

Huey Long, "Share Our Wealth" (1935) Speech in Congress, May 23

Huey Long was the charismatic governor of Louisiana who was elected to the Senate in 1930. Initially, he was a great supporter of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. But as the Great Depression wore on, Long grew increasingly convinced that Roosevelt's New Deal programs were not adequately addressing the needs of the nation's poor people. As a result, he introduced his Share Our Wealth program, which he described before Congress in the speech excerpted below. Long faced criticism from Socialists, Communists, and the Democratic Party, but he enjoyed huge popularity at home in Louisiana, and he even had the support of many progressive politicians. Long's ambitions were cut short when he was assassinated by the son-in-law of a political enemy in 1935.

It is impossible for the United States to preserve itself as a republic or as a democracy when 600 families own more of this Nation's wealth--in fact, twice as much--as all the balance of the people put together. Ninety-six percent of our people live below the poverty line, while 4 percent own 87 percent of the wealth. America can have enough for all to live in comfort and still permit millionaires to own more than they can ever spend and to have more than they can ever use; but America cannot allow the multimillionaires and the billionaires, a mere handful of them, to own everything unless we are willing to inflict starvation upon 125,000,000 people. . . .

. . . God's law commanded that the wealth of the country should be redistributed ever so often, so that none should become too rich and none should become too poor; it commanded that debts should be canceled and released ever so often, so that the human race would not be loaded with a burden which it could never pay. . . .

It took the genius of labor and the lives of all Americans to produce the wealth of this land. If any man, or 100 men, wind up with all that has been produced by 120,000,000 people, that does not mean that those 100 men produced the wealth of the country; it means that those 100 men stole, directly or indirectly, what 125,000,000 people produced. . . .

Here is the whole sum and substance of the share-our-wealth movement:

1. Every family to be furnished by the Government a homestead allowance, free of debt, of not less than one-third the average family wealth of the country, which means, at the lowest, that every family shall have the reasonable comforts of life up to a value of from \$5,000 to \$6,000. No person to have a fortune of more than 100 to 300 times the average family fortune, which means that the limit to fortunes is between \$1,500,000 and \$5,000,000, with annual capital levy taxes imposed on all above \$1,000,000.
2. The yearly income of every family shall be not less than one-third of the average family income, which means that, according to the estimates of the statisticians of the United States Government and Wall Street, no family's annual income would be less than from \$2,000 to \$2,500. No yearly income shall be allowed to any person larger than from 100 to 300 times the size of the average family income, which means that no person

would be allowed to earn in any year more than from \$600,000 to \$1,800,000, all to be subject to present income-tax laws.

3. To limit or regulate the hours of work to such an extent as to prevent overproduction; the most modern and efficient machinery would be encouraged, so that as much would be produced as possible so as to satisfy all demands of the people, but to also allow the maximum time to the workers for recreation, convenience, education, and luxuries of life.

4. An old-age pension to the persons over 60.

5. To balance agricultural production with what can be consumed according to the laws of God, which includes the preserving and storage of surplus commodities to be paid for and held by the Government for the emergencies when such are needed. . . .

6. To pay the veterans of our wars what we owe them and to care for their disabled.

7. Education and training for all children to be equal in opportunity in all schools, colleges, universities, and other institutions for training in the professions and vocations of life; to be regulated on the capacity of children to learn, and not on the ability of parents to pay the costs. Training for life's work to be as much universal and thorough for all walks in life as has been the training in the arts of killing.

8. The raising of revenue and taxes for the support of this program to come from the reduction of swollen fortunes from the top, as well as for the support of public works to give employment whenever there may be any slackening necessary in private enterprise.

I now ask those who read this circular to help us at once in this work of giving life and happiness to our people--not a starvation dole upon which someone may live in misery from week to week. Before this miserable system of wreckage has destroyed the life germ of respect and culture in our American people let us save what was here, merely by having none too poor and none too rich. The theory of the Share Our Wealth Society is to have enough for all, but not to have one with so much that less than enough remains for the balance of the people. . . .

Let everyone who feels he wishes to help in our work start right out and go ahead. . . . The reward and compensation is the salvation of humanity. Fear no opposition. "He who falls in this fight falls in the radiance of the future!"

Document Analysis

What were the most radical aspects of Long's plan? Did any of his ideas become reality? Upon whose law did Long base his ideas? Do you think this assertion increased or diminished support for his ideas?

What did Long predict would be the consequences if the nation failed to adopt a program such as his?