

VOLUME XXV, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2025

# CLAREMONT

REVIEW OF BOOKS

*A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship*

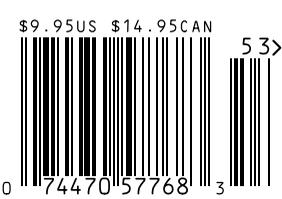


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Bradley C.S. Watson: <i>Of Meese &amp; Men</i>	Brian C. Anderson: <i>Alexandre Kojève</i>	Spencer A. Klavan: <i>The Quotable Horace</i>	Helen Andrews: <i>Joan Didion</i>	Christopher Flannery: <i>They/Them &amp; You</i>



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Book Review by Alexander Orwin

## EVERY MAN A KING

*American Populist: Huey Long of Louisiana*, by Thomas E. Patterson.  
Louisiana State University Press, 704 pages, \$49.95



THE PIED PIPER IS WILLING TO PASS OVER HIS PIPES.

Newspaper cartoon by Clifford Berryman, 1934

NINE DECADES HAVE PASSED SINCE the assassination of Huey P. Long (1893–1935), but Louisiana’s self-proclaimed “Kingfish” continues to cast a shadow over American politics. Admirers tout his investments in education, such as free schoolbooks for all children and a new campus for Louisiana State University; his numerous building projects, including paved roads, Louisiana’s first suspension bridges, and monumental public buildings that still stand; and his powerful speeches, inspiring to the public of his time and eminently readable today. Critics dwell upon his tendencies to make unrealistic promises about economic equality, demonize and humiliate his opponents, and resort to political tactics that could politely be called heavy-handed and dictatorial.

Thomas E. Patterson enters this fray with his impressively researched *American Populist: Huey Long of Louisiana*. He purports to shed new light on his fascinating but familiar subject by virtue of online sources and private pa-

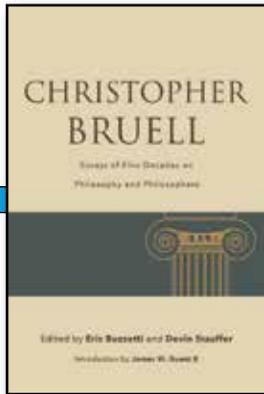
pers that were not available to earlier scholars. The book brims with stories and information about Long’s colorful life, from his cradle in remote Winn Parish to his grave in front of the fabulous New State Capitol that he erected in Baton Rouge, in whose marble halls he was felled by an assassin’s bullet.

PATTERSON’S AIM IS NOT, HOWEVER, TO write a neutral historical work. A lawyer by profession, Patterson seeks to restore Long’s reputation, which has been tarnished by charges of corruption and dictatorship: “It is time to retire the historical caricature of Huey as a menace.” Patterson contests the claim that Long was interested in power but not policy, or in furthering his ambitions rather than improving the lives of ordinary Americans. He rightly asks whether some of the charges against Long might not be the work of his political enemies, the greatest of whom was Franklin D. Roosevelt. One of the more provocative and interesting chapters of the book

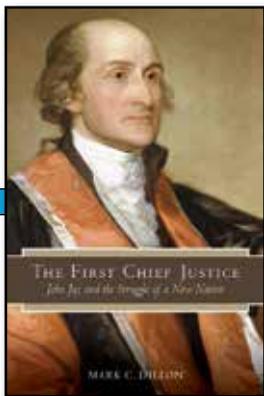
contrasts Roosevelt, a clever but ruthless and conventional politician whose economic ideas for combating the Great Depression amounted, in Patterson’s view, to mere window dressing, with Long, who offered many innovative proposals for recovering from the Great Depression. These included increasing the money supply along with government spending on public works, more stringent regulation of banks, and greater redistribution of wealth, under the famous slogans “Share our Wealth” and “Every Man a King.” Roosevelt, Patterson contends, should have cooperated with Long, but “Huey made him feel small. Roosevelt had to cast him off.” He argues that Roosevelt belatedly adopted some of Long’s rhetoric and proposals in 1935, after the economy had failed to improve. Yet could these two very different, but equally ambitious, political personalities ever have successfully worked together? Patterson does not give any direct answer to this question.

