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The Success of the Dissident Ideology

Alan Brinkley examines the “dissident ideology” in his book *Voices of Protest*. He concludes that the leaders of this ideology were doomed to fail. The inevitability of modernity and the superficial populism of their ideology precluded meaningful accomplishments. Earlier Populists had voiced similar rhetoric but also “engaged in an active effort to construct an alternative to the emerging, centralized, corporate economy.” (Brinkley, 166) The farm cooperatives, credit unions, and organized boycotts of the Populists found no parallel in the empty activism of the dissidents. Brinkley argues that the lack of substantial dissident institutions indicated a “thinly veiled sense of resignation.” (Brinkley, 166) This resignation was due to fact that modernism had become a fact of life in 1930’s America. The possibility for truly alternative forms of society that inspired people in the 1890’s was now impossible in the face of centralized banking and large-scale national bureaucracies. For these reasons, argues Brinkley, the movement was a failure. Brinkley is wrong. There are different ways to measure success. And while it is true that the leaders of the dissident ideology never realized their presidential ambitions, their collective influence on the Second New Deal must be recognized as an achievement of historic importance.

Franklin Roosevelt and the Democratic Party were afraid that Huey Long and the other leaders of the dissident ideology had enough popular support to split the ticket in 1936. To gauge the depth of his threat the DNC commissioned the first secret public-opinion poll in 1935. Long won eleven percent of the vote; a high enough percentage to compel action. The president’s previous decision to remove federal patronage from Long had not stopped his growing

popularity. FDR considered sending in federal troops to Louisiana to “restore Republican government” (Brinkley, 80) but decided against such a crude response. Ultimately, FDR decided to incorporate the dissident ideology into his platform. The celebrated turn to the left of the Second New Deal was the great success of Long and the other dissident leaders.

Many of the proposals of the Second New Deal had roots in dissident ideology. The Revenue Act of 1935, better known as the “soak the rich tax,” was designed to capitalize on the popularity of Long’s “Share the Wealth.” In the process, the majority of American people benefitted from its progressive structure and the prevention of “an unjust concentration of wealth and economic power.” (Brinkley, 80) The 1935 Social Security Act was indebted to Dr. Townsend and his efforts to subsidize the elderly. The Works Progress Administration mirrored legislation in Louisiana and the National Youth Administration found an antecedent in Long’s proposal for student financial aid. Father Coughlin’s attacks on private banking resulted in the 1935 Banking Act, which strengthened government control of the Federal Reserve System. Each of these contributions had an important impact on the country. The timing of these Acts—all were enacted in 1935—indicates that they were largely “political” in the sense that the upcoming 1936 election was a major factor. In other words, the achievement of the Second New Deal was the direct result of the Democratic Party’s fear that the followers of the dissident ideology would abandon the party.

The success of Huey Long and the other leaders was an important contribution to American politics. FDR is revered for his governance and the Acts of the Second New Deal are a major reason why. It is only just that the people whose efforts led to those Acts should share in the adulation. This recognition does not negate Brinkley’s other arguments. Modernization was

probably inevitable in the 1930's and the dissident ideology did lack effective grassroots organization. But instead of seeing the leaders as failing due to these shortcomings, their achievements are greater because they succeeded in spite of these shortcomings.