The Build-up of Long and Coughlin

Washington, March 11

The excommunication of Huey Long and Father Coughlin has turned into a demonstration of political feeblemindedness. General Hugh Johnson, a discredited man, was set up to finish off the Kingfish and the radio priest merely because he fires a sixteen-inch mouth. The General did a marvelous job with his verbal ammunition. He overjoyed everyone capable of delight in picturesque language. And when he had finished, he had built up for Huey Long the largest radio audience in his career—nearly a "Presidential" audience in size—which Huey, who is no fool, used not for vituperation but for a presentation of his wealth-sharing program. Worse than that, the General performed the miracle of combining an excommunication with a public wedding. He joined in holy matrimony the Long and Coughlin movements, which had only reached the stage of flirtation. Every Long adherent henceforth will feel in alliance with every Coughlinite, and every Coughlinite will recognize affinity with the subjects of the Kingfish. The marriage may have lain in the stars, but it did not need to be consummated before its day by friends of the President. Johnson on the air and Robinson and McKellar in the Senate have behaved as though politics were like a club, which can throw out members who do not behave like gentlemen. And like clubs, they made themselves ridiculous in doing so. The Senate in which Boies Penrose was so utterly at home, and the Administration in which Mr. Farley is a Cabinet minister (he now is slated to be Governor of New York) become hilariously funny when they take exception to the vulgarities of Huey Long.

One may have sympathy with the Administration in its irritation over Senator Long. What cannot be condoned is its strategy. Presumably Messrs. Johnson, Robinson, and McKellar are "grasping the nettle." But they are ignorant of economic botany. Huey Long is not the nettle, he is only a person, and his importance does not lie in his personality, but in the response of people to his appeal. The nettle to be grasped is the maldistribution of economic power in America. It is the economic condition in which dividends rise and wages fall. It is the prospect of long years of misery at depressed wages. This is a nettle which General Hugh Johnson cannot grasp because he does not know it is a nettle. Senators Robinson and McKellar have been blind to it throughout their senatorial careers. It is a nettle which some of the President’s speech-writers once saw and promised to grasp, but the President is not using them any more.

Huey Long and Father Coughlin, as the result of the past ten days of stupidity, are now designated to be the leaders of protesting America. Three months ago one would have considered it impossible that so soon Huey Long would be getting a solid page in the Herald Tribune and a national hook-up of every station on the NBC. His ride to prominence has been a mad gallop. Father Coughlin’s importance is not so much a surprise since the World Court vote, and the White House may not be quite happy over his castigation by the General, for one hears that it tried to censor the Coughlin part of the speech. But the two of them now have the millions safely behind them. Huey Long boasted the other day that already he could carry New York City. It may not be a foolish boast. With Father Coughlin’s support and with the appeal of his own radio speeches Huey has prestige in Eastern cities where a few weeks ago he was a far-away myth. If anyone questions their combined municipal strength, let him study the results of the plebiscite recently held in Philadelphia by the Columbia station WCAU. The station management had to decide whether to put on the New York Philharmonic or Father Coughlin in the three-o’clock Sunday afternoon hour. On four successive nights it asked its listeners to report their preference. By Saturday noon, when the voting closed, the station had received 117,000 letters. Father Coughlin was the choice of 110,000 and the Philharmonic of 7,000. After the voting closed, a further 82,000 letters were received, 77,000 for Father Coughlin and 5,000 for the Philharmonic. In all, the vote was better than fifteen to one for Father Coughlin. Against this result it can be noted that the announcement of the plebiscite was made each evening at eleven o’clock, when most music lovers do not listen to their radios. A Philharmonic lover is not necessarily political. But the vote paints the portrait of a radio audience, hence of municipal society as it is. And Father Coughlin and Huey Long know better what it is like than, for instance, General Johnson and Franklin Roosevelt. Between them these arch-demagogues combine city unrest with the unrest of Southern farmers and the lower middle class of the Middle West, and indeed with unrest wherever it exists beneath the $2,000 income level—which is pretty much everywhere. And whatever else is to be said of the Philadelphia district, it preferred yesterday hearing Father Coughlin on the reconstruction of society to the somber loveliness of Brahms’s German Requiem, a token of political vitality if not of culture.

