

So, What's New?

Part I

“Do We Get the Government We Deserve?”

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My dear friends, we want to share some thoughts with you on “So, what’s new?” each of these five Shabbos evenings that we’re honored to spend together this month. Next week, we’ll initiate a new draft of our *Sinai Siddur* prayer book and consider the challenge and the power of prayer. So, what’s new about prayer today?

On the 16th of June, we’ll hear about what’s new with the State of Israel from Allison Good, reporting on her new perspective as a young Jew, having just returned from several months in Israel. On the 23rd, on Shabbat She’lach-lecha, we’ll address “So, What’s New, Rabbi?” as I bring you a report on the just completed CCAR national convention, to be held in San Diego. And finally, on the 30th, we’ll put Cantor Colman front and center in a tuneful presentation on “So, What’s New in Jewish Music?” – recently published Reform Cantorial liturgy.

But, this Shabbos, it seems to me our focus ought to be on the political fallout from our just-completed mayoral election. “So, what’s new? Will we get the government we deserve?” Yesterday, I participated in the prayer service at St. Louis Cathedral along with Rabbi Busch, attendant with the inauguration of Mayor C. Ray Nagin, for better or worse, the winner of the election. I proudly read a selection from the Prophet Isaiah, which began,

Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness
and ministers shall govern with justice. Every
one of them shall be like a refuge from gales, a
shelter from rainstorms.

Ironically, it’s not a bad selection for that occasion which coincided with the first day of the new hurricane season.

Those of you who are offended by talk of politics from the pulpit, I apologize in advance, but not really! You see, a rabbi who ignores or is scared away from politics from his or her pulpit becomes nothing more than an irrelevant hireling. Thank God, no Reform rabbi, in the history of our three New Orleans congregations, has ever become such a pitiable object.

The fact is, we all need to remain ardent advocates – vocal spokespersons for civic progress, healing, energetic action, to put this Katrina destruction – which is such a blight on our spirits and upon our future – finally behind us. The result of the mayoral election, perhaps, many believe, the bizarre result of willful racism, both black and white, is at last history. And I ask, will we now get the government we deserve and have chosen? Perhaps the real question is, ought we be afraid we will get what we deserve?

The question is, do we deserve better or is this what we have chosen? Historically, Louisiana has taken the low road. As voters, our state has often chosen not only foolishly, but knowingly, for the candidate who would ask the least of them of highmindedness or of anything resembling selflessness, vision, or sacrifice.

Professor Richard White, Jr. of LSU has just written a fantastic new biography of Huey P. Long, which he titled simply, *Kingfish: The Reign of Huey P. Long*. It illustrates so well the political legacy that we have inherited and which still colors and influences the politics resonating from Baton Rouge. Do you know about Huey P. Long? Let me mention just a little to refresh your memory or to acquaint you with this unique character. All of this I learned from Dr. White's magnificent and engaging study of a man who was all but a dictator, who ran this state with an iron will from his election as governor in 1928 until his assassination in 1935, and who once admitted, "Listen, there are smarter guys than I am, but not in Louisiana." Professor White elaborates how, step-by-step, Huey P. Long seized more control over a state of this Union than any politician before or after. According to Dr. White:

By the end of his tempestuous reign as governor of Louisiana and later as United State Senator, [Huey Long] dominated almost every aspect of government in his native state. He used political whim to hire thousands of state government workers, from cabinet secretaries to laborers shoveling gravel onto highways, while thousands of local government workers, including school teachers, sheriff's deputies, and courthouse clerks fell under his political mastery. He orchestrated elections, padded voting lists, and directed the counting of ballots. He assaulted freedom of the press by proposing a gag law that prevented newspapers from printing 'malicious, scandalous, or defamatory' stories about him. He deployed the state militia as his personal police force and declared martial law on cities that refused to submit to his mastery. He packed the courts with his loyalists to insure that his increasing power went unchecked. Most blatantly, he dominated the state legislature and ordered it to slavishly pass hundreds of bills that increased his power, destroyed his enemies, and stretched the very limits of constitutionalism.

Let me tell you something else, because I want this sermon to be fair. Huey Long also happened to have done more good for the people of Louisiana than any politician before or since! You have to understand that we're talking in the midst of the Great Depression, and Long built 9,000 miles of new roads and more than 100 bridges over swamps and rivers. In some ways, he succeeded in pulling Louisiana from a horse-and-buggy world into the age of modern transportation.

Governor Long gave free schoolbooks to students, allowing thousands of poor children to attend school. And, his adult night schools taught 175,000 illiterate

Louisianans to read, including many poor blacks. He was not a man who, as the governors of Alabama, Mississippi, or Georgia at that time were experts in doing, villainized the black citizens of Louisiana. In many ways, he did not come across as a Jim Crow racist. You see, Huey Long was the first one to recognize the power of the black electorate of the state of Louisiana and its ability to influence the outcome of elections!

