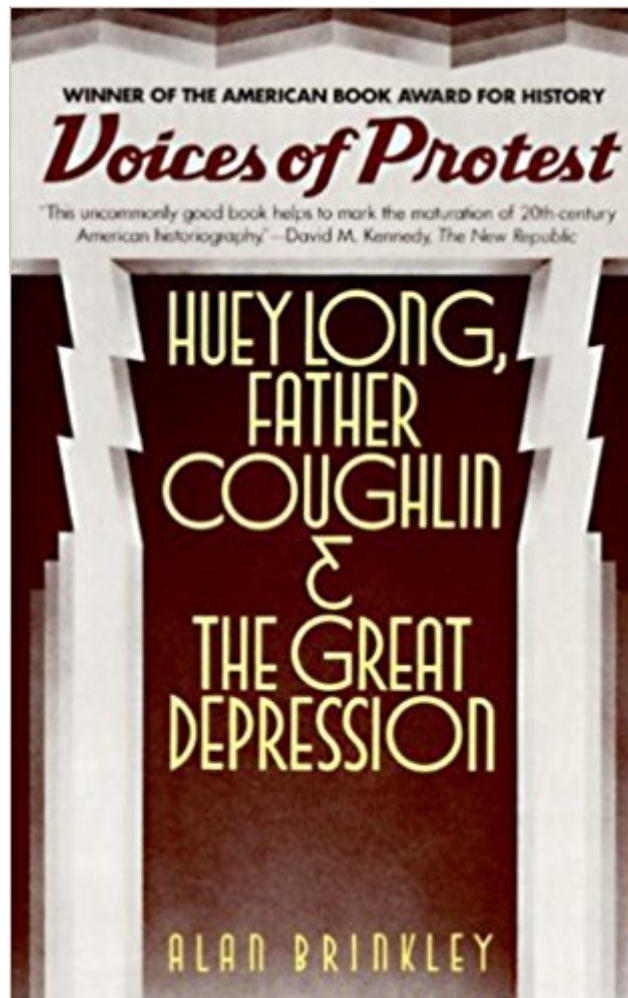




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Voices Of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & The Great Depression



Synopsis

The study of two great demagogues in American history--Huey P. Long, a first-term United States Senator from the red-clay, piney-woods country of northern Louisiana; and Charles E. Coughlin, a Catholic priest from an industrial suburb near Detroit. Award-winning historian Alan Brinkley describes their modest origins and their parallel rise together in the early years of the Great Depression to become the two most successful leaders of national political dissidence of their era. Â Â *Winner of the American Book Award for History*

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Customer Reviews

"This uncommonly good book helps to mark the maturation of the 20th-century American historiography."--David M Kennedy, The New Republic"History explicated by a master of the art... impressively well written in addition to being topical." --The Chicago Tribune Book World"It is not often that we get a book as good as this one about demagogic figures like Huey Long and Father Coughlin....A sensitive and subtle work moderated by grace and restraint....Brinkley's findings add to our knowledge of the leaders themselves, but more significantly to the nature of their appeal, their methods...and their relations with President Roosevelt....It would be well for American historiography should this book mark a turn in predominant fashions." --The New York Review of BooksÂ Â

The study of two demagogues, whose vast popularity explains much about Depression-era

America.

I've read other books by Brinkley, and his recent stuff (he's a professor at Columbia) is very well written, and has tons of wonderful detail. This book, however, on F. Coughlin and Huey Long, is an early one, and lacks the maturity of his current work, But it's a good read.

Read a narrative history, this is a terrific work on two fascinating individuals. I learned a lot about Coughlin and Long from Brinkley's pages. I didn't appreciate -- or really care about -- the political theory that the author uses at the end of the book. I imagine this evolved from a dissertation so I can understand why it was included, but the book probably would have worked better without it.

Good

One of the things I've found in reading American history, and especially in books written about the era of the Great Depression, is that President Roosevelt had the greatest smear operation in American History. This operation has carried on to this day, 60+ years after his death. The "establishment" historians are merely foot maidens of the Roosevelt reputation, burnishing the legend of his greatness, overlooking his ineffectiveness both in dealing with the depression and the war, and smearing anyone who ever dared to question the legacy of this supposedly greatest of 20th century Americans. It is an operation that the Kims of North Korea could surely envy. Two cases in point are Father Coughlin and Huey Long. Another is Charles Lindbergh. These men had the gall, in their day, to oppose Roosevelt. Thus they have come down to us in our day as Fascists, anti-semites, Nazi sympathizers and Little Hitlers. None of these men was flawless. As a matter of fact, each had grievous faults. Long was a corrupt politician. Coughlin was a brilliant speaker who fell prey to his own over-emotionalism and then easily into rancor, both in politics and with his brethren in the church and who then stooped to the bitter personal attacks and bigotry that cost him the respect of general audiences. Lindbergh was naive and often filled with bloated self-importance; he was short sighted and illogical in many of his views and inarticulate in expressing them. Yet each in their time raised legitimate concerns with the policies of Roosevelt and, I think, were more or less sincere in their protests against the direction FDR was taking this country. Personally, I think the ideas of Long, Coughlin and Lindbergh were purely crack-pot and founded on ignorance of basic economics and politics. Proof of this is the continued popularity of their ideas (maybe under a different name and guise) among the kooks of the modern lunatic fringe like, say, the Larouchites.