Patterson’s aspiration to write as both an unbiased historian and a booster of Long leads

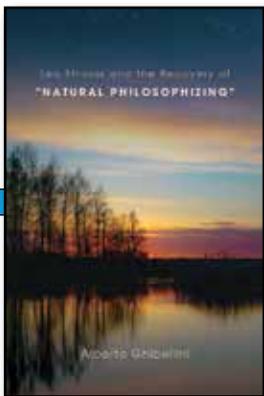
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to some revealing tensions in his work. Sometimes, he merely recounts episodes from Long's life. These narrations are unfailingly informative, especially concerning the legal cases, most often against big business interests, that occupied so much of Long's early career. Patterson is a competent writer, but his work often lacks narrative flow, as he struggles to tie the many strands of Long's frenetic activity into a single whole. The sheer quantity of historical material becomes somewhat ponderous, making it difficult for Patterson to keep up with the indefatigable presto of Long's short but eventful life. (In contrast, Richard D. White's *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long* [2006] is written with the necessary panache). As a fair historian, Patterson cannot simply deny the numerous instances in which Long misused power. As an admirer of Long, he attempts to either justify or minimize them.

AS THE 40TH GOVERNOR OF LOUISIANA (1928-32), Long survived determined opposition, including an impeachment attempt. But Louisiana governors in those days could serve only one term (today they may serve two). When Long's term was up, he got himself elected to the United States Senate, while retaining total control of Louisiana through his gubernatorial puppet Oscar Allen, a boyhood friend and political non-entity who was sure to sign whatever bill Long proposed. Patterson doesn't emphasize the main elements of Long's dictatorship, but neither does he conceal them. Despite serving in the Senate, Long found time to return to Louisiana, where he would quickly pass whatever bills he drafted in the legislature without meaningful debate. He controlled an extensive patronage network and had no qualms about using it to reward friends and punish enemies. He meddled in the municipal administration of Baton Rouge and New Orleans, to the point of reducing the mayors to impotence by seizing control of municipal appointments and declaring martial law. Finally, he was not above cheating in elections. When somebody protested that his effort to fine opponents for spending money for political purposes was unconstitutional, Long retorted, "I don't give a damn." Taken together, these practices gave Long extraordinary power over every aspect of Louisiana life.

Patterson's defenses of Long are spirited but not consistently persuasive. They fall into four general categories. First, Long did not abuse his power as egregiously as his detractors claim. Second, other party bosses and politicians of the era did the same thing, or worse, without acquiring the same notoriety. Third, Long was driven to act ruthlessly by the ruthlessness of his political enemies, beginning with his

impeachment and continuing with criminal investigations into him and his allies. Fourth, Long enjoyed popular support because his very ruthlessness allowed him to overcome legislative incompetence and pass bills that served the public good. The reader is welcome to consider such arguments—which are still invoked in defense of executive prerogatives today—but they set a risky precedent.

LONG'S REIGN OVER THE STATE MET A sudden and mysterious end in September 1935 with his assassination at the hands of Carl Weiss, a successful eye doctor with an infant child, little known interest in politics, and no direct acquaintance with Long. The most common theory of Weiss's motive links it to Long's plan to ruin the political career of Benjamin Pavy, an anti-Long politician who happened to be Weiss's father-in-law, by gerrymandering Pavy's district in rural St. Landry Parish out of existence. Patterson doesn't deny the existence of this scheme but resists the more damning allegation associated with it: that Long also planned to destroy Pavy by dredging up an old rumor about his family's dark-skinned ancestry. It was this prospect of dishonor to his wife and children that, according to many historians, impelled Weiss to act. Without this additional motive, Patterson contends, Weiss would never have undertaken something so desperate. He speculates that somebody may have spread false rumors to Weiss, presumably with malicious intent. Yet Patterson's own arguments against the veracity of this rumor are hardly persuasive. True, very few people heard Long talking about it, but this proves little, since a politician as skilled as Long would have known how to keep his cards close to his chest. One of the people who reported the rumor, moreover, was a New Orleans printer tasked with disseminating the slander. Because Patterson struggles to find any alternative reason for the assassination, he never truly succeeds in decoupling it from Long's machinations against Pavy. Patterson's reluctance to accept the most plausible reason for Long's demise fits with his larger effort to downplay Long's abuse of power and willingness to crush his enemies at any price.

The assassination put an abrupt end to Long's presumptive run for president in 1936. Patterson expresses the wistful hope that Long would have lived long enough to take on Roosevelt as a third-party candidate. He touts Long's superior policy vision, as he has throughout the book. He also argues, plausibly enough, that Long would not have been able to control all 48 states by means of the same heavy-handed methods that subjugated Louisiana. But he avoids the issue of foreign policy, which would



shortly prove to be of the utmost importance. Even if we grant that Roosevelt's policy ideas were conventional, his political skill kept the country afloat during the Depression and mostly united in the face of an unprecedented world war. Would Long, with his history of divisiveness and negligible experience in foreign policy, have been able to accomplish this same feat? And if he had lost the election but weakened Roosevelt, who won a landslide victory in 1936, how would that have strengthened the country as global disaster loomed?

