for the *American Economic Review* who saw Long as a “political expert” following in the theory of fascism.³³ How sharply this contrasts with Peter Odegard’s view of Huey published just a month prior. Rather than a fascist, Odegard saw Huey accelerating the destruction of the Democratic Party and preparing to reform it from the ashes – still a radical, but operating within the same political philosophy.³⁴ C. S. Potts, dean of the Southern Methodist University’s school of law, wrote to *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* that if Long were elected war, the collapse of society, and anarchy would follow.³⁵ One journalist, writing to argue in the defense of the maintenance of Congressional tradition, felt compelled to note that he simply enjoyed Long’s presence in the chambers for his loud clothes, animated speech, and dynamic movement style, which served to alleviate some of the stuffy boredom of sitting in the gallery.³⁶ Likely, if Long’s political career had not been cut short a political science consensus would have begun to coalesce around him. What was created and survives serves to remind us of the imperfect and often confused nature of scholarly discourse around divisive figures. Labels of the political extremes are attached and only walked back incrementally, just as it is in contemporary politics. The discourse around

³³ John R. Commons, “Communism and Collective Democracy,” *The American Economic Review* 25, no. 2 (June 1935), p. 215.

³⁴ Peter H. Odegard, “Political Parties and Group Pressures,” *The Annals of the American Academy* 179 (May 1935), p. 81.

³⁵ C. S. Potts, “World Chaos Once More,” *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, 16, no. 2 (September, 1935), p 1-2.

³⁶ Richard Lee Strout, “Sand-Shakers in the People’s Forum,” *The North American Review*, 237, no. 6 (June 1934), p. 561, 565.

Long demonstrates the importance of personal judgements coming from a synthesis of expert opinion and layman observation.

Conservative and liberal scholars both dedicated a measure of study to the Kingfish with regards to the 1936 election and a potential primary challenge from Long. Oliver McKee Jr. in an article titled “A Word to the Republicans,” emphasized the broad ideological spectrum within the Democratic Party. He advocated that the Republican Party should do everything they could to widen the gulf between Long and his supporters and the main Democratic Party, hopefully splitting the voter base.³⁷ From the other side of the aisle, and coincidentally enough printed in the same periodical (*The North American Review*), Norton McGiffin published “The Long Way to Atlantis.” McGiffin recommended that the Democratic establishment run offense simultaneously against Long and the Republicans by framing the upcoming election as a choice between Roosevelt and Long. By presenting Roosevelt as a more conservative candidate and the only one which could pull ahead of Long, the Party could unite voters from both sides of the aisle who found Huey more onerous than Roosevelt.³⁸ It is interesting that despite their differences, both parties hoped to leverage Long to their advantage over their foes. A similar pattern can be seen emerging in the lead-up to the 2016 election – Conservative influencers on social media continued to harp on the ideological gulf between Clinton and her defeated primary opponents to discourage more liberal voters from turning out.

To this point all of the media coverage examined thus far has been negative, or at best simply ignored the Kingfish’s troubles. Complicated, contentious, and in some ways outrageous, Long’s depictions in print media reflected on both the reality and popular opinion of his career in

³⁷ Oliver McKee Jr., “A Word to the Republicans,” *The North American Review* 237 (January 1934), p. 8.

³⁸ Norton McGiffin, “The Long Way to Atlantis,” *The North American Review* 240 (June 1935), p. 107

the Senate. Let us close on a higher note, with a brief exploration of the one area in which Long's policy pleased those it impacted: school music.

In late October of 1934 1,500 Louisiana State University students descended upon Nashville Tennessee, headed by Huey Long and a 125 piece band. Long paid for the band's seven dollar tickets out of his own pocket (and loaned the same to many of the others, out of "contributions.")³⁹ This stunt landed Long on the front page of *The New York Times*, but it was only the most famous of his several commitments to encouraging students to make music part of their lives. Throughout the Depression Louisiana's available funding for education reached a critical low, causing closures which deprived children of the possibility of gaining an education.⁴⁰ While it was certainly beyond even the Kingfish's power to procure funding for all the failing schools, he did improve the quality of holistic education at those which could be saved. Up until 1933 even T. H. Harris, the Louisiana State Superintendent of Education, and J. Jones Stewart, the Louisiana School Music Association Director, admitted that in terms of school music programs Louisiana had fallen far behind other states in the country. Thus began an investigation into the best practices for creating a quality music program, as well as a comprehensive survey of programs already in existence. The findings of these studies were troubling – not only were there major hurdles to the creation of a large-scale music program, but those that did exist in Louisiana were far behind in comparison to other states'.⁴¹

With the publication of the Louisiana music report came Huey Long's involvement. Apparently making Louisiana's music education as a point of personal pride, Long asked to be

³⁹ "Tennessee Will Admit Huey Long Guards As Game Wardens Protecting 'Wild Life,'" *The Associated Press* republished in *The New York Times*, October 26, 1934, p. 1.

⁴⁰ "School Facing Further Losses," *Rayne Tribune*, March 31, 1933, p 4.

⁴¹ J. Jones Stewart, "A New Deal for Music Education in Louisiana," *Music Educators Journal*, 21 no. 1 (September 1932), p. 21.

brought fully up to speed on the issues within Louisiana and what worked elsewhere. Apprised of the situation, Long took his case for the improvements of school band and choruses to the State Board of Education. Convinced by his insistence, the Board created the position of State Supervisor of Music and the State Department of Music Education.⁴² Almost immediately the program blossomed into a success. The Department of Music was backed with enough funding by Superintendent Harris to utilize new teaching methods (the phonograph),⁴³ and worked towards its first big trial – a specially staged “Grand Band Parade.” The parade was a coup, attracting an estimated 125,000 spectators to the streets of New Orleans, almost as many as a Mardi Gras festival.⁴⁴ Long’s involvement in the Louisiana state music programs demonstrates that at least on some level he was responsive to the needs and wants of his constituents. More importantly, it shows that Long was adept at leaning into the values of his voters. His decision to attach himself to the music program – a fairly low stakes but potentially great voter relations move – shows a level of political savvy often ignored in press coverage.

Hardly a day went by from 1932 to 1935 without Huey Long appearing in the papers. As a visible, outspoken, and radical (not to mention eccentric) member of the Senate, national media simply could not get enough of him. Local Louisiana papers also found themselves dedicating columns to Long’s antics, and were especially glad to include them if their editors were no fans of Long. In contrast, papers with editors wishing to present a positive image of Long made the absence of his woes conspicuous to anyone with the ability to compare. National publications frequently included columns on the Senator and his many conflicts with colleagues and rivals, as well as ones focused on his eccentric character and humorous gaffes. Especially they like to

⁴² Samuel T. Burns, “The School Music Program in Louisiana,” *Music Educators Journal*, 22 no. 3 (November-December 1935), p. 38.

⁴³ Burns, “School Music Program,” 38-39.

⁴⁴ Stewart, “A New Deal,” p. 21.

publish letters to the editor that doubled down on the humorous elements of Long's career. Yet these columns were always restrained – jabs were couched in sarcasm, hypotheticals, and rarely turned openly hostile. In fact, it was the local Louisiana papers which frequently included direct attacks on Long's character and policy, demonstrating a dynamic of decorum aligned with geographic restrictions of publications.

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