These ideas would have been disastrous to the country had they been followed. Yet this is supposed to be a free country where political dissent is allowed; but because Coughlin, Long and Lindbergh dared to question the motives and actions of the idol of the American left, they have been eternally smeared through our history. Looking at this result, I would be moved to ask who were the real fascists: the Coughlins, Longs and Lindberghs; or FDR and his brain trust, and the lap dogs, both in the media of the day, and in the history books since, who have smeared and mischaracterized his opponents and who attempted to use the powers of government to intimidate them into silence. Which makes this book different and admirable. The author reports on Long and Coughlin with all their warts and doesn't try to conceal any of their weaknesses; however, he is fair to them. He doesn't try to make every disagreement with FDR into evidence of Fascism. He connects the Long & Coughlin programs to legitimate public grievances and shows how wide spread among the public were the feelings that Long & Coughlin expressed. The book is not overly long, yet it is meticulously researched. And though I think, from reading it, that the author is an FDR admirer (just a feeling--I don't really know), he allows FDR's opponents the benefit of the doubt in the sincerity of their opposition. My own opinion is that Long & Coughlin (especially Coughlin) underestimated the popular power of the presidency. I believe the people, in general, WANT to like the president, whoever he is. We see now, even with a president as unpopular as Bush, how hard it is to balk him, and how easily he has thwarted his congressional opponents in their efforts to reverse his policies. He retains, even in his lowest days, strong support from about 1/3rd of the population, and this is usually enough to maintain a hold on the direction of national policy. We saw how Clinton held on to enough support, through all his sordid scandals, to frustrate his foes; how long LBJ held a blank check despite his mismanagement of Viet Nam, only losing grip at the very end; and even how such a boob as Carter retains a good measure of public popularity, even after his miserable performance as president and his almost 30 years of asinine behavior after leaving the White House. FDR was completely ineffective in dealing with the depression. Every one of his programs, and every effort of the New Deal were failures. His value was mainly as a propagandist and cheerleader. He made the people feel better and they loved him and supported him for his good cheer and they elected him four times. He was a brilliant publicist and public speaker. His radio addresses were models of simplifying complicated issues without seeming to speak down to his audience. This was enough to cloud, in the mind of his listeners, the effectiveness (or, rather, ineffectiveness) of his administration. The popularity of a Coughlin was transient and that of Long was more or less local (though it would have been interesting to see, had he lived, how far he could have gone in challenging FDR following the economic reversals of 1938, then what his stance

would have been in the war debates of 1939-40, and if he could have made greater national inroads at this time). A nation of people elect a president. They vote for him. To repudiate him, to turn against him, means admitting a mistake in electing him. Hence they cling to him long after he has proven a failure, an incompetent or a devious scoundrel. FDR was all of these, but neither Coughlin or Long could erode the people's faith in him because the people want to love their president and to hold on to the idea that their votes for him showed sagacity and wisdom.

A remarkably clear and good read for a more academic than popular history. I learned an enormous amount about a time as fascinating for its differences to the present as its similarities.

Praise has been heaped on Alan Brinkley's book in the past, and after reading it, I fully concur with the accolades that past reviewers have granted to this book. Brinkley sets the tone for his book from the title - "Voices of Protest". He focuses the book on the two main characters (and I do mean characters) present in the subtitle - Huey P. Long and Father Charles E. Coughlin. Brinkley treats us to a brief biographical sketch of each of these flamboyant and ebullient personalities. Long in his silk pajamas receiving a German envoy, and Coughlin stripping down from his clerical garb to a sweat soaked politician are just a couple of the many images that grab the reader during the progression of this discourse. After explaining who these men were, he goes into their social & political movements - a fascinating tale of Long's "Share Our Wealth" plan, and an equally rich telling of Coughlin's "Golden Hour of the Little Flower". Brinkley has chosen the title Voices of Protest because both of these movements became major political dissident movements in Depression-era America. Brinkley does a fantastic job of explaining, in historiographic terms, why these movements gathered such steam and were able to become massive social movements rather than just political fodder. In addition to detailing these two major oppositional voices to FDR's new deal, Brinkley also gives us a chapter on other movements that were equally critical of the New Deal, but not nearly as widespread. I found it especially interesting how Brinkley explained that Long was the primary reason why both of these movements flourished - after his assassination in 1935, both movements really seemed to fall apart. I enjoyed this book tremendously - it gives new insight into the way that political dissonance took hold in the 1930's and what a big part of American society these two political movements became.

A fine overview of two largely forgotten but decidedly relevant political demagogues from the 1930s. If you want to get some insight on what drives the politics of populism, this is a good place to begin.

If the writing were a bit more refined, I would give it five stars.

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