The Radio Priest of the Great Depression: A Study of Father Coughlin and the Misrepresentation of His Politics

by

Kathleen Sheehan
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# Table of Contents

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4
Chapter 1: Formation ........................................................................................................ 30
Chapter 2: “Roosevelt or Ruin” to “Roosevelt and Ruin” ............................................. 69
Chapter 3: Coughlin Charts an Independent Course ..................................................... 97
Relationship with the Catholic Church (Part II) .......................................................... Error! Bookmark not defined.
Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 155
References ..................................................................................................................... 160
Introduction

On a Sunday in December of 1934, addressing a crowd of 3,000 worshippers and approximately 30 million more listeners over the radio, Father Charles E. Coughlin declared:

Depressions have been decreed by bankers…the Baruchs, the Warburgs, the Morgans and the Mellons, the Federal Reserve bankers and every white-carnation-bedecked banker in America…A banker is not a producer. He is a leech who lives upon the artistry, the labor and the scientific development of others…What matters it if fifteen million men be idle, if factories close, if commerce freezes, if dire and abject poverty be the lot of the multitude in this land of plenty. Their racket must continue- a sordid, vicious racket that poisons the very life blood of the nation! (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 105).

Based outside of Detroit, in the Shrine of the Little Flower Church, the Irish-Catholic Father Coughlin was one of the most influential political public figures of the Depression-era United States. An early pioneer of the radio, Coughlin hosted a weekly radio program, titled *The Golden Hour*, through which he promoted his political views on the Depression. In addition to *The Golden Hour*, Coughlin also founded and directed an organization called The National Union for Social Justice and published his own weekly periodical titled Social Justice in the 1930s. Popularly known as “The Radio Priest,” he rattled the established politics of his time. A 1933 issue of Literary Digest states that “perhaps no man has stirred the country and cut as
deep between the old order and the new as Father Charles E. Coughlin, radio priest of Detroit” (“Three Priests Preach the Gospel of Social Justice,” 1933).

As illustrated by the quote above, one of the cornerstones of Father Coughlin’s message was a denunciation of the way in which the financiers of Wall Street had caused the Depression and were continuing to profit at the expense of the common people. Through advocating for average and poor Americans against the power of Wall Street, he often employed age-old anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews. His speeches are filled with allusions to Jews as “symbols of international finance, exploitation and conspiracy,” and a “tightly knit race” that undermines the national interest in their “cold-blooded” practices of hoarding gold (Cremoni, 1998, pp. 25-32). Although we often tend to think of anti-Semitism and progressive politics that advocate for the poor and as incongruent, Coughlin seamlessly demonstrates how they can be reconcilable. However, the nature of his political program cannot be entirely reduced to the elements of anti-Semitism and anti-poverty entirely, and a further exploration of the ways in which he appealed to a widespread audience Americans is necessary.

Based on the main theme of advocating for the common people, Coughlin appealed to concerns on both sides of the conventional political spectrum. Furthermore, the majority of the priest’s stances on specific issues intertwined an appeal to both left-wing and right-wing ideology so it is not possible to label his discourse on specific issues as either discretely right or left. Coughlin’s discourse resonated with the concerns of the left, with its catchphrase of “social justice,” condemnation of the deep-rooted sources of wealth and power, advocacy for the
ordinary citizens against vested interests, and the responsibility of government to secure a basic standard of life for all of its citizens. At other times, Coughlin’s message could be understood as right-wing, with its strong nationalist and anti-communist rhetoric, emphasis on isolationism and aversion to refugees, attention to select hidden adversaries rather than an economic system rife with imbalance, and focus on controlling money rather than dismantling capitalist structures themselves (Brinkley, 1983, p. 121).

A vast amount of books and articles has been written about Father Coughlin. This thesis offers a historiography of the way in which Father Coughlin’s political program has been portrayed, centered around the way in two authors address the concept that being anti-Semitic and working for progressive change are incompatible. There are two biographies of Coughlin central to this project. First, there is *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*, originally published in 1982 by American political historian Alan Brinkley. Second, there is *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio*, published in 1996 by sociologist Donald Warren. The political beliefs of Brinkley and Warren greatly inform how the two historians portray Coughlin’s politics. As evidenced by his work, such as *The End Of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* in addition to his biography of Coughlin, Brinkley strictly adheres to liberalism with its value of accountable institutions and belief in progress. He reveres President Franklin Roosevelt as the standard bearer of American liberalism. Donald Warren was solidly left-wing, an assertion which is supported not only by his interpretation of Coughlin, but also his other book on the subject of American political alienation and
neighborhood organizing.

For Warren and Brinkley, Coughlin’s political program poses an obstacle because it challenges their respective foundational political beliefs and conception of political figures with whom he associated. Central to this obstacle is the way in which Coughlin intertwined virulent anti-Semitism with a call for progressive change on behalf of the poor, given that the two are not compatible under the respective political ideologies of Warren and Brinkley. Given that Brinkley adheres to liberalism and Warren to a left-wing ideology, address this apparently incompatible nature between progressive politics and bigotry in ways that both compliment and contradict one another.

In order for Brinkley to uphold his tenets of American liberalism, he strategically depicts Coughlin’s beliefs in two different periods: Phase 1 was when Coughlin worked for progressive, change and accountable institutions. Phase 2 was when Coughlin was an irrational anti-Semite. In Brinkley’s mind, the two are mutually exclusive: When Coughlin held progressive Brinkley does not believe he was a public anti-Semite, and later in Coughlin’s career, when the priest asserted his anti-Semitic views, Brinkley considers him to longer be progressive. Brinkley’s depiction of Coughlin can largely be attributed to his goal of upholding President Roosevelt as the standard bearer of American liberalism.

To give some context of the era, for the first years of the 1930s, Coughlin’s and Roosevelt’s supporters overlapped and the two public figures themselves had a general political alliance with shared ideas for economic reform that would “drive the money changers from the temple” going into Roosevelt’s first term. In order to keep
Roosevelt and the American public who worked for progressive change and accountable institutions separate from antisemitism, Brinkley needs to say that Coughlin was not an anti-Semite while aligned with that coalition.

Brinkley’s other ideological hang-up is that once Roosevelt got into office and did not follow through with his promise of substantial reform, Coughlin repeatedly criticized Roosevelt from the left and called for more progressive change. Brinkley does not want to validate any critiques of Roosevelt for not going far enough to help the United States out of the Depression. Thus, Brinkley seeks to completely delegitimize Coughlin’s political program and the supporters that chose Coughlin over Roosevelt by painting the priest as a crazy, irrelevant bigot.

Only after Coughlin’s break with Roosevelt does it become acceptable, and in fact necessary, for Brinkley to disregard Coughlin’s political program and his followers. However, Brinkley also recognizes that depicting Coughlin as making a complete switch overnight from being an influential figure who worked for progressive change to irrelevant, virulent anti-Semite is a bit too big of a stretch. Therefore, Brinkley seeks to point out ways in which Coughlin had signs of being personally crazy the entire time, even if his politics reflected progressive change. This strategy can generally be understood as a strategy to psychologize Coughlin as a way to avoid dealing with political views that find incompatible. To clarify, as a liberal, Brinkley is not concerned with the fact that Coughlin appealed to some right-wing concerns in general, but rather that the priest held bigoted, anti-Semitic views and was once aligned with Roosevelt.
In contrast to Brinkley, Warren believes that Coughlin was an anti-Semite for the entirety of his career. Warren does not want to admit that Father Coughlin, someone who spouted virulent antisemitism, could also effectively resonate with progressive concerns, despite the reconcilable nature of the two. Overall, Warren’s goal is to keep progressive politics innocent of antisemitism. To accomplish that goal, Warren associates Coughlin’s political program with the right and seeks to understate all left-wing themes from Coughlin’s discourse. The author manipulates and exaggerates this Coughlin’s anti-communist message, and therefore leads the reader to believe that because he disliked elements of the far-left, he was necessarily right-wing. It goes without saying that not every progressive is anti-Semitic, nor is every anti-Semitic person a progressive. Coughlin is a perfect example of how it is definitely possible to be consistently and anti-communist and anti-Semitic while simultaneously resonating with progressive ideals.

In addition to the issue of anti-communism, Warren also exaggerates elements of Coughlin’s discourse and political career that are popularly considered to be right-wing, such as association with “big money,” nationalism, and isolationism. It is not important if these beliefs and characteristics exclusively belong to the right-wing, but rather that Warren portrays Coughlin’s take on them as juxtaposing progressive values of tolerance and help for the poor. Warren often uses these aforementioned issues as “markers” to lead the reader to connect the dots and associate Coughlin as a right-wing bigot, and completely divorced from progressive ideals. Like Brinkley, when all else fails, he psychologizes Coughlin and to strategically sidestep a discussion of his politics.
As previously alluded to, both Warren and Brinkley employ a variety of manipulative strategies in order to portray Coughlin to fit into a framework that does not contradict their own historical and political grounding. The authors utilized a variety of methods, including selective editing and excluding certain phrases from a speech; purposely failing to mention that Coughlin’s policies lay to the left of President Franklin Roosevelt; the complete absence of large sections; and finally, dramatically understating/downplaying parts of Coughlin’s statements in their effort to avoid fully discussing the left-wing components of Coughlin’s discourse. All of these methods fall into the umbrella category of omission.

The other strategy utilized by both Warren and Brinkley is to rip Coughlin out of the realm of politics and instead psychologize him so they do not have to consider his political actions and statements. In psychologizing the priest, the authors focus on his personality traits rather than ideology as a way to depict his motivations for saying or doing specific things. The most common form of psychologizing encountered is to depoliticize his efforts for political advancement by attributing them to his egotistical nature and campaign for power and fame rather than wanting to effect political change. Another common strategy of psychologizing is to write off Coughlin’s condemnation of the actions of another public figure as an unwarranted personal attack, driven by his cruel and savage mentality, instead of explaining his legitimate reasons for doing so. Oftentimes, they hone in on the interpersonal relationships with other political figures and not the politics themselves. By and large, this strategy of psychologizing Coughlin stages an attack on the man himself, not the politics.
Beyond Coughlin’s two cornerstone biographies by Warren and Brinkley, this thesis incorporates several other analyses on Coughlin to a lesser degree. First, there is *Father Coughlin, the radio priest, of the Shrine of the Little Flower. An account of the life, work and message of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin*, by Ruth Mugglebee, a reporter for the *Boston Globe*. Written in 1933, Mugglebee’s biography is meant to be an easy read, and is not a highly academic piece of work. For the first 23 chapters of the book, Mugglebee offers an overtly pious depiction of Father Coughlin, portraying him primarily as a religious “disseminator of Christian principles” (pp. 196-197). The interesting part is that Mugglebee added an additional two chapters to the end of the book in May of 1935 that give an extremely negative depiction of Coughlin (p. 321). Given that Mugglebee was part of a coalition that endorsed Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration under the New Deal as the “Most Just Program in Ages,” and praises Roosevelt repeatedly in the two additional chapters, it is beyond reasonable doubt that Mugglebee added the chapters in defense of Roosevelt (Mugglebee, 1933, pp. 324-387; “JEWISH WOMEN HEAR PLEA TO AID N. R. A.,” 1933, p. 8). Mugglebee is similar to Brinkley in that she utilizes the technique of psychologizing Coughlin to dismiss him as crazy and unimportant to politics after he breaks with Roosevelt.

Another text worth mentioning is *Father Charles E. Coughlin; an authorized biography*, by Louis B. Ward, published in 1933. Indicated by the word “authorized” in the title, this biography of Coughlin also gives a very flattering account of the priest. Ward was a close associate of Coughlin, serving as a lobbyist for Coughlin in Washington, running in the Senator in the Michigan primaries, and heading
Coughlin’s *Social Justice* publication at one period. The book was published largely as a refutation of allegations against Coughlin for hypocritical or shady financial dealings (Warren, 1996, pp.185-186). Ward’s entire text and Mugglebee’s first 23 chapters can even be considered hagiographies, considering the way in which they load him with lavish praise and describe him as carrying out the word of God.