Oh, let me also tell you this! He doubled the number of beds in the state's Charity hospitals. He raised LSU to national stature in size, athletes, and scholarships. Huey Long lessened the burden on poor farming families with his homestead property tax exemption, allowing thousands of individuals to vote when he abolished the poll tax. He took an instant dislike of the old state house and insisted on building the towering State House we know today – in one year! You see, this is not a sermon that only sees the dark side. But, let me tell you this. There is plenty of the dark side to describe.

While these sizable accomplishments took place in the first few years of Huey's reign, it petered out very quickly and real improvements to the well-being of Louisianans stopped. After his election to the U.S. Senate, Huey Long did virtually nothing to foster the economic liberation of the people whose trust he had so dramatically captured. After 1931, you can forget about economic reform, as he abandoned his progressive crusade and devoted all of his energy toward increasing and perpetuating his own enormous political power.

Time and again, Long's opponents in the legislature and the old guard political power men here in New Orleans, Shreveport, and Baton Rouge underestimated Huey Long's brilliance and boldfaced defiance of the establishment. Huey Long made an art of public vulgarity in Baton Rouge and in the United States Senate. And, his inhumane vengeance upon anyone who didn't play along – and I mean anyone – was legion.

By spring of 1929, impeachments were being held in the State Senate chamber. The charges? Are you ready?

- Blackmail
- Bribery
- Not accounting for state money he had spent specifically on a new limousine
- Illegally removing an official of the state training school
- Using mansion funds for personal purposes
- Permitting a construction company to build defective culverts
- Forcing appointees to sign undated resignations
- Insulting citizens
- Discharging a college president
- Appointing a corrupt parole officer

And the charges went on and on. The result? On a technicality, 15 out of 39 senators – one more than needed – killed the vote for conviction.

The pro-Long forces were richly rewarded with contracts, jobs, appointments, and unwrapped, unfrozen cash. The enemies were fiercely punished and weeded out.

Early on in the Huey Long administration, Rabbi Walter Peiser of Baton Rouge's B'nai Israel Congregation caused a stir when he refused to open a session of the Legislature with a prayer. Rabbi Peiser, much to his credit, publicly stated that in good conscience, he could not...

...call down the blessings of God on such a
governor...who is unworthy of the high office
he holds.

No doubt, Rabbi Peiser was criticized for being too political. But, Huey Long as governor, then as U.S. Senator, hung out with viciously anti-Semitic friends and supporters. People like his lawyer, Leander Perez, and the fascist minister, Gerald L.K. Smith, were among Long's inseparable buddies. Had Huey not been killed, one can only imagine the unholy alliance he would've forged in his already announced presidential campaign in 1936 – nativists, isolationists, and Jew-haters. Incidentally, Huey enjoyed the unshakable friendship and funding of certain of Louisiana's Jewish politicians, including Abe Shushan and the Roosevelt Hotel's Seymour Weiss of New Orleans. Both were ultimately rewarded with jail terms.

Now, here's the point, and Dr. White puts it out there toward the end of this amazing biography. "Many Louisianans still respond to the populist rhetoric of Huey Long." And, says White,

Compared to other states, Louisiana's governor possesses much of the unparalleled informal power amassed by Huey, including substantial political patronage. The state legislature still bows to most of the governor's wishes...the governor still appoints the speaker of the House, president of the Senate, and other important chairmanships (regardless of which party has control of the legislature).

My dear friends, it will be interesting to say the least to see how our current governor fairs now, after Katrina. But then, I was sure I would witness another mayor being sworn in yesterday! So, don't place any bets!

We wish Mayor Nagin well. Let that be made clear. Though his competence is yet to be proven, Ray Nagin is not a Huey Long by any means, thank God. But we all still breathe toxic air that was first bred in those terrible Huey Long years when the citizens of this state and, ultimately, the upper crust, blue blood, power class of this city collectively went down on their knees, worshipfully submitting to whatever their governor deemed appropriate. These times of unprecedented challenge and uncertainty

demand our earnest participation in the democratic process. This is no time to be bashful in raising our voices. As Jesse Jackson told Ray Nagin at the inauguration yesterday, “This is a plateau, it is not a mountaintop.”

The voters of this city, at great effort and under such severe hardship, have chosen our city’s new leadership. What did we choose? For what will we settle? Will we demand excellence? Are we to be satisfied with pocketing our due or will we insist that this city and its leadership reach for far more for everyone?

I pray, and I know that you do too, that we’ll never relive the helplessness of what our eyes and ears have seen and heard this past year. A new New Orleans: are we going to insist upon it? I’m optimistic enough to believe that we will. I pray that yesterday was an historic turning point in the life of this city: a new City Council and a re-elected Mayor, together intent on doing it right this time.

You know, I’m glad that I have learned what happened in those Huey Long years, here in Louisiana. We all learn from the past – at least we had better. No one is perfect, but with steadfast hope matched with ceaseless efforts, tomorrow can and will be better and brighter.

Ken Y’hee Ratzoan – Dear God, may it be so!

Amen