

NEW DEAL CRITIC: Rev. Charles E. Coughlin

BIOGRAPHY:



Father Charles Coughlin was taking advantage of the radio in Detroit, Michigan. Needing to gain financial support for his Church and combat the local anti-Catholic sentiment, Coughlin began delivering religious sermons over the radio in 1926 in what he coined the Radio League of the Little Flower. In his radio sermons, Coughlin increasingly began to express his own concerns about society and politics. As he did so, more desperate Americans of all religions began tuning in to hear the activist priest. Through the National Broadcasting Corporation network, Coughlin's fantastic energy reached most of the Midwestern cities. As an only child who was babied and spoiled tirelessly by his mother, Coughlin adored the attention and craved more. He learned quickly that social activist sermons would gain him much more celebrity status than religious sermons.

By 1930, Father Coughlin had transitioned his sermons almost entirely into social and political tirades. He fervently attacked communism, the disproportionate concentration of wealth, and Prohibition. He called for a change in the structure of American society to lift the nation from the Depression, but never detailed a specific solution. When he did offer solutions to economic problems, they were overly simplistic and far-fetched. He catered to the opinions of a wide stratum of the population by passionately complaining about the Depression and wealthy businessmen whom he believed brought the nation to its desperate state of affairs. Eventually, his sermons became so controversial that all the major networks refused to provide him airtime, and instead he created his own network out of Detroit. In 1934, Coughlin organized his supporters and formed the National Union for Social Justice whose main objectives were to engage in rallies for and against political candidates. Through this organization, Coughlin attacked New Deal reforms (which he deemed not radical enough) and pushed tirelessly for absolute federal control of the country's economic system. In 1932 just before his election, Roosevelt met with and charmed the popular Coughlin. Walking away from the meeting voicing his full support of the democratic candidate for President, Coughlin showered Roosevelt with adulation on his radio programs and was convinced that the President would take his advice on the economic future of the nation. Coughlin believed the New Deal programs started off well, but by 1934 he criticized them for not completely ridding the nation of its economic woes. His reverence for the President began to dwindle because he felt he had been cheated, misled, and most importantly because Roosevelt was not instituting his economic reforms. By 1935, Roosevelt successfully rid his administration of any threat posed by Coughlin. In a series of political maneuvers, the President dissolved any influence Coughlin had on incumbent Congressmen and although Coughlin remained in the public eye for many years thereafter, Americans had devoted their full support to Roosevelt above and beyond the radio priest.

SOURCE: Brinkley, Alan. *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression*. New York: Vintage Books, 1982.

PRIMARY SOURCE:

Following this preamble, these shall be the principles of social justice towards the realization of which we must strive:

- 1. I believe in liberty of conscience and liberty of education, not permitting the state to dictate either my worship to my God or my chosen avocation in life.*
- 2. I believe that every citizen willing to work and capable of working shall receive a just, living, annual wage which will enable him both to maintain and educate his family according to the standards of American decency.*
- 3. I believe in nationalizing those public resources which by their very nature are too important to be held in the control of private individuals.*
- 4. I believe in private ownership of all other property.*
- 5. I believe in upholding the right to private property but in controlling it for the public good.*
- 6. I believe in the abolition of the privately owned Federal Reserve Banking system and in the establishment of a Government owned Central Bank.*
- 7. I believe in rescuing from the hands of private owners the right to coin and regulate the value of money, which right must be restored to Congress where it belongs.*
- 8. I believe that one of the chief duties of this Government owned Central Bank is to maintain the cost of living on an even keel and arrange for the repayment of dollar debts with equal value dollars.*
- 9. I believe in the cost of production plus a fair profit for the farmer.*
- 10. I believe not only in the right of the laboring man to organize in unions but also in the duty of the Government, which that laboring man supports, to protect these organizations against the vested interests of wealth and of intellect.*
- 11. I believe in the recall of all non-productive bonds and therefore in the alleviation of taxation.*
- 12. I believe in the abolition of tax-exempt bonds.*
- 13. I believe in broadening the base of taxation according to the principles of ownership and the capacity to pay.*
- 14. I believe in the simplification of government and the further lifting of crushing taxation from the slender revenues of the laboring class.*
- 15. I believe that, in the event of a war for the defense of our nation and its liberties, there shall be a conscription of wealth as well as a conscription of men.*
- 16. I believe in preferring the sanctity of human rights to the sanctity of property rights; for the chief concern of government shall be for the poor because, as it is witnessed, the rich have ample means of their own to care for themselves.*

These are my beliefs. These are the fundamentals of the organization which I present to you under the name of the NATIONAL UNION FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE. It is your privilege to reject or to accept my beliefs; to follow me or to repudiate me.

Hitherto you have been merely an audience. Today, in accepting the challenge of your letters, I call upon everyone of you who is weary of drinking the bitter vinegar of sordid capitalism and upon everyone who is fearsome of being nailed to the cross of communism to join this Union which, if it is to succeed, must rise above the concept of an audience and become a living, vibrant, united, active organization, superior to politics and politicians in principle, and independent of them in power.

This work cannot be accomplished in one week or two weeks or in three months, perchance. But it must begin today, at this moment. It shall be a Union for the employed and the unemployed, for the old and the young, for the rich and the poor, independent of race, color or creed. It is my answer to the challenge received from the youth of the nation; my answer to those who have dared me to act!

...Tremendous opposition will be aroused against us. Obstacles will be thrown in our path to prevent our success. Every public utility shall besiege us. But all of those who still wish to leave behind them a better country than they found are invited today and this week to unite their hearts and minds for the establishment of social justice.

SOURCE: "A Series of Lectures on Social Justice," by Rev. Chas. E. Coughlin, Radio League of the Little Flower, Royal Oak Michigan, March 1935. <http://www.ssa.gov/history/fcspeech.html>.