**T**Hese questions are, of course, strictly hypothetical, but they are relevant to our assessment of Long. Did he have the global vision necessary for success as president? Or might he serve us better as a model for domestic governance? Without quite saying it, Patterson prefers the second interpretation. His Long is a visionary primarily in domestic policy. In favoring the bold regulation of business and generous distribution of wealth for the sake of the common man, Long emerges as a forerunner of Lyndon Johnson and his Great Society in policy, and Bernie Sanders in tone. This, it seems, is what Patterson means by "populist," a term that appears in the title but is never clearly defined in the book. If this is in fact Long's legacy, then it

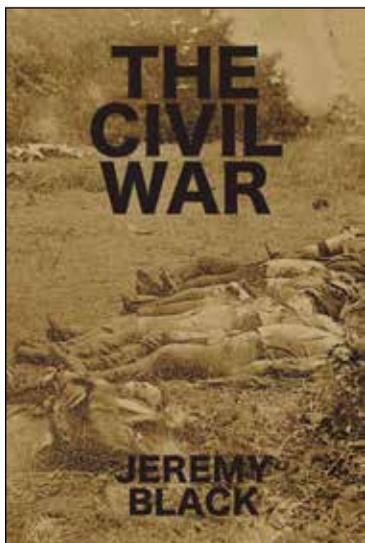
is indeed a formidable one, although not without controversy in light of his extraordinary methods of seizing and maintaining power.

Patterson began his book in 2014, just before the current constellation of American politics began to take shape. But this hardly explains the relative lack of comparisons between Long and Donald Trump, comparisons on which Patterson had ample time and every reason to reflect in the ten years during which the book was written. He finally addresses them in a single paragraph in his conclusion, acknowledging rhetorical similarities in both leaders' appeal to the common man against corrupt elites but contrasting Long's intelligence and ability to learn with Trump's pigheadedness. This should be the beginning, not the end, of Patterson's analysis. The rhetorical similarities between Long and Trump suggest a legacy for populism that extends beyond mere policy. On this point, the fact that both began their careers as salesmen, albeit in highly different circumstances, calls for further examination. Patterson could have combined his impressive discussion of Long's youthful formation in this regard with some commentary on Trump. His discussion of the failed impeachment of Long and its aftermath could have benefitted from a similar comparison.

**T**HOMAS PATTERSON DESERVES CREDIT for a superbly researched book and provocative defense of Long's inventive policies. Yet his book never quite delivers on its promises. It does not bring Long to bear on contemporary politics as cogently as it could, perhaps because its author is ultimately unsure of his own position on him. Much as Patterson wishes to defend Long, he cannot help but warn of his "manic exuberance or vindictiveness." Even more strikingly, his final paragraph blames Long's habit of shutting and shouting down reasonable debate with his opponents for contributing to a "distasteful aspect of modern American politics" that could end in a "tragedy" of the sort described in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* (1946), a masterly political novel based in large part on the life of Long and culminating in assassination. Perhaps we should highlight, and even appreciate, both Huey Long's magnificent virtues and his malignant vices, since it is this combination that has made him such a compelling figure. The beautiful and ugly sides of his character remain unique in American politics. We have a lot to learn from each.

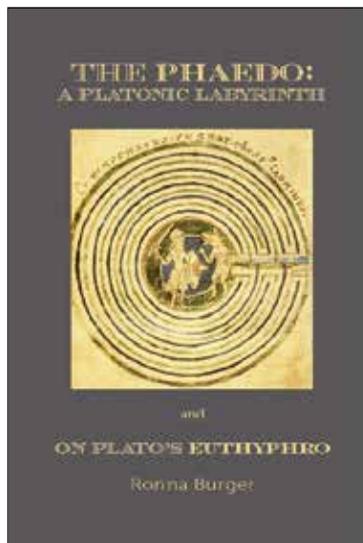
*Alexander Orwin is associate professor of political science at Louisiana State University.*

## "Study history. Study history."—Winston Churchill



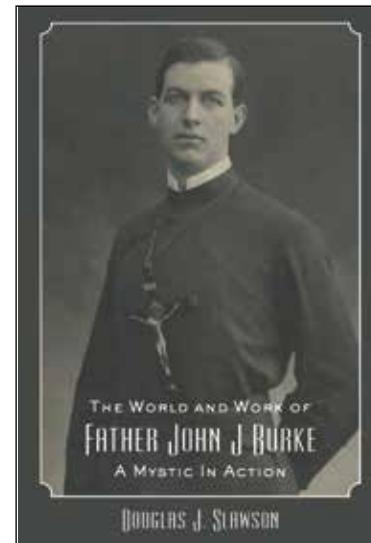
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