This thesis also heavily incorporates “The Political and Economic Program of American Fascism” a dissertation by Victor C. Ferkiss in 1954. Ferkiss is a useful perspective to have because while he does not go into extended detail, he accurately recognizes the way in which Coughlin appealed to the left while spouting anti-Semitism. Another biography, *Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower* written by Sheldon Marcus in 1973 provides historical information but relatively little analysis or opinion on Coughlin.

Looking at Coughlin, it becomes clear that it is possible to simultaneously draw on left-wing and right-wing concerns far more easily than is often acknowledged. When employed, this blend of left and right is also far more powerful than is usually recognized. This method of appealing to left-wing and right-wing ideals has a name; it has often been called fascism. In contemporary conversation, the word “fascist” is often meaningless. Most often, it serves as a generic insult or pejorative term, and, on the occasion that it is employed in a political context, it usually denotes authoritarian tendencies. This later utilization also does not get at the heart of fascism. Back in the 1930s, the word signified an actual set of political beliefs and Father Coughlin was often accused of being a fascist. This thesis uses a miniscule f in fascism to denote fascist political thought, rather than a capital F,
which is only used to reference specific fascist political regimes who have actually been in power (Ferkiss, 1954, p. 10).

There is no doubt that components of Bryan’s 1890s agrarian populism also lent themselves to Coughlin’s ideology. Similar elements include plebiscitary democracy, a strong aversion to the eastern financial sector accompanied by an undercurrent of anti-Semitism, and a focus on inflationary monetary policies (Ferkiss, 1957, pp. 350-357).

The point of this thesis is not to debate if Father Coughlin was a fascist or a populist. The fact that there are numerous definitions of fascism makes that project extremely long and largely futile. Instead, the main takeaway should be that Father Coughlin’s political program scrambled traditional definitions of left and right, and that it shares a common core with fascism. The purpose of this thesis is to understand what a program of fascist political thought means in an American context and how we continuously tend to misunderstand it.

Many other noteworthy Americans held similar political views to Father Coughlin. Examples include Henry Ford, the captain of the automobile industry; Huey “The Kingfish” Long, the governor and then senator of Louisiana who developed a program called “Share the Wealth”; Charles Lindbergh Jr., the pilot who took the Spirit of St. Louis across the Atlantic and also railed against American intervention in World War II; Ezra Pound, a poet; and Lawrence Dennis, a diplomat and theorist. Out of all these American fascists, Father Charles Coughlin is the best one to study. His national fame placed him and in conversation with the most prominent elected officials and at the center of current affairs of the day. He had his
own weekly radio show and periodical, which means that he provided public commentary on almost every pertinent political occurrence. Above all, the element that makes him the most useful American fascist to analyze is that he never ran a corporation or held elected office, and thus never had to compromise his true ideology in the face of greater political concerns. When threatened with censorship, Coughlin chose to stay silent rather than modify his public discourse. In effect, Coughlin was a pure ideologue who produced wealth of spoken and written material.

**Father Coughlin’s Ideology: An Overview**

Before diving into a study of Father Coughlin’s controversial career, it is essential to have a general understanding of his ideological grounding and his position on different political issues. In many ways, his stances on issues tend to overlap with one another, which will become evident upon reading the next section as well as during this study as a whole.

### i. The Papal Encyclicals:

While the length and scope of this thesis does not permit an in-depth analysis of Father Coughlin’s theology, it is nevertheless necessary to understand the priest’s religious foundation. Father Coughlin’s social ideology was greatly informed by the papal encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI. References to the two documents can be found throughout Coughlin’s speeches and written work. The two encyclicals called
upon Catholics to reflect upon the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas in light of the unequal economic conditions of the era (Brinkley, 1983, pp. 62-63). *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of the Working Classes*), issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, is largely considered to be the foundational text of modern Catholic social thought. In the context of industrial revolution and political upheaval, Pope Leo XIII focused on the necessity of a balance between labor and capital as well as the role of the government in guaranteeing “public well-being,” chiefly of the poor. The encyclical stressed the need to remedy “The misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class” and the dignity of labor. It supported the right to private property while simultaneously denouncing unbounded capitalism, and supported the right to organize in unions although it and condemned socialism (Leo XIII, 1891).

Following up on Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical from four decades earlier, Pius XI released *Quadragesimo Anno* (*The Fortieth Year*) in 1931. The document focused not specifically on the conditions of workers, but rather expounded his vision of the ethical necessities in the context of the current social and economic order and stated the evils of both unrestrained capitalism as well as socialism (Pius XI, 1931). The Depression, as well as the publication of *Quadragesimo Anno* had revitalized the Catholic-social justice movement, but no other Catholic of the era would become as influential in the political arena as Father Charles E. Coughlin (Brinkley, pp. 61-62). It is important to clarify that the priest’s mainly focused on the social values from the papal encyclicals of the papal encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI, and not the strict
traditional doctrines or scripture. It is beyond doubt that Coughlin’s cornerstone of social justice was rooted in the social ideas of the aforementioned papal encyclicals.

**ii. Role of the International Financiers:**

Coughlin believed that the United States was no longer a true democracy, but was instead being controlled “by the capitalist and the plutocrat” (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 55). Referring to “financiers who wrecked our country,” Father Coughlin contended that the bankers, with their hoarded wealth, had precipitated the Depression and were continuing to perpetuate unjust economic conditions (p.33). He condemned the practices of the “predatory capitalists” of Wall Street who were responsible for the poverty, suffering and unemployment of Americans nationwide (Brinkley, 1983, p. 42) Father Coughlin abhorred that these distant centers of wealth and power were diminishing both local economies and the accompanying local autonomy of Americans through their lewd financial practices. Rather than being located in distant locations, inaccessible to ordinary citizens, he advocated for power should be located within local communities so that that ordinary citizens could regain control over their own destinies (p.67). Stemming from his distaste for inaccessible power, Coughlin’s advocacy for the common laborer and the poor was almost always coupled by a denouncement of these financiers. Upon tuning into a broadcast by the radio priest, it was likely that you would hear him railing against the bankers, referring to them as “money changers,” or calling out well-known individuals of Wall Street such as J.P. Morgan, Rothschild, or Baruch (p. 69).
Moreover, Coughlin detested that the American bankers of Wall Street were linked to networks of foreign capitalists and saw these connections through as a dangerous web of power and wealth. He saw them as willingly undermining the best interest of the nation and exploiting average citizens through their vast international financial networks all to make a personal profit (Brinkley, 1983, p. 69). The “harsh, cruel and grasping ways of wicked men who first concentrated wealth into the hands of a few, then dominated states” had to be stopped if America wanted any chance at prosperity (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 17). As previously stated, Coughlin’s of capitalist finance tended to be intertwined with a rationalization for anti-Semitism (Ferkiss, 1954, pp. 32-33)

iii. Productive and Unproductive Enterprise:

One of the reasons that Coughlin hated bankers was because he did not see them as productive members of the nation. The act of charging interest implies that money is productive, but, he believed that money is not productive. Bankers’ money was “a pure fiction, a figment of the people’s imagination” because that bankers “manufactured” it themselves through activities such as charging of interest, and lending money that they did not actually have in their possession (Coughlin, 1935/1971, pp. 101-105).

Lending money was acceptable in some circumstances. As Coughlin explained, the “Church does not condemn borrowing and interest” in general, but condemns “usury which is identified with fruitless debts—with unproductive debts—
whereby the lender grows riche, not upon the prosperity of the borrower, but upon the misery and his economic exhaustion” (1934, p. 66). Thus, Coughlin supported the “thousands of honest little local bankers” who provided the necessary financial systems to strengthen communities (p. 17). The purpose of capitalism was to lend money for productive activities, such as for launching a small industry that would provide a decent livelihood for workers and make a product that the nation needed (Coughlin, 1935/1971 pp. 101-105). Originally, industry was a productive enterprise, but many large industries had become unproductive through their wedding to finance and concerned with making vast amounts of profits while workers suffered (p. 30).

More than anything, the money lent by bankers for war purposes and the accompanying interest that taxpayers were obliged to contribute, was not acceptable, because the funds went to destructive activities (Mugglebee, 1933, pp. 327-328). Generally, the banker was “a leech who lives upon the artistry, the labor and the scientific development of others” because they made their living off of other peoples’ hard earned money. Coughlin was specifically concerned with the fact that bankers made enormous profits off of the deposits of the common laborer and farmer (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 101-105)

iv. Revaluation:

Monetary policies were the main pillar of Coughlin’s discourse, fact which is unsurprising considering that the peak years of his career coincided with the Depression. While his specific plan for economic reform varied throughout his career, it rested on the same consistent belief: “the problem of the Depression was a problem
of money and banking; only by reforming the currency and restructuring the nation’s financial institutions could the government hope to restore prosperity” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 48). He saw the scarcity of currency in circulation, or, as he referred to it, the “cursed famine of currency money” as the main problem and believed that the solution was for the government to issue more currency (Coughlin, 1933, p. 28).

Coughlin had different ideas throughout his career on the best way to increase the amount of currency in circulation, varying between the revaluation of gold, changing to a silver standard, and fiat currency issued by the United States, which were historically called “greenbacks.” Regardless of the method, revaluation and the accompanying increase of currency in circulation would cause inflation, making it easier for debtors to pay back loans and other mortgages to creditors. Revaluation would also pressure the wealthy into spending their “hoarded dollars” and generally stimulate the economy (Coughlin, 1933, p. 12; Brinkley, 1983, p. 48).

Although Coughlin’s primary focus was industrial laborers, he also recognized that farmers were suffering due to depressed prices. The lack of currency in circulation meant that people had less money to purchase goods produced by farmers, causing a surplus of farm goods and the inability for farmers to make a living (Coughlin, 1934, p. 16). In general, the radio believed that farmers should be able to cover the “cost of production plus [make] a fair profit.” Inflation would benefit the farmer by enabling people to buy more products from them and raise the prices of their products (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 121). It did not matter to him if you were a farmer or laborer- the main point was that he wanted there to be “adequate currency for the benefit of all our people and not for the chosen few” (Coughlin, 1934, p. 34).
One thing that stayed undeniably consistent throughout Coughlin’s career was his concern for the well-being of debtors, who he saw as the common person, and not the creditors, who he saw as bankers, of society.

Coughlin monetary proposals have been criticized on the basis that they were an oversimplification of the solution necessary to reform the economic troubles of the era problems (Reeve, 1943, p. 196). Nevertheless, he recognized that radical monetary reform which would help the common person was necessary, something that many officials of the era were not willing to admit.

v. Government and a Central Bank:

While Coughlin recognized that government had contributed to many of the socioeconomic problems of the 1930s, he also maintained that it was essential to the solution. Government was the only force strong enough to project the people from the “institutions of the modern economy” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 71). The “privately owned Federal Reserve bank system” should be abolished, and a “Government owned Central Bank” should take its place, controlled by elected representatives who would not use it to benefit their special interests. As Coughlin proclaimed in a fiery speech, “Take the federal bank and make it accountable to the people.” Indeed, making the state and economy accountable to the people, was a central theme of Coughlin’s discourse. (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 121).

While simultaneously supporting the role of the federal government and calling for a Central bank, he also promoted the “simplification of government”
(Coughlin, lectures 1935/1971, p. 121) Although one could imagine how the increasing the scope of federal apparatuses while also wanting the government to be simplified could be contradictory in practice, Coughlin did not see it this way. The priest hoped that the government could operate largely as a passive force that protected the individual and strengthened the economies of communities without being intrusive on the daily lives of common citizens (Brinkley, 1983, p. 71).

vi. **Plebiscitary Democracy:**

Father Coughlin believed that the government, in addition had been captured by special interests and described the United States government as a “slave” of “modern capitalism” (Coughlin, 1935/1971, pp. 33-44). As Brinkley summarizes, the solution was to return the government to the “true will of the people,” a group he often loosely equated with laborers, farmers, small merchants, and above all, not financiers (Brinkley, 1983, pp. 153-154). Coughlin declared that it was the government’s responsibility to ensure that we “prosper as a people and not as a privileged class” (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 121). In effect, Coughlin was advocating for a plebiscitary democracy, in which the population would “exercise the right of national self-determination” and big finance would not use as a tool to amass personal profits. As described by Ferkiss, Coughlin’s contended that “Public power will protect the national interest against the selfish few” (1957, p. 353). “The people have given a new mandate for social justice” and other similar affirmations of the political power
of the people can be easily found throughout Coughlin’s discourse (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 121).