The sudden importance of Long and Coughlin calls for appraisal in terms of the advance toward fascism which it represents. Long is not yet a fascist in his thinking, while Coughlin is. But the Louisiana dictator is fully as fascist in his type and in the nature of his appeal as Hitler was, say, before 1930. If the American liberals consider these two “safe” because they are radical, it is because of the queer notion widely held that European fascism is reactionary. The neat explanation that the Nazis were merely the bribed thugs of Thyssen may be welcome to people who are afraid to look the German revolution in the face, and who think all the evils in life can be ascribed to foul conspiracy. Fascism began in Germany as a radical movement. Hitler, if anything, was more radical than either Long or Coughlin. He denounced the capitalists, promised to abolish interest, nationalize industry, and seize land without compensation. Mussolini’s fascist movement grew from a branch of the Socialist Party, and he broadened its base to include the peasants and middle class because he had the sense to see that he must raise the banner of national unity. If we had had a Socialist labor movement the doctrines of both Long and Coughlin would be still more radical. And the only reason I can see for denying they are potential fascists is that for
this stage in a fascist development they are too conservative, and not the other way around. To me their mildness makes their fascist nature much clearer in the light of European experience. Their programs, for all their glamorous radical sound, are capitalist radicalism. That is, they are built four-square on the profit motive and the rights of private property. If an election draws near in which they are seen to have a fair chance of success, big business will have commerce with them, as did the German industrialists with the radical Hitler, and the Italian industrialists with the Socialist Mussolini. Big business will not like it, but it will know that cooperation is the only way to buy off heavy penalties after a revolution. Huey Long has already had a fruitful experience of alliance with the corporations he fights in Louisiana. And Father Coughlin's labor doctrines will en- dear him to big employers once they get over the hindrance of considering him a crackpot. The precedent in Europe was not that big business embraced fascism outright; it first helped it financially as a speculative investment, then went into coalition with it hoping to control it. Mussolini came into office with industrialists, Catholics, and liberals; Hitler with industrialists and conservatives. And if we are in the first stage of fascism, as we seem to be, with our romancing demagogues, our weakening government, our growing unrest, and the stabilization of our depressed living standard, a future phase would be the coalition of the Long-Coughlin elements with conservatives. Simply because fascism in Europe has a regalia which so far it lacks here, the assumption is that America is not disposed to be fascist. But young men in uniforms, marching and drilling and camping, are not fascism. And nothing is more vulnerable than the bland assumption that America is “different,” and will not go fascist because it is America. In this country fascism undoubtedly would look different from parallel movements in Europe. But in essence it would be the same. For fascism is the reorganization of society by undemocratic means to maintain the capitalist system. It is a movement, first of all, of passion and prejudice, growing out of the despair of disillusioned, impoverished people. It then is the coalition between the demagogues, who have whipped up the passion, and big business, which goes into it on the defensive. And finally it is the attempt to solve the social conflict, which democracy had failed to resolve, through the technique of dictatorship. Long and Coughlin already lead movements of passion and prejudice, without for a moment transcending the confines of capitalism.

Now they have been helped in the first stage by the utter failure of Washington to understand obvious portents. And they will be helped, too, by an accretion of muddle-headed liberals, who fail to see the graph of fascism as it has been clearly drawn in Italy and Germany. Huey Long is making many friends in the Senate, winning them by his skill as a strategist and his acumen in picking popular issues. He has become a national figure. Nothing can stop him now except the one likelihood he himself mentions on every possible occasion—that Roosevelt will keep his promises. He will not be stopped by the Administration falling into the depths of mental indolence and treating him and Father Coughlin as persons and not as personifications of the discontent in the country.

R. G. S.

Moscow Is a Dynamo

By LOUIS FISCHER

The capital of any country is important. But Moscow is a thousand times more important to the Soviet Union than London to England, or Paris to France, or Washington and New York to the United States. Moscow is heart, brain, and purse. Moscow is master, father, teacher. A business enterprise in Manchester or in Chicago or in Lyons may have an agent or two in the capital of its respective country, pay taxes to the federal government, and that is all. But Moscow builds, operates, finances, and controls every big and even every relatively small factory, railroad, bank, mine, scientific institute, and oil field in that vast country which covers one-sixth of the earth’s surface.

Not only do the army, the taxes, the foreign affairs, the post office—that is, what usually goes as “government”—center in Moscow; every economic unit, social organization, cultural enterprise, and political office has a life-line which connects it with Moscow. Moscow is the heart which pumps blood, the brain which sends messages, the dynamo which lends energy to every corner of the Soviet continent. In its turn, the body keeps the heart alive, enriches the brain, and replenishes the dynamo.

Moscow throbs. Human electricity tinges in the streets. Moscow’s tempo is racing, staccato, mad.

Green and yellow trolleys, red and yellow trolleys, green buses, yellow and red buses, giant green trolley buses. Crowds at stops, crowds in the trolleys, crowds in the buses. Young women driving trolleys. Sleeping heads on trolley window sills. Reckless driving around curves. Little traffic but much danger. Much more traffic each year. An empty taxi races by. Some hopeful Muscovites raise their hands to stop it. No use. And when it is standing still: “Are you free?” “Where do you want to go?” “To such-and-such a street.” “I have no gas”; or “I must go to the garage”; or “This is my lunch hour.” You entreat, offer an extra tip. Your child is sick. You will be late for an important conference. He shakes his head. “I am going the other way,” repeats the adamant chauffeur. At night these counter-revolutionaries collect outside the better restaurants waiting for gay couples or drunks. No ordinary passenger can entice them to leave such a post. “Engaged.” Engaged to the hope of a good fare.

Numerous trucks of Soviet and foreign manufacture. Will Rogers, the American sociologist who visited Russia recently, said: “When there are more trucks than touring cars in a city it’s a good sign.” He accorded Moscow the best sign. But no truck driver would ever allow a passenger: car to pass him. His truck-driver pride would suffer. All Muscovites have a lucky star in heaven. If they did not, they would be dead. What though felt-helmeted militiamen in white gloves execute right turns and left turns and bend