The priest’s beliefs on the regulation of the currency was one such issue that reflects his general adherence to plebiscitary democracy. For instance, he declared, “recover the people’s power over money- currency money and credit money” (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 106). More generally, “The right to coin and regulate the value of money” belonged not in the hands of bankers, but in Congress, the branch of government that is the most subject to the will of the people (p. 121).

vii. Nationalization of Resources:

Coughlin saw that selfish interests often dominated the industries which provided indispensable services and resources to the nation, resulting in inefficient delivery or exorbitant prices that the common person could not afford. This was partially due to the fact that finance had started to dominate big industry. Given the corruption of industry, certain public necessities had to be nationalized and put under government oversight to protect them from the selfish few who were trying to undermine the interests of the nation as a whole (Ferkiss, p. 353). Overall, the priest called for limited nationalization of shared elements of the nation and not nationalization of every sector of the economy because he still upheld private property and wanted individuals to have autonomy over their day-to-day life.
viii. Private Property and Wealth:

Besides the nationalization of certain major industries, Coughlin believed in
the private ownership of property as long as it did not impede on the “public good”
(Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 28). The government should set limits on the profits of
industry, and therefore free competition, so that “the owner of an industry will so
operate his factory” and create so much wealth that he ends up using “his private
property to the detriment of society” (p. 52). By this, Coughlin meant that individuals
should not own so much wealth or property that it infringed upon the ability of others
to have their own property. Through an illustrative metaphor, Coughlin explained that
“by the fact that I own an automobile, it does not argue that I may drive it on the
wrong side of the street or park the car on your front lawn” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 68).
Private ownership of property needed to be “widespread” and not concentrated in the
hands of the few (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 28). The bottom line was that the “sanctity
of human rights” was far more important than the “sanctity of property rights” and the
government’s primary concern should always be for the poor (p. 121).

ix. Labor and Wages:

Being an Irish-Catholic priest in the Depression-era Detroit, the first and
consistently largest demographic group to follow Coughlin were German and Irish
industrial laborers who resided in urban areas. Coughlin declared “that every citizen
willing to work and capable of working shall receive a just and living annual wage
which will enable him to maintain and educate his family according to the standards
of American decency (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 121). While focusing on a living
wage, Coughlin also believed that the laborer should not just receive a wage, but that there should be a partnership between the laborer and the industrialist so that the former also benefitted alongside the latter (p. 27). Due to the fact that capitalism was continuing to exploit the laborer with low wages and others were left without work, Coughlin insisted that the government should offer some type of “credit” for those who wanted to work but were not able to find a living wage (Tull, 1965, p. 55).

Coughlin did not direct any blame down towards the lower classes themselves for being unemployed. Never did he charge the unemployed laborers with the crime of being lazy or lacking thrift (Coughlin, 1933, p. 5). Nor did the priest believe that the farmers were to blame for not being able to sell their harvests or getting their farms confiscated, explaining that “the American agricultural class is too industrious to suffer this charge” (p. 28). Instead, Father Coughlin directed the blame upwards towards the greedy financiers for orchestrating the Depression causing widespread unemployment, or as he referred to it, “forced idleness” (p. 137). Right-wing discourse has a tendency to blame the lower-classes for the poor state of the economy, and given that Coughlin drew from right-wing themes, the fact that he excluded the American lower classes from blame is particularly important to note. The one exception to his exclusive attack on the upper class is that he was worried that refugees would take resources away from the struggling American laboring class.

x. Unions:

Coughlin believed it was not “only the right of the laboring man to organize in unions” (16 principles) but “it is your duty to establish vocational groups” (lectures
p.54). The government, specifically the Department Labor, should protect labor and facilitate its negotiations with the owners of industry (16 principles, lectures p. 54) Due to the social nature of industry, there should be a cooperative rather than antagonistic relationship between labor and the owners of industry through negotiation of disputes (p. 27 of lectures). Negotiation would make strikes and lock-outs unnecessary, because they tended to cause “more harm than common good.” Nevertheless, if the system of negotiation failed to work, then it was acceptable for united labor to refuse to work (p. 54). He was also worried that

xi. Nationalism and Isolationism:

Father Coughlin highly valued the sovereignty of the nation, independent from foreign interference, and believed it did not have any international obligations. As noted by Ferkiss, Coughlin’s brand American fascist nationalism had no “pseudo-mystic exaltation of the State” or imperialist goals, two features common in the traditional European variety of fascism. Coughlin preferred to stay “aloof from foreign affairs entirely,” including foreign wars, imperialist ventures, or international organizations, such as the World Court (Ferkiss, 1957, p. 352). The priest believed that international endeavors is often influenced by “supranational conspirators” and selfish economic interests (p. 351).

Having a career bookended by the two world wars, his nationalist social justice concerns pertained to the damage international financiers had done to the nation in WWI and the inter-war period as the potential damage the international financiers
could do in WWII. For instance, during a sermon, Coughlin listed all the ways in which Wall Street had profited from U.S. entry into World War I. He claimed that the primary reason the U.S. had entered the first world war was at the behest of the international financiers in order to “save the finances of the Morgans” and were able to profit off of the sale of munitions (Coughlin, 1934, p. 39). The core of Coughlin’s nationalist and isolationist thought was this: “We return to the thought expressed by George Washington- keeping out of foreign entanglements—minding our own business and taking care of our own people and our own money” (p. 40). His other qualm with entering a war or an international organization is that it would divert the resources of the nation from helping its own citizens.

He also railed against people in the United States who adhered to the foreign “isms,” namely communism and fascism, because he saw these doctrines and a threat to American values. Furthermore, he preached that all American citizens should adhere to Christian values in order to be patriotic. One did not have to practice the religion of Christianity, but should nevertheless practice Christian values.

xii. Communism:

Father Coughlin abhorred Communism for both religious and political reasons. He saw Communism, and its founder Karl Marx, as inseparable from atheism and therefore the natural opponent to Christianity. This philosophy led Coughlin to instruct listeners to “Choose to-day! It is either Christ or the red fog of communism” (1935/1971, p. 35). Coughlin also believed that the atheism under
communism propagated Christian immorality, and interpreted the rising divorce rates as a direct consequence of the effects of communism, but was generally more concerned with sociopolitical issues of a bigger magnitude. He viewed communism as the modern form of socialism, and often used the two terms interchangeably. The radio priest also labeled the Soviet government as the modern source from which communism radiated, and had a particular aversion to the Soviet state, most likely stemming from their anti-clerical practices (“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, pp. 26, 31).

From Coughlin’s perspective, communism was a significant threat to the unit of the Christian family, or as he referred to it, “the primeval law of domestic organization,” (“Investigation of Communist Propaganda,” 1930, p. 27). This idea stemmed from Coughlin’s other conclusion that “all property, all children, all men and women, all intellectual and material goods are the possession of the state” under the system of public ownership of communism. Not only did communism seek to destroy the faith in the higher religious power of God, but through state control and lack of private property it also destroyed the local autonomy and infringed upon the true will of the people. Coughlin disliked communism for the same reason he disliked international bankers: both had inaccessible, distant locus of power that inaccessible to the ordinary American citizen. The radio priest believed that the communist state becomes “the absolute master of the disposed communist citizen” and strips individuals of “the right of choice, the right of ordering one’s own life” (p. 16). He understood the power of communist state as originating at the top and from there the state subsequently imposed its order downward onto the people. Only by taking a
bottom-up, and not a top-down, approach to state power could the state be truly representative of the people. Sovereignty had to first be located within the home, and then these familial units would construct the state (Belloc, p. 15). Above all, Coughlin believed that as an international movement, communism undermined national sovereignty.

Coughlin’s condemnation of communism was often accompanied by a critique of the underlying force pushing laborers towards communism: unrestricted capitalism. The priest recognized that it was logical for laborers to find communism appealing under the unjust economic conditions of the Depression (“Investigation of Communist Propaganda, 1930, p. 29). Holding avaricious and cruel industrialists and capitalists responsible for the fact that many were embracing Communism, Coughlin proclaimed, “Let not the workingman be able to say that he is driven into the ranks of socialism by the inordinate and grasping greed of the manufacturer” (p.34). He “readily admitted” that “the condition of our laboring class needs much improvement,” and Catholics had a responsibility to work for reform (p. 41).

xiii. Anti-Semitism:

Employing age-old stereotypes, Coughlin believed that Jews were intrinsically linked to hoarding money and gold, and through their abusive, unproductive charging of interest, were modern day usurers. He also relied on the trope that that “Jews maintained tribal loyalties to one another that superseded their loyalties to the nations in which they lived” (Brinkley, 1983, pp. 116-117). When directly referencing or alluding to the evil nature of “Jewry,” Coughlin was not concerned with the religion
of Judaism, but rather secular values that he believed had permeated the Jewish culture and were now inherently linked to it, which is a common form of anti-Semitism. Thus, Coughlin’s denunciation of international financiers was ripe with anti-Semitism. He frequently referred to the evils of the “international bankers,” “Wall Street,” and “money changers,” which were all terms that served as code words for “Jew” and the international power he saw them as wielding (Warren, 1996, p. 134). He had the habit of calling out Jewish bankers by name, and even when he did not state that names of Jewish bankers directly, other assertions made by Coughlin imply that he was nevertheless implying that the values of “Jewry” were behind the actions of these non-Jewish bankers. Through his radio program, Coughlin often offered detailed histories about how Jewish bankers were the “causal factor” behind many events in history. He saw them as the hidden forces responsible for pulling the strings and orchestrating great economic abuses of history against the common people (Ferkiss, 1957, p. 351). Coughlin’s anti-Semitic rhetoric was similar to that of the Midwestern agrarian populists of the 1890s, who decried Wall Street and the “Jewish control of international finance” (Brinkley, pp. 116-117). It is also possible that Coughlin’s anti-Semitism was fueled by a modernized version of the general idea in the Catholic Church that Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus Christ (Cremoni, 2010, p. 35)

Although Coughlin was undoubtly an anti-Semite, he always vehemently denied that he even once said anything anti-Semitic. He claimed that he was not against Jews as a group, but only against the rich bankers, who happened to be Jewish. He also often sought to differentiate between the “good religious Jews,” who
were presumably poor, and the evil, wealthy, gold-hoarding Jews of Wall Street (Coughlin, p.38, 1939a). The vast majority of Coughlin’s anti-Semitism was directed “up” towards elite Jewish people, and not “down” towards the common Jew.

However, he also linked Jews to communism, largely related to ideas about the Soviet Union. Upon first glance it might seem contradictory that he associated Jews with both finance and communism, sometimes in overlapping ways, he saw a connection between high finance and communism: they both valued money, albeit in different ways, rather than any greater ideals of nation or religion. Under this general concept, Coughlin explained that he considered Jews to be naturalists, which meant that they were materialists who were not interested in any greater spiritual power (Coughlin, 1939b). Therefore, the priest’s use of the word “atheist” can often be read as a synonym for “Jew” (Cremoni, 2010, p. 35). Furthermore, both communism and finance are largely linked to internationalism, which touches on a reiteration of the age-old trope of tribalism: Jews are a “closely woven minority in their racial tendencies,” who hold allegiance to no nation. Stemming from this idea, Coughlin saw Jews as a threat to the nation (Coughlin, p.36, 1939a).

Chapter 1: Formation

Charles Edward Coughlin was born in 1891 into a ardently religious Catholic family of Irish ancestry. The Coughlins lived in a working-class neighborhood of Hamilton, Ontario (Mugglebee, 1933, pp.1, 6). Charles’s father, Tom Coughlin, originally from Indiana, served as a stoker on the Great Lakes before moving to Ontario. In Ontario Tom Coughlin became the sexton of St. Mary’s Cathedral and married Amelia Mahoney Coughlin, a seamstress (Swing, 1934, p.
Although the Coughlin’s were not wealthy by any means, Charles grew up with financial stability. Tom and Amelia had undeniable working-class roots, and they raised Charles in a simple, middle-class household “with enough of everything and not too much of anything” (Mugglebee, 1933, p. 9). Later in life, Charles would observe individuals who were much less fortunate trying to survive in dire economic conditions, primarily Detroit autoworkers during the Depression, and become inspired to speak out the abuses of capitalism.

Considering the religiosity of his family, Charles Coughlin was destined for priesthood from the moment he was born. The Coughlin’s modest home occupied the land directly next to St. Mary’s Cathedral of Ontario. More important in young Charles’ Catholic upbringing than the location of St. Mary’s was the religious dedication practiced by both of his parents (Brinkley, 1983, p.38). Mugglebee (1933) and Ward (1996) explain that when Amelia was in labor with Charles, a group of nuns prayed at her bedside for her to have a son that would enter the clergy, although Carpenter (1998) doubts the veracity of this detail and believes this was a fictional embellishment added by the authors (Warren, p. 9; Mugglebee, p. 1; Carpenter, 1998, p. 27). Charles’ personal interest in being a man of the cloth became apparent when, at the age of four, he announced to his parents that he was going to be a priest (Brinkley, 1983, p.86).

Drawing upon the age-old cliché, Warren (1996) and Brinkley (1983) use Coughlin’s childhood relationship with his mother to take their first crack at psychologizing him. On Charles’ first day of school, Amelia sent her son to his first day of school with his “long hair in curls and dressed…in an immaculate blue and
white kilt,” which, as mentioned by Mugglebee, Amelia considered to be “an integral part of a well-dressed boy’s wardrobe” and was not an uncommon apparel for the time and place (Brinkley, 1983, p. 39; Mugglebee, 1933, p. 36). Apparently, a Christian Brother at the school asked Amelia to dress her son in less girlish clothing. Warren and Brinkley use this incident to epitomize Coughlin’s relationship with his mother and describe the way this relationship will impact him for the rest of his life. Warren writes that “there was something more than mere doting overprotectiveness by his mother…she wanted to control the most mundane details of his life” (1973, p. 9). Brinkley adds to this assertion by stating that Coughlin’s relationship created insecurity about his masculinity. He writes that there were “two important threads of Coughlin’s personality:” The “brashness” as an “implicit rebuff” “to his mother’s efforts to pamper and refine him” “at the same time an expectation of constant…approval,” which made him angry when he was not “the recipient of acclaim” (1983, p. 38). These descriptions of Coughlin “set the stage,” so to speak, for the claims that both Warren and Brinkley will make about Coughlin’s “frenetic” personality and need for approval in his adult life. This early element of psychoanalysis enables the authors to more smoothly transition into psychologizing the motive behind Coughlin’s political actions as an adult, in order so that they can avoid addressing the complexities and implications of his politics.

Under the instruction of Catholic educators for all of his schooling, Coughlin first attended St. Mary’s School in Hamilton, then when on to St. Michael’s of the University of Toronto, where, at only 20 years of age, he received a degree in Honor
Philosophy. This last degree is roughly comparable to an American B.A. with honors (“Father Coughlin (Pronounced Kawglin),” 1934, p. 34).

After he first contemplating pursuing a career in either the Church, politics, or sociology, Coughlin settled on the first option and then enrolled in St. Basil’s Seminary, where he was ordained as a priest in 1916 at the age of 24 (Tull, 1965, p. 24). The first teaching job held by Coughlin as an ordained priest was at Assumption college in Ontario (Mugglebee, 1933, p. 97). Concurrent with his teaching position, Coughlin served as the pastor for two parishes in Detroit, located a short trip across the Detroit River from his teaching position (Warren, 1996, p. 12).

In Detroit, Coughlin gained local popularity and a modest reputation as a public speaker. The colloquial and direct style of Coughlin’s sermons, rather than conventional language people were accustomed to hearing from priests, appealed to Catholics and non-Catholics alike (Warren, 1996, p. 13). The way in which Coughlin’s early message and oratory style appealed to listeners of various religions foreshadowed the widespread influence his later political radio broadcasts would have on the American public. In addition to being a skilled public speaker, Coughlin had an attention-grabbing physical presence. Fortune magazine ran a short biography of Father Charles Coughlin in 1934 and described him as “a gray-haired, energetic priest, forty-two years old, who weighs over 185 pounds and looks like the pious kind of football coach” (“Father Coughlin (Pronounced “Kawglin”),” 1934, p. 34). In summary, the priest’s dynamism and ability to attract listeners became clear in the first few years of his career, but neither he himself nor anyone else had any idea of the national influence the next two decades would bring him.
Under the orders of The Right Reverend Michael James Gallagher, D.D., Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Detroit, Father Coughlin moved to the United States in 1923 and spent the following two years assigned to a handful of small parishes in the greater Detroit area (Mugglebee, 1933, p. 122). Given that Tom Coughlin was born in the United States, Charles Coughlin was already an American citizen through his father. (Brinkley, 1983, pp. 84, 88). It was not until 1926 that Father Coughlin settled in Royal Oak, Michigan, a small residential town from which he would launch his legendary radio program. In 1926, Royal Oak was a dreary, largely protestant suburb of Detroit that was quickly becoming the home of many workers involved in Detroit’s booming auto industry (Tull, 1965, p. 2).

Combining their efforts and taking out a couple of loans, Bishop Gallagher and Father Coughlin built a simple church for a small parish of 25 Catholic families. Having recently taken a trip to Rome and observed the canonization of St. Therese of the Little Flower of Jesus, Bishop Gallagher dedicated the church to the new saint and named Father Coughlin as its pastor (Tull, 1965, p. 3). Located in a drab area at the intersection of two highways, the first Shrine of the Little Flower Church was simple and hastily constructed, but had optimistically been designed to seat 600 worshippers (Marcus, 1973, p. 25). The Bishop hoped that the energetic Father Coughlin would strengthen the small and loosely connected Catholic community of Royal Oak, a desire which the young priest would do more than fulfill (Mugglebee, 1933, p. 154).

**The Cross Burning Incident**
In *Stations of the Cross*, a pamphlet that Coughlin published in 1930, the radio priest went into detail about the event that occurred in the first few years of living in Royal Oak and his subsequent ascension to the airwaves. Specifically, the priest cited the act of witnessing an anti-Catholic cross burning by the Ku Klux Klan in front of his own Church as the reason why he became more politically active and started a radio program.

Fiery crosses flashed their crimson light upon a peaceful starlit night...out of a clear sky was born the idea of the Radio League of the Little Flower…Let the radio pulpit… with its charity and tolerance be the logical answer to the prejudice and bigotry of those who had been misinformed. (as cited in Warren, 1996, pp.17)

Biographers Mugglebee (1933), Brinkley (1983), and Warren (1996) all have different interpretations of the veracity and subsequent impact of the cross-burning incident. Always one to paint a flattering picture of Coughlin through the year 1933, Mugglebee gives a dramatic account of the brave young priest who woke in the middle of the night to find a cross burning next to his beloved church. She also argues that encountering “the foul symbol of the hooded order” with its “crimson glow of bigoted hatred” had a dramatic effect on the priest’s ideology and career (p. 158).

Contrary to Mugglebee’s analysis of the event, Warren doubts the truthfulness of the cross-burning story and postulates that Coughlin had ulterior motives for telling
it. Warren refers to the story of the burning cross as a myth that Coughlin invented about himself to show that he had denounced injustice from the beginning of his career. Intent on uncovering the truth behind the cross story, Warren invested a lot of time and effort into finding evidence that suggested the story was a lie. A handful of his extensive research initiatives on the matter include: talking to a former reporter in Royal Oak who “expressed skepticism” about the occurrence of the cross burning, examining local newspapers and finding detailed reports about other fires and accidents but nothing on the supposed cross burning, and even tracking down a retired Royal Oak police officer who said he owned the fabled cross but, upon inspection, it turned out to be a small cross purchased from a historical exhibit with no burn marks. The conclusion reached by Warren is that there is no evidence of any significant hostile confrontations occurring between the KKK and Catholics in Royal Oak during this time period, much less a cross burning (pp.18-19).

Somewhere in the middle of the two opposing views of the cross-burning event held by Mugglebee and Warren lies Brinkley’s understanding. Brinkley (1983) does not have any doubts that the cross was burned on the lawn of the Church of Little Flower and includes the detail that “Coughlin rushed to the scene to put out the fire.” Nevertheless, he does mention his belief that, when recounting the night of the fire, Coughlin “no doubt embellished [the story] for dramatic effect” (p. 40).

Rather than solely focusing on Father Coughlin, Brinkley also briefly describes the relationship between the social environment of Royal Oak and the Ku Klux Klan. He states that older residents, “fearful of urban, industrial encroachments and hostile to immigrants and Catholics” had joined the Ku Klux Klan in large
numbers, creating an overall hostile social climate in Royal Oak (1983, p. 40). This portrait of Royal Oak stands in stark contradiction to the one provided by Warren, who argues that the KKK was not a relevant threat to citizens there. Warren comes to this conclusion based on the fact that “the community of Berkley, Michigan, adjacent to Royal Oak, was a Klan stronghold with little history of anti-Catholicism” (p. 18).

The actual attitude and activities of the Ku Klux Klan against Catholics, immigrants, and minorities in Father Coughlin’s first few years of his appointment in Royal Oak remains unclear. Two men knowledgeable on the topic, a Klan official and a professor wrote that nearly half of the 75,000 Michigan’s Klan members resided in Detroit in 1924 (Jackson, 1966, p. 173). One of the Klan’s “favorite activities” was the burning of crosses near churches and public buildings (p. 181). Charles Bowles, a write-in candidate who had open Klan support and spoke at Klan rallies, nearly won the Detroit mayoral election of 1924 and later became mayor in 1930, although he was not as intertwined with the Klan in the second election (p. 188). Nevertheless, due to a string of financial failures, the Detroit Klan had only a few hundred official members by 1928 and had “ceased to exist” by 1934 (p. 197). While cross burnings were most likely not as frequent in the late 1920’s as they had been five years prior, they were a recent threatening occurrence in the lives of Detroit residents and it is possible they still happened in the late 1920s.

The vastly different and conflicting account and analyses of the cross-burning incident by the three authors is representative of the greater image of Father Coughlin that they want to depict. All three authors consider it to be an important episode in the priest’s life and are significantly invested in their personal interpretation. Even though
the three historians come to different conclusions, they all use the veracity and impact of the cross-burning incident as one of the initial pieces of evidence that foreshadows what they believe to be Coughlin’s true character. Mugglebee’s understanding of the incident demonstrates her pre-1933 view of the priest as someone who offers a “blast on bigotry” and denounces the “conditions and disadvantages which surrounded his Shrine at Royal Oak” (p. 66). For Brinkley, it is important to show that although Coughlin had laudable political goals, he exhibited unreliable personal characteristics near the beginning of his career, as demonstrated by how he exaggerated the cross-burning incident in following years. Brinkley also explains the overall sociopolitical context of Royal Oak and how various residents responded to it. He describes that the climate of terror created by the strong presence of the KKK helps to explain why Catholics and immigrant residents of Royal Oak were initially attracted to a figure of hope such as Father Coughlin. For Warren, who is of the opinion that all of Coughlin’s political beliefs and actions were motivated by prejudice, it is crucial for him to demonstrate that “documentary evidence for Coughlin’s early opposition to bigotry is lacking.” The greater meaning that Warren extrapolates about Coughlin’s nature is that “the episode of the burning cross underscores one of the most basic rules of the successful bigot: to claim the credentials of the antibigot” (p. 19). With this phrase, Warren indicates the simple frame he will use to characterize Coughlin for the rest of the priest’s career.

Ascension to the Airwaves
With the enthusiastic approval of Bishop Gallagher, Coughlin started broadcasting his sermons on the radio in October, 1926 via WJR, a small, struggling radio station in the Detroit area (Marcus, 1973, p. 26). Other priests had utilized the medium of radio to broadcast their sermons, but Charles Coughlin was the first priest to have a weekly radio program and was therefore widely considered a pioneer in the field (Warren, 1996, p. 23). The United States had only been introduced to commercial broadcasting a mere six years before Coughlin went on the air. Prior to preaching the type of sermons he would become famous for, the priest’s first radio program was called “The Children’s Hour” and contained lessons directed at school children (p. 24). Mixing in themes for adults as well, he quickly gained a large audience of devoted listeners before long (Mugglebee, 1933, p. 164).

Bishop Gallagher supported Father Coughlin in establishing his first organization, The League of the Little Flower, in January of 1928. Lacking any type of formal activities, membership in the League served as a mechanism for listeners to feel more connected to the radio priest and create a type of “radio parish.” The League was listed as a nonprofit with the ostensible mission of collecting funds to build a new church in Royal Oak, but also served as a way to generally fulfill the financial needs of Father Coughlin’s popular broadcasts. Although members of The League often donated small sums of money in the form of dollar bills, the large number of contributions received each week meant that the League handled sizeable sums of money (Brinkley, 1983, p. 41). Later, Father Coughlin dissolved The League of the Little Flower and established a new but nearly identical organization, the Radio League of Little Flower. The Radio League of the Little Flower listed nearly $45,000
in assets and nearly $6000 in liabilities in its Annual Report, an indication of the numerous donations contributed by listeners (Marcus, 1973, p. 55).

Brinkley (1983) notes that Coughlin’s sermons during his first three years of broadcasting occasionally attacked the KKK, prohibition, or supporters of birth control. By and large, however, the sermons were “generally uncontroversial” and focused on religious topics including “Biblical parables, the meaning of the sacraments, and the like” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 41). Wallace Stegner, a historian and Pulitzer prize winning novelist, could not help but note the priest’s superb oratory skills. Describing Coughlin, Stegner wrote “Warmed by the touch of Irish brogue” the priest had “a voice of such mellow richness, such manly, heart-warming, confidential intimacy, such emotional and ingratiating charm, that anyone turning past it almost automatically returned to hear it again. It was without a doubt one of the great speaking voices of the twentieth century” (1949, p. 234). One dedicated listener remembered Coughlin’s voice was so soothing, that it made her forget about the Depression (Drasnin, 1988). There is no doubt that the exquisite public speaking skills of Father Coughlin played a role in his quick rise to fame (Brinkley, 1983, p. 92).

**Broadcasts Become Political**

As the reality of the steadily declining economy became more obvious in the months following the 1929 stock-market crash, Father Coughlin’s broadcasts became more political in nature. Detroit, a city whose economy centered on the automobile
industry, was hit particularly hard by the Depression (Brinkley, 1983, p. 93). Observing the distress of automobile workers in the area who no longer had work, Coughlin realized “he could not ignore social conditions while he watched the suffering around him.” From mail contributions received from his radio broadcasts, he established a large charity called God’s Poor Society, which provided food and clothing to those in the Detroit area who were severely struggling (p. 94).

On January 12th, 1930 Father Coughlin delivered his first outright political broadcast. The sermon, titled “Christ or the Red Serpent,” railed against the evils of communism and the danger it posed to Christianity. Of primary concern to Father Coughlin was the way in which the atheist nationalism of communism could destroy the Christian familial unit as was mentioned in the “Introduction” of this thesis. Under the communist regime of the Soviet Union, Coughlin perceived how “all children of Russian parentage belonged not to the father and mother who bore them, but to the soviet [state] under whom they lived” (“Investigation of Communist Propaganda,” 1930, p. 25). From Coughlin’s perspective, evidence of a “dangerous tendency towards bolshevism in the United States” lay in the fact that over 2 million couples had gotten divorced in the past 10 years and have “scorned the basic family and national doctrine of Jesus Christ” (Warren, 1996, p. 30). Communism was not merely a distant threat, but one that was domestic in nature and slowly eroding American Christian families.

Although Coughlin primarily focused on the threat communism posed to Christianity, he soon intertwined his denunciation of communism with a critique of communism. Aware of the suffering of poor Americans during the Depression, Father
Coughlin recognized that the ideology of communism had an additional appeal besides its “looser moral code.” For many working-class Americans, communism promised the power to redress the inequality of wealth and poor economic conditions of the Depression. The week following the “Christ or the Red Serpent” sermon, Coughlin took to the air to encourage his listeners that, in addition to actively preaching the values of Christianity, it was also necessary to combat the forces of “predatory capitalism” that drove laboring Americans towards communism. He proclaimed, “We can start with the leaders of industrialism. We can ask them to better the working conditions of their laborers, to devise ways and means of keeping the laborer steadily employed, to contribute…money toward providing an old-age compensation insurance” (“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, p. 34). Thus, while Coughlin condemned communism on the grounds that it was immoral, he also targeted the capitalists for causing American laborers to embrace communism. All throughout his career, Coughlin attribute the growth of communism to the abuses of capitalism.

Although Brinkley (1983), Warren (1996), and Mugglebee (1933) all have different general understandings of Coughlin, all three agree that the “Christ or the Red Serpent” sermon is noteworthy change from his generally apolitical sermons of the 1920s. For these three biographers of Coughlin, this sermon in January, 1930 marked the beginning of a decade of controversial and inflammatory political broadcasts for which Coughlin would become famous. As noted by Warren, the structure of this first political sermon served as a prototype for his future broadcasts over the air; the sermons linked global political events with the immediate impact
these aforementioned events would have on individual lives (p. 30). Unable to refrain from a psycho-analysis of Coughlin whenever possible, Brinkley is skeptical that Coughlin was motivated by altruism to denounce the unequal economic conditions. Instead, Brinkley make the unfounded claim that Coughlin’s new found interest in political issues was a strategic maneuver to “attract attention” when an apolitical message no longer resonated with people suffering from the Depression (p. 95). Motivations aside, “Christ or the Red Serpent” was only the first of many political broadcasts that would stir the nation.

**Early Relationship with the Church**

The Church maintained a mixed relationship with Father Coughlin throughout the 1930s. The analysis written by Earl Boyea in *The Reverend Charles Coughlin and the Church: The Gallagher Years, 1930-1937* (1995) offers more detail than the general and sparse analysis that Brinkley offers on the same topic in *Voices of Protest* (1982). Using letters and other archival materials, Boyea was able to piece together more elements of the relationship between Coughlin and his Church superiors both in America and at the Vatican.

In the context of Pope Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931, Coughlin’s social-justice message resonated with many members of the Catholic clergy (Brinkley, 1983, p. 61). In 1933, Father John A. Ryan, the leader of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, praised Coughlin’s social justice discourse for “stirring up” the “sluggish-minded” masses, who had “not shown any faint signs of rebellion
until recently” (p. 62). Nevertheless, not all Church officials approved of Father Coughlin. Throughout Father Coughlin’s career, the Vatican, the Apostolic Nunciature, and the Archbishop of Cincinnati, and the Cardinal of Boston, as well as many other clerics wanted to silence Coughlin. Bishop Gallagher provided the utmost support and defense of Father Coughlin against other, more powerful members of the Catholic clergy. As the immediate superior of Father Coughlin, known in church terms as the “ordinary,” Gallagher was the only official outside of the Vatican with the canonical authority to control Father Coughlin. Boyea (1995) writes, “Canon law provided little guidance on how anyone could interfere in the relationship between a bishop and his priest. This was true even when Vatican or American clerics thought that some intervention would be good for the Church in America” (p. 212). There was an expectation that a Bishop would handle any issues with a priest after instruction from the Vatican to do so (p. 225). For the majority of the 1930s, the Vatican and other Catholic officials did not want to put too much public pressure on Father Coughlin. The priest had a vast number of followers and they were concerned that a formal denunciation or mistreatment of Coughlin might lead to a schism in the Church (p. 212).

With the few exceptions of making Coughlin retract the phrasing of several minor statements after public outcry, Bishop Gallagher gave Father Coughlin an immense amount of freedom. For instance, after Coughlin called President Roosevelt a liar in 1936, Gallagher scolded his priest into offering an apology to the president (Boyea, p. 219). As early as 1930, “the papal representative to the American bishops, the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Pietro Fumasoni-Biondi,” made efforts to restrain
Father Coughlin’s radical discourse by contacting a friend of Bishop Gallagher’s, Archbishop John Timothy McNicholas of Cincinnati (p. 213). Bishop Gallagher permitted Father Coughlin to proceed as he had been, and did not reply to the Apostolic Delegate. When Father Coughlin criticized President Hoover for aiding the bankers and disregarding the debtors in 1932, Fumasoni-Biondi was more direct with Bishop Gallagher. The Apostolic Delegate directly commanded Bishop Gallagher to have Coughlin cease his discourses of a “political character.” The delegate disliked that there were activities "arousing political partisanship” taking place inside of a church building. Again, Bishop Gallagher refused to interfere with Coughlin’s activities (p. 214).

The American Catholic clergy lacked unity of opinion Coughlin’s message. Among those that disproved of Coughlin’s broadcasts, they disagreed on what should be done about them, and the majority recognized that direct mobilization against Coughlin by them could drive Coughlin’s supporters from the Church. As a result, many clerics avoided making any inflammatory remarks about Coughlin (Boyea, 1995, pp. 222-23).

Cardinal William O’Connell of Boston was the first major critic of Father Coughlin. O’Connell had no reservations about publicly castigating The Golden Hour of Little Flower and its producer (Tull, 1965, p. 19). Having arguably more political capital in the Church than any other clerics in the United States, O’Connell rejected Father Coughlin’s broadcasts as “hysterical addresses,” declaring that they were not in adherence of Catholicism. The Cardinal never uttered Coughlin’s name, but left no uncertainty about to whom he was referring. Specifically, in April of 1932, he said,
“You can’t begin speaking about the rich, or making sensational accusations against banks and bankers, or uttering demagogic stuff to the poor. You can’t do it, for the Church is for all.” Thankfully, the ever loyal Bishop Gallagher refused to interfere with Coughlin’s work and said, “Christ was not setting class against class when he rebuked the abuses of wealth” (Marcus, 1973, p. 42). In the Roman Catholic Church, a priest is only answerable to his immediate superior, thus rendering Cardinal O’Connell incapable of taking any punitive action against Coughlin. In later years Father Coughlin would not let a public accusation like that slip by without a counterargument, but at that time he issued no response to O’Connell’s remarks (Tull, 1965, p. 19).

A close reading of Cardinal O’Connell’s accusation alongside Bishop Gallagher’s response reveals that the cardinal was accusing Coughlin of alienating the upper-classes and encouraging the laboring class to engage in class conflict. In the 1930s, direct class conflict initiated by the working class was popularly thought of as communism, as evidenced by how Coughlin tended to equate the two in his sermons. Regardless of whether or not Cardinal O’Connell was actually accusing Coughlin of being a communist, he is undoubtedly condemning Coughlin for being too far left. Only a couple of years later, and still expressing the same core beliefs, the priest from Royal Oak would be criticized for being too far on the right of the political spectrum.

By 1934 the cardinal had made three open attacks on Coughlin, and the priest of Royal Oak decided to challenge O’Connell. Rather than have a silencing effect, the criticism from Cardinal O’Connell merely motivated the priest to promote his message more (Tull, 1965, p. 70-71). In a radio broadcast from December 9, 1934,
Father Coughlin called out Cardinal O’Connell’s lack of attention to socioeconomic inequality.

For forty years William Cardinal O’Connell has been more notorious for his silence on social justice than for any other contribution which he may have given either in practice or in doctrine towards the decentralization of wealth and towards the elimination of those glaring injustices which permitted the plutocrats of this nation to wax fat at the expense of the poor. Now he castigates me for doing what he was ordered to do. (Tull, 1965, p. 71)

Brinkley (1983) takes this opportunity to highlight Coughlin’s words cruel and Coughlin himself as a bigot. In providing context for the situation, Brinkley assesses Coughlin’s response as characterized by what “even the most progressive of his Catholic colleagues considered unwarranted and unseemly harshness” (p.63). Through framing Coughlin’s response to O’Connell in this manner, Brinkley is implying that Coughlin made yet another unjustified personal attack against someone else. A closer review of O’Connell shows that Coughlin’s attack on the Cardinal was not baseless. A near celebrity of the Catholic Church for his militant nature, O’Connell was well known for his uncompromising faith and conservative attitude. One author characterized him as having a “closed mind and a repressive hand” (O’Connell, 2015, p. 7). Generally speaking, Brinkley’s subtle indictment of Coughlin was inappropriate and unfounded when O’Connell’s general political character is taken into account. This is just one of the numerous
instances in which Brinkley chalks up a political move or statement by Father Coughlin to what he notes as his cruel personality.

**Intellectual Influences**

A pair of ideologically disillusioned financiers helped shape Coughlin’s discourse on economic issues in the early years of his career, and especially focused on silver (Brinkley, 1983, p.103). When the two financiers, Harriss and Le Blanc, contacted Father Coughlin and met with him for the first time around 1930, the priest had already developed a curiosity for monetary issues facing the nation (Ferkiss, 1954, p.172). Robert M. Harriss was previously a prominent member of the New York Cotton Exchange and additionally owned large amounts of farmland in the southern United States. Brinkley (1983) writes that Harriss became deeply concerned over the economic state of the nation when farm prices dropped and liquid currency became scant (Brinkley, 1983, p. 45). The other financier, George LeBlanc, originally from Montreal, was an accomplished international gold-trader and banker, until becoming a severe critic of the industry. His accomplishments included manager of the New York branch of American Express, and serving as the vice president of Equitable Trust and heading their foreign department before starting his own investment counseling venture in 1929 (Ferkiss, 1954, p. 172). Irving Fisher called Coughlin “one of eighteen Americans who understand money” (“Father Coughlin, (Pronounced “Kawglin”),” 1934, p. 38). Ferkiss (1954) writes that both Harriss and LeBlanc were interested in “the marketing of crops which…were, being produced by farmers who were being ruined by having to sell on deflated markets while paying off mortgages at the inflated rates of the twenties” (p. 172). Both Harriss and LeBlanc
were affiliates of the Committee for the Nation, a political group who advocated for inflation. Members included “silver senators, farm senators, and others desiring inflation for reasons of economic interest or intellectual conviction” (Ferkiss, 1954, p. 172). In summary, Brinkley and Ferkiss both describe Harris and LeBlanc as ideologically divorced from Wall Street and intent on radically reforming the nation’s financial system to be more equitable.

In contrast to Brinkley and Ferkiss (1954), Warren (1996) gives the impression that the two financiers were very much still aligned with Wall Street ideals and does not give any indication that they had any interest in helping the working class who were financially struggling during the depression. Warren quotes, but does not offer a citation for a “contemporary account that described him [LeBlanc] as a mysterious figure who had ‘pursued a checkered career’ in Wall Street,” thus depicting Le Blanc as a crooked banker (p. 58). Other information in Warren’s account of the two Wall Street operators allude to their overall financially corrupt nature, such as how an associate of Coughlin said that Harriss “owned half of Texas” (p. 316). In both Brinkley’s and Ferkiss’ relation of Coughlin’s relationship with Harris and LeBlanc, as well as their joint inflationary program, the reader is given the impression that they were doing so on behalf of financially suffering citizens, and thus fighting for a progressive, left-wing cause. In contrast, Warren purposefully excludes information about their beliefs, and thus leads readers to assume that Harriss and LeBlan were solely interested in profit at the expense of the common people. Being a member of the “big-money” establishment of Wall Street that exploits the poor is popularly thought of as right-wing. Therefore, Warren is also
implying that through his relationship with Harriss and LeBlanc, Coughlin is also a part of the right-wing, big-money establishment.

According to Louis Ward’s biography of Coughlin, and as cited by Donald Warren, LeBlanc “was conversant with it from every angle of capitalistic philosophy and of racial psychology” (Warren, 58). As noted by Warren, the phrase “racial psychology” was a reference to the belief that Jews controlled the international banking sector, a “contemporary theme of anti-Semites (Warren, p. 316). Yet again, Warren utilizes the marker of “anti-Semitism,” this time by association, to reaffirm Coughlin’s right-wing political orientation and therefore implies his interest in monetary reform was discordant with progressive values.

While the two financiers had undoubtedly made handsome profits as major players on Wall Street, and perhaps even continued to do so for all their lives, there is hard evidence that they were advocating on behalf of the common person by the early 1930s. In 1932, Harriss and LeBlanc testified at a hearing before the Committee on Ways and Means in favor of the immediate payout to World War I veterans of bonds that they were previously not allowed to cash until 1945. Harriss argued for the “immediate payout” of the bonus promised to World War I veterans because it “will lead to a more equitable distribution of the wealth of our country in an orderly and legal manner.” LeBlanc offered a similar argument (hearing, p. 172). Beyond helping veterans, they argued in the committee that the immediate payout of the bonus would facilitate the devaluation of the dollar and move the United States away from the gold standard (Tull, 1965, p. 13). None of this is mentioned by Warren.
By the end of 1932, the two former financiers had developed an intellectual relationship with Father Coughlin that consisted of frequent written correspondence and the occasional trip to Detroit to discuss monetary concerns (Brinkley, 1983, p. 45). The immediate payout of the bonus to WWI veterans was one of the issues that the three men no doubt discussed, considering that Coughlin spoke on the issue in April of 1912 (Tull, 1965, p. 13). In summary, Harriss and LeBlanc played a significant role in the development and expansion of Coughlin’s monetary policies.

**Monetary Reform**

Rooted in his general idea that the nation’s financial disaster was rooted in the scarcity of currency, Coughlin’s first solution for nationwide economic reform was to raise the price of gold per ounce. According to the priest, the bankers of Wall Street had caused the scarcity of money and were continuing the Depression directly through their manipulation of the gold standard (Marcus, 1973, p. 48). By increasing the price of gold, the government could then issue more paper money per ounce of gold, leading to more currency in circulation and the inflation of prices. To briefly reiterate the basis of Coughlin’s inflationary goals, he hoped that among other things, the increased currency in circulation would aid average citizens to pay back their debt and “stimulate the economy to create prosperity for all.” The overarching objective was to strip bankers of their power and influence over the monetary system and put it back in the hands of the people (Brinkley, 1983, p. 111).

In addition to providing much needed economic assistance to the common person, revaluation would serve as a preventative measure against the rise of
communism. Again, Coughlin echoed his familiar theme that the lack of substantial economic reform would lead to a communist revolution when he declared that, “The only two ways out are revaluation of our gold ounce or repudiation of our debts. One way is Christianity. The other is Bolshevism” (Marcus, 1973, p. 48). Coughlin did not directly state that the revaluation of gold was the sole solution to all of America’s economic problems, he did think it could have a tremendous positive impact (Brinkley, 1983, p. 111).

The Fish Committee Hearings

In the early 1930s, Representative Hamilton Fish III, a conservative republican and vehement isolationist from New York, headed the Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities. The Fish Committee’s stated that goal was to investigate:

- Communist propaganda in the U.S. . . . The Communist party of the U.S. and all affiliated organizations . . . the Communist International, the Amtorg Trading Corp., The Daily Worker and all groups or individuals who . . . advise, teach or advocate the overthrow by force or violence of the Government of the U. S. or attempt to undermine our Republican form of government.” (as cited in “House Goes Hunting,” 1930, p. 17).
After opening the hearings in New York, the committee travelled around the nation and conducted hearings in major metropolitan areas such as Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, Seattle, and Los Angeles (“House Red Hearings Open Here Tuesday,” 1930, p. 27).

The press coverage of the opening hearings in New York paints a useful picture of the Fish Committee’s objectives and type of information they were hoping to gather during their nationwide crusade. As stated in an article titled “Congress Red Question Shifts Here Today” in the *New York Times* (1930) from the opening day of the hearings, the committee would be investigating charges against the Amtorg Trading corporation, the Soviet unofficial trading agency in the United States, of being used by the Soviet government as a vehicle for communist pursuits in the United States. Of particular concern to Congressman Fish was the possibility that Soviet “paid agents” had infiltrated the trade unions and were working with American communists to convert other members to communism. In New York, the vice president of the American Federation of Labor served as a chief witness and brought forth evidence of “Communist activities in labor organizations.” He specifically detailed information on the branch of the Communist Party that sought to “undermine the American Federation of Labor, seize control of the trade unions and use them for revolutionary purposes.” In addition to labor, the trials also sought details on the presence of communism in American education institutions. Fish devoted the opening day of trials to an investigation of “communist youth organizations…undermining the patriotism of boys and girls” with testimonies provided by school officials. Fish
promised to deport any Soviet “aliens” “found guilty of engaging in subversive propaganda.” (“Congress Red Quest Shifts Here Today,” 1930, p. 3)

When the Fish Committee traveled to Detroit, they invited Father Coughlin to testify as a witness and he readily agreed. The anti-communist content of Coughlin’s sermons had caused him to become popularly regarded as an expert on communism. This would be the first of many official political public appearances for the priest (Brinkley, 1983, p. 45).

Donald Warren’s (1996) portrayal of Coughlin’s testimony at the Fish Committee hearings on communism is a useful example for understanding how Warren exaggerates and twits Coughlin’s anti-communist beliefs in order to fit into a construction of Coughlin as a rabid right-wing Christian. Through a careful selection and exclusion of quotes from Coughlin’s testimony, Warren portrays Coughlin as solely focused on anti-Semitism, the threat Communism posed to Christianity, and the “danger of the extreme left’s seizing a moment of near chaos in America and taking power” (p. 30). The few quotes included from the testimony cite how Coughlin stated he believed the communists were capable of “making great strides” and that a prominent socialist thinker once said ‘destroy Christianity and civilization will be happy’” (pp. 32-33). By only reading Warren’s depiction of the priest’s statements at the Fish Committee hearings, one would come to the conclusion that Coughlin was opposed to the goals popularly associated with the of the extreme left: conditions for laborers or farmers.
After reading Coughlin’s full testimony, it becomes evident that the priest’s testimony had more political complexity than a simple fear of communism. Coughlin’s primary concerns was that not communism itself, but the economic injustice under capitalism that was driving the laborers to the ranks of the Communists. The priest contended that “many of our manufacturers, capitalists, and others, bankers, are helping this movement along; they are forcing the unemployed into communism” (“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, p. 21). In contrast to Warren’s depiction of Coughlin’s primary focus of the testimony being his aversion to the working-classes gaining rights and paranoia about a communist takeover, Coughlin’s actual main concern was the way in which wealthy titans of industry were increasing the appeal of communism through their poor treatment of the working class.

A noteworthy example of the way in which Warren misrepresents Coughlin’s argument is the manner in which he unreservedly twists Coughlin’s reasons for accusing Henry Ford of being a communist. Warren’s overly simplistic summary leads the reader to believe that Coughlin thought Ford was solely aiding communism by investing his funds in a Soviet controlled country. Warren cites Coughlin as saying “There is a movement…to take down our Stars and Stripes and put up an international flag…and that movement is headed by Mr. Henry Ford” and then following that, writes, “Coughlin explained that by Henry Ford’s contracting to build tractors for the Soviet Union, ‘he was abetting the spread of communism’” (p. 33).
Ford and his industrial techniques served as a symbol of modernity and progress, and therefore, divorced from its greater context, this quote would lead the reader to
believe Coughlin was against the values of modernity and progress. Furthermore, reading the quote alone also makes the priest seem like an irrational, ludicrous conspiracy theorist.

A study of Coughlin’s entire statement during the Investigation of Communist Propaganda shows that the priest had a much more logical understanding of America’s political environment and did not believe that Ford was attempting to overthrow the American government. Coughlin’s true first sentence of the phrase states the complete opposite of what Warren presented: “There is no movement on here that I know of, among important people at least, to take down our Stars and Stripes and to put up an international flag.” In his testimony, Coughlin continues on to articulate his belief that “there is an international labor movement throughout the world, and that movement is headed by Henry Ford.” A further analysis of the testimony shows that the phrase “international labor movement” is not an attack upon the laboring class, but instead an attack on Ford, the owner of the means of production. Coughlin’s use of the term “international labor movement” is a specific critique of how Ford signed a contract with the Amtorg Corporation located in Russia, and thus created jobs for Russians instead of Americans. More specifically, Coughlin testifies that Ford had falsely promised to open a new plant with 30,000 jobs in Detroit, causing tens of thousands of poor people to migrate from the South and wait outside for jobs in sub-zero temperatures. Given that Ford had instead decided to invest those funds in the Russian corporation, Coughlin said that the migrants from the South were left stranded without work, “became disgruntled” and [sic] have taken out cards in the Communist Party” (“Investigation of communist
propaganda,” (1930, p. 20). The priest was distraught at the way in which the rich were carelessly treating the workers and making communism more appealing.

Prominent newspapers highlighted Coughlin’s critique of Ford for how the industrialist made an empty promise of employment and unwittingly “forced men into the ranks of the communists” (“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, p. 20). The July 26th issue of The New York Times published an article titled “Priest Says Ford Aids Communism: Detroit Witness attacks failure to employ thousands after calling for workers” (1930). Warren (1983) quotes a title from an article in The Detroit Free Press: “Blames Ford for Red Flare! Accuses Ford of Spreading Communism; Priest Cites One Case Where Thousands Failed to Get Jobs in Auto Plant. Says Ford is Helping Communism” (p. 50). While this title expresses a similar sentiment to the one in the New York Times, it is generally vaguer and does not clearly convey that Coughlin advocated for the working class in his testimony. Most importantly, The Detroit Free Press was a weak source for Warren to use as evidence because it was biased against Charles Coughlin. The paper was owned by the same man that served as president of the Detroit Bankers Company, Mr. E.D. Stair. It is highly unlikely that any banker would offer a positive portrayal of Coughlin, considering he was one of the most vocal contemporary critics of high finance. E.D. Stair’s disdain for Coughlin would become unquestionably clear a mere two years later during the Detroit banking crisis when Father Coughlin and The Free Press engaged in a series of heated back-and-forth media attacks on the other’s politics and principles. Warren (1996) details this event in The Radio Priest and dubs it “the newspaper war,” indicating that he undoubtedly knew the personal bias that the Free
Press had against Coughlin. Warren is so committed to portraying Coughlin as a paranoid, illogical right-wing extremist that he chose to use a clearly weak, partisan source as evidence instead of one that might present a more balanced view (pp. 48-49).

Warren (1983) strategically omitted all statements from Coughlin’s testimony to the Fish Committee that pertained to the priest’s attention to the plight and suffering of the common person in the economic context of the Depression. For instance, Warren includes a phrase from Coughlin’s testimony in which the priest says, “I think by 1933, unless something is done you will see a revolution in this country” (“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, p. 33). Directly prior to this prediction, Coughlin explained how farmers were unable to sell their crops and “sixty-seven out of every 1,000 farms in America sold for taxes during six months” (p. 24). Without the context of the previous quote, the isolated phrase “unless something is done” implies that Coughlin was encouraging the government to employ measures to quell labor unrest headed towards communism. After reading the entirety of the testimony and the preceding statements about the economic struggle of farmers, it becomes clear that the word “something” is not advocating for harsh, authoritarian government actions. In actuality, Coughlin is implying that “something” should be done to financially aid the suffering laborers and farmers so that they do not have an interest in communism. Advocacy on behalf of poor Americans was not a side note, but a common theme of his statement to the Fish Committee. Earlier in his testimony, Coughlin called out the “Cabinet of the United States of America” for exporting money to foreign countries “to help pay their dole system, and help build
up their battleships, where they omit to make any contributions to relief of conditions in America” (p. 21). Warren is clearly manipulating the evidence to make Coughlin seem more right-wing and part of big-money instead of addressing the priest’s multifaceted political stance on capitalism and communism.

Although both Warren (1996) and Brinkley (1983) present overall negative views of Father Coughlin in their biographies of him, they have divergent interpretations of the priest’s testimony at the Fish Hearings. Warren depicts Coughlin and Fish as sharing a similar anti-communist perspective. He describes Coughlin as the “star witness” to the Fish Committee’s hearings in Detroit and implies that Coughlin testified because he wanted to help Fish quell communist activities. Also present in Warren’s account of the hearing is the detail that Hamilton Fish’s 1930 Special Committee to Investigate Communist Activities later became the House Un-American Activities Committee, which directed its attention to “the danger from the extreme-left” (Warren, p. 32). Through Warren’s association of Coughlin to the precursor of the anti-communist activities of the 1950s, the reader is left with the impression that Coughlin is a McCarthy-like figure, intent on ridding the nation of far left-wingers.

In contrast to Warren’s reading of the hearings in Detroit, Brinkley points out how the priest and the congressman took approaches to communism that conflicted with one another. He identifies how Fish “interrupted Coughlin repeatedly, attempting to soften the denunciations [against Ford] and turn the testimony back to the communists themselves” (p. 45). Fish was clearly hoping to learn information that he could use to stop the communists themselves, but instead, Coughlin deflected the
attention away from the hunt for working-class communists and focused on the structural problems caused by capitalism. Specifically, Coughlin calls out the hypocrisy of worrying about the working-class being loyal to the United States, when, in fact capitalists and the United States Government are directing funds to foreign nations instead of the economic crisis at home: “The bankers have become internationalists; therefore, we talk of the ordinary person supporting the Stars and Stripes, when our banking institutions have gone abroad and become internationalists” (p. 22). Both Brinkley’s brief assessment and Coughlin’s testimony show that Coughlin refused to give up what Fish wanted, which is a polar opposite analysis than the one Warren offered.

It should not go without mention that although Father Coughlin abstained from making any targeted attacks on the communists themselves during his testimony to the Fish Committee, he did include anti-communist rhetoric in his weekly sermons.

As briefly alluded to in the introduction, it is beyond a doubt that the priest felt an anxiety about the spread of communism and the danger the atheism that accompanied communism posed to Christianity. The priest declared that “America is seriously tainted with purple poison of Bolshevism” in a sermon titled “Christ or the Red Serpent Sermon” given on January 12, 1930 (“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, p. 29). One of Coughlin’s goals was to make listeners aware of communist activities occurring across the nation. For example, in the same “Christ or the Sermon” sermon from January, 1930, he told “a few tales out of school relative to American communism or Bolshevism,” including how student members of the
Milwaukee Y.M.C.A. were addressed by the editor of the Daily Worker of Chicago, the leading communist print publication ("Investigation of communist propaganda," 1930, p. 32). To reiterate, the anti-communist rhetoric found in Coughlin’s sermons from 1930 was often accompanied by statements of support for the working class. In a different sermon, “Christ or the Red Fog” Coughlin encouraged listeners to “preach the doctrines of Christ and… avoid the atheistic immoralities” in order to combat communism. Given that Coughlin often combined anti-communist rhetoric with support for the laboring class in his sermons, it is curious that he avoided answering questions about the former and chose to devote nearly his whole testimony to attacking the industrialists. It is plausible that the priest believed it was important for the Fish Committee to focus on the ignorant errors of the industrialists.

Compared with Warren, Brinkley devotes relatively few words to Coughlin’s testimony at the Fish Committee hearings on communist activities. In accordance with Brinkley’s characterization of Coughlin as egotistical, the author mentions that this one was one of the first times for which Coughlin received national press coverage and suggests that the priest enjoyed the fame and attention (p. 45). This is another example of how Brinkley hints at early signs of what he will later label as Coughlin’s fanatical tendencies.

Unsurprisingly, Mugglebee’s account of Coughlin’s testimony to the Fish Committee portrays Coughlin in a more positive light than Warren’s account. Unlike Warren, Mugglebee does not question if Coughlin is qualified to talk about communism, and writes that it was “fitting that he be summoned to testify” (p. 193). Mugglebee primarily uses the Fish Committee as a way to highlight Coughlin’s
popularity. She details the large crowds that gathered outside to “get a close-up view of the fiery crusader of the air” and mentions that the reporters were much more interested in Father Coughlin than any of the other people who testified on the first day (194, 196). Overall, Mugglebee’s description of the Fish Hearings fits into her construction of Coughlin as a heroic champion of religious issues and offers relatively little unique insight into her understanding of the priest. Louis Ward does not once mention that Father Coughlin offered a testimony to the Investigation of Communist Propaganda spearheaded by Congressman Fish.

**Branching Out**

After honing in on communism for the first three months of 1930, Coughlin moved on to domestic economic and social problems, issues which would occupy his radio program for the next couple of years. Every week, Father Coughlin would spend countless hours poring over magazines, newspapers, and reference texts (Brinkley, 1983, p. 102) in preparation for upcoming Golden Hour broadcasts. In addition to his solitary efforts, he often discussed and drafted ideas for future sermons with another man of the cloth, Bishop Gallagher (p. 101). In contrast to the more targeted sermons he would deliver in later years, his broadcasts from this period did not address specific policies in detail and mostly avoided calling out people by name. They did, however, mention “the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few,” “greed,” and “internationalism and the League of Nations,” which were all themes that Coughlin would expound upon in later years (Coughlin as cited by Brinkley, p 96). Starting in early broadcasts and continuing into the fall of 1931, Coughlin
repeatedly denounced prohibition. To him, prohibition was just a smoke screen utilized by the capitalists to distract the American people from more important problems. In his broadcasts, Coughlin often advocated for temperance instead of complete abstinence (Marcus, 1973, p. 37).

A sermon titled “Charity, the Policy of Christ” discussed how the industrial world had replaced “Christian charity” with the political economy (Mugglebee, 1933, p. 203). For the last three months of 1930 he passionately “decried the festering ills of a sick country” that were most severely effecting those of low socio-economic status. He emphasized the idea of social justice as it was described in *Rerum Novarum* and the need to live by those values (p. 211). Another issue that Coughlin stressed was the importance for workers to be paid a living wage for their labor, which Coughlin considered to be a be a “sacred commodity” that they “brought to the financial marketplace” (Marcus, 1973, p. 34). In an interview in 1970, Father Coughlin reflected on his message “I knew damn well that the little people, the average man was suffering. I also knew that no one had the courage to tell the truth about why this nation was in such mortal danger” (as cited in Marcus, 1973, pg. 34).

During the period of 1931-32, *The Golden Hour of the Little Flower* dedicated a fair amount of time to targeted criticisms of the Hoover Administration for how it was handling the Great Depression. Hoover continuously said that the country “had turned the corner” and that the end of the Depression was in sight. In response, Father Coughlin remarked that the corner Hoover was referring to must be a “circular corner” because the end was obviously far from over. The priest berated the president for publically stating that aid for those in need was not the responsibility of the
Federal government, but local governments. To Coughlin, it was ironic that Hoover was willing to loan large sums of money to foreign governments but would not help the citizens of his own country when they needed it most (Marcus, 1973, p. 38).

Directly following the establishment of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation by the Hoover Administration, Coughlin announced that it would give even more political power to the financiers and bring the United States closer towards a system of “financial socialism” (p. 39). Both Brinkley and Marcus admit that Coughlin’s recognition of the scarcity of money was correct, but that the priests’ proposed solutions were not the right ones.

Although the assertion that no other individual was speaking out about the problems of the United States at this time would be an exaggeration, Coughlin was certainly very radical and forthright for this era. The medium of radio enabled his passionate critique of the current sociopolitical system to be spread far and wide and earned Father Coughlin praise from individuals and the press. Supporters positively referred to him as the "Shepherd of the Air," "Militant Crusader," "Daring Apostle of the Truth," "Fearless Radio Priest," and "The Champion of the Under-dog" (Mugglebee, 1933, p. 208). Devotees of Coughlin even sent letters to President Hoover with a combination of requests and warnings to heed the advice of the priest or to lose their support of his administration (Brinkley, 1983, p. 101).

Early Controversy
Although Coughlin gained an outstanding amount of fame and support during this time, his criticism of the country also caused anger. His opponents objected to the radio priests message with the claim “that he was placing in the minds of the people a consciousness of revolution.” President Hoover described Father Coughlin as “one of the most dangerous leftist radicals in the country (“Radio Priest Charles Coughlin,” 1996). Congressman Louis McFadden of Pennsylvinia provided the priest with what the congressman referred to “incontrovertible statistics” about the evil of the Treaty of Versailles (Marcus, 1973, p. 34). When Coughlin announced that his first broadcast of 1931, titled “Prosperity,” would center on a critique of the way that the Treaty of Versailles and international bankers had contributed to the economic downturn of the United States, the priest received substantial backlash from dissenters (p. 35). “Prosperity” was aiming to be even more inflammatory than Coughlin’s previous disagreement with the high rate of unemployment. Mugglebee (1933), in her dramatic style, writes, “Certain political and financial leaders, wearing lead-weighted hats of guilt, resorted to extraneous efforts in an attempt to stifle any discussion of the touchy and highly-charged subject of prosperity by the militant cleric of the air.” Rumors circulated that government officials in Washington had held a private meeting to discuss how to respond to Coughlin’s verbal denunciation of the American federal government (p. 213). The vice-president of CBS, worried about how this sermon would affect the station’s reputation with the federal government, called Coughlin and asked him to remove the majority of the controversial points (Marcus, 1983, p. 35). Agreeing to speak on a completely different topic, Coughlin passionately questioned the censorship of radio broadcasts and the state of free speech
in America, a subject which alarmed CBS even more. Not one to let anyone stop him, Coughlin delivered the original broadcast, “Prosperity,” the following week (Marcus, 1973, p. 36).

For Mugglebee, who wrote Coughlin’s biography in 1933, Coughlin’s course of action surrounding the “Prosperity” controversy shows his strong and fearless spirit in his determination to share the truth with the masses. In contrast to historians such as Warren and Brinkley, who note the defiant nature of his character but that ultimately focus on the bigotry of Coughlin, Mugglebee, has clearly painted a much different picture. From her description, one can see how in the early 1930s, he was not viewed as a conservative anti-Semite, but as a radical progressive who used his pulpit to fight for justice for the poor (pp. 212-218).

Despite the large audience that tuned in weekly to Coughlin’s broadcasts, when his contract with CBS ended in 1931, they declined to renew it, and offered a weak and evasive reason. NBC also refused to allow Coughlin to buy airtime and was not able to state a convincing explanation for this decision. The real reason that these networks did not want to work with Father Coughlin was due to his political message, which many broadcasting and government officials deemed to be “inflammatory.” Radio was still a relatively new medium, with the medium’s relationship to the federal government and free speech not yet fully defined, and these radio stations were afraid of upsetting those in power (Brinkley, 1983, p. 100).

In Chapter 6 Section III of *Voices of Protest*, Brinkley (1983) makes the sweeping generalization that “Time and again, political figures who might otherwise have openly attacked him restrained themselves for fear of appearing irreverent” (p.
61) to a man of his “clerical status.” Through this assertion, Brinkley intimates that Father Coughlin was able to escape repeated public criticism because they were afraid of seeming disrespectful to a priest. This claim uses Father Coughlin’s status as a priest to invalidate Coughlin as a serious public figure with a real political message that addressed legitimate economic problems of the nation. Alarmingly absent from this statement is the fact that political figures refrained from criticizing the priest not because they were afraid of appearing impudent, but because they were aware of the political sway that Coughlin held over a significant portion of the nation. Ironically, in Chapter 5, Brinkley himself even mentions that the presidential administration of 1933 was cognizant of the backlash that would come from Coughlin’s followers if the administration were to denounce the priest: “Coughlin was too influential a figure to be antagonized lightly, and Roosevelt and his staff were willing to put up with a great deal” (p. 47). Many shots were taken at Father Coughlin, and when people avoided taking them, it was largely because of his political legitimacy.

**National Popularity**

Not letting corporate rejection deter him, Father Coughlin quickly arranged individual contracts between The Radio League of Little Flower and private radio stations located in the American East and Midwest (p. 100). Towards the end of 1934, *The Golden Hour* could boast to having contracts with over 30 stations in all “major populous centers” throughout the East and Midwest, and finally made it to the West Coast in 1935 (Brinkley, p. 119).
Given the lack of opinion polls and other modern assessment tools, there is no precise estimate of the number or composition of Coughlin’s listeners. Father Coughlin himself avowed that he had the same number of dedicated Protestant as Catholic supporters and also boasted to having a decent-sized Jewish following. This contradicts this claim by Coughlin, and recognizes that the “relatively ecumenical tone” of the priest’s sermons during this period would make it very possible (p. 101). Further confirmation of the religious diversity of The League’s listenership lay in the letters that Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish listeners mailed in with favorable notes and small financial contributions (Marcus, 1973, p. 34). Some sources estimate that he had a 65% non-Catholic following in 1934 (Bennett, 1969, p. 279).

The evidence that does exist points to the fact that Coughlin had an audience that was large and rapidly increasing in number (Brinkley, 1983, p. 101), something that even those who disliked Coughlin attested to (p. 119). By the end of 1930 The Radio League of the Little Flower required 55 clerks to handle all of the mail and by 1935 the number increased to around 100. (Marcus, 1973, p. 34). Fortune Magazine estimated that he was receiving an average 80,000 letters per week in 1934, but had hit “the million mark” several times (“Father Coughlin (Pronounced “Kawglin”),” 1934, p. 34).

In addition to inquiries and notes of support, many of the letters received contained cash, which all were voluntary contributions. Most of the contributions are only a few dollars, but the sheer number of them added up to sizeable sums. A common story told was how Coughlin once deposited $22,000 all in one dollar bills. In 1933, The Radio League received enough donations to pay the salaries of its clerks,
pay the radio station costs of $380,000, and start the construction of a new church made of stone (“Father Coughlin (pronounced Kawglin),” 1934, p. 34).

The majority of audio pundits of the time reckoned that at least 10 million listened to *The Golden Hour* every Sunday, while others said even that large figure was too small. The radio priest from Royal Oak was not just more popular than other religious radio programs, but non-religious ones as well. *Radioland*, a fan magazine that featured more information about radio personalities, often featured Coughlin. Beating out numerous entertainment programs, *The Golden Hour* made it to the top of the ratings. A poll named the radio priest the most useful citizen of 1933 (Drasnin, 1988). There is no doubt that Coughlin was a force to be reckoned with.

**Chapter 2: “Roosevelt or Ruin” to “Roosevelt and Ruin”**

**Early support for FDR**

For the 1932 presidential election, Coughlin threw his support behind Roosevelt. Coughlin’s support for Roosevelt over Al Smith, the Democratic U.S. presidential candidate in the 1928 election and the favorite of most Catholics, came as a surprise to many. Why Coughlin chose Roosevelt is not definitively known, but possible reasons include the latter’s progressive political platform or general popularity and greater likelihood of winning (Brinkley, 1983, p. 107). At first, Father
Coughlin didn’t explicitly state Roosevelt’s name, given that it was somewhat controversial for a priest to take such a partisan stand, but instead praised the presidential candidate’s agenda of “cheap currency” and a “new deal” for the common man” (Marcus, 1973, p. 45). He also alluded to how the money changers needed to be driven from the temple, something which no one associated with Hoover, Roosevelt’s main challenger. During 1932 and 1933 the United States was experiencing some of the most extreme effects of the Depression. The U.S. Treasury had been completely depleted. Nearly one million farmers were now without land. Following his public admiration of Roosevelt’s plan for “cheap currency,” Father Coughlin honed in on the general issue of the value of currency at the beginning of a new broadcasting season in October, 1932 (Marcus, 1973, p. 47).

After the presidential election of 1932, Coughlin became much more explicit and lavish in his praise of the newly elected President Roosevelt. Listeners that tuned in on Sundays in 1933 could be sure to hear dramatic phrases of support such as “Roosevelt or Ruin” and “The New Deal is Christ’s Deal” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 108). Back in 1931, Coughlin had sent a letter to Roosevelt that expressed his interest in conversing with him, and finally in the spring of 1932 they had a brief meeting (p. 107). Throughout the first couple years of Roosevelt’s presidency, Coughlin often sent letters to the President or dropped by the White House in the hopes of having a stronger political relationship with Roosevelt (p. 109). The administration was general evasive of Coughlin, recognizing that his outspoken nature could bring unwanted trouble upon the President if the two had a close affiliation (p. 108). At the same time, they were also careful not to offend Father Coughlin because they knew
he had a strong sway over the minds of many Americans (p. 110). Marcus (1973) believes that Roosevelt started to become disenchanted with Coughlin and his numerous ideas at the beginning of 1933. The President remarked to a close advisor that, “We must tame these fellows [i.e. Coughlin and Huey Long] and make them useful to us” (p. 49). Whatever Roosevelt’s personal feelings towards Coughlin may have been at this time, the priest’s positive attitude towards the President and his political agenda remained strong. As proof of this, Father Coughlin reiterated his support for President Roosevelt and general his fiscal policies in a speech in August, 1933. In what is most certainly a personal spin on the President’s words, the priest praised Roosevelt’s promise made in his inaugural address “to drive the money changers out of the temple” (Marcus, 1973, p. 57). Coughlin was careful to mention that he was not supporting President Roosevelt purely for his individual merits, but rather the principles of his political agenda. He stated, “I am defending a Protestant President who has more courage than 90 percent of the Catholic priests in the country, a President who thinks right, who pleads for the common man…, who knows that men come before bonds, and that human rights are more sacred than financial rights” (as cited in Marcus, 1973, p. 58).

**Revaluation of Gold**

Through the Gold Reserve Act in January, 1934, President Roosevelt increased the price of gold to be $35 per ounce (Marcus, 1973, p. 64). In addition to breaking with the traditional gold standard, The Roosevelt administration had also bought gold with the goal of increasing its price and to increase the amount of cash in circulation (Brinkley, 1983, p.111). This came only a little over month after Coughlin
preached at the New York City Hippodrome to a crowd of over seven thousand and urged the government to double the price of gold. The timing of the Hippodrome speech and the Gold Reserve Act suggests that the former may have impacted the latter. However, it must be noted that the Roosevelt administration never acknowledged Coughlin’s letters to them about the subject of his sermon at the Hippodrome, and so it cannot be assumed that Coughlin had any real influence on the revaluation (Marcus, 1973, p. 64). Nevertheless, Coughlin did not go unacknowledged by elected officials in Washington. In 1933, he spoke in front of the House Committee on Coinage, Weights, and Measures, and he warned them that if Congress did not support Roosevelt’s revaluation of gold, there would most likely be a communist revolution. He declared that “it is Roosevelt or ruin…our beloved President, inspired by a desire to preserve capitalism while ridding it of its major abuses…has taken the first step toward revaluation of gold” (p. 66). Towards the end of 1933, although Roosevelt had inflated the price of gold, the Depression was not over. Because the average citizens were still continuing to suffer, Coughlin urged the Roosevelt administration to take more drastic measures of inflation.

**E.D. Stair Controversy**

Before delving into Coughlin’s next monetary plan, there is an incident which occurred in March of 1933 which pertains to Coughlin’s attack on finance. The bankers of Detroit, a target much closer to home than Wall Street, became a target of Coughlin’s attacks in the first few months of 1933. The majority of Detroit bankers engaged in the type of careless financial practices and abuses throughout the 1920s
and early 1930s that earned them a negative reputation among ordinary Americans. During the Great Depression, The Detroit Bankers company increased the dividends it gave to stockholders in spite of the fact that the bank’s assets were in decline. Given the interconnected system of Detroit banks, when the Union Guardian Trust Company collapsed, Detroit banks had insufficient liquid funds to satisfy the cash withdrawals that depositors demanded during The Depression.

Through a sermon in early March, 1933, Coughlin charged that the Detroit banks had “misappropriated funds, had lied to the public about their reserve supplies, and had falsified their records.” Specifically, Coughlin alleged that the First National Bank was only 12.5% liquid while it publically stated that it was 80% liquid (Brinkley, 1983, p. 50). When the Detroit banks that remained solvent sought a loan from the government-controlled Reconstruction Finance Corporation, Coughlin assailed that these banks were led by men who had “approved fraudulent loans to themselves in order to protect their investments after the 1929 crash” (Shenton, 1958, p. 355). Father Coughlin held the bankers directly responsible for the crisis, but also recognized the bigger inadequacy of the financial liability law in the United States which allowed the Detroit banking crisis to happen. The “perverted” liability law “made it possible to cheat the widow, to rob the orphan and to depress the poor,” while it enabled the “artful dodgers of high finance to escape” (Coughlin as cited in Ward, 1933, p. 180). Clearly, something had to be done.

The priest concentrated his criticism on E.D Stair, president of the Detroit Bankers Company and publisher of the Detroit Free Press, who used his newspaper to frequently lambaste the New Deal. If one were to tune into the local Detroit media
in March or April, 1933, they would encounter a dialogue of heated attacks between the Detroit Free Press and Father Coughlin. A Free Press article that denounced the United States government for its plan to establish a government controlled bank in Detroit instead of bailing out the current banks through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation seems to have inspired Father Coughlin to speak out specifically against E.D. Stair. The priest saw this article as “designed to obstruct the driving out of the money changers from the temple of this country” and yet another attempt to “escape the responsibility of the irresponsible and devious management of depositors’ money” (Ward, 1933, p. 185).

Through the medium of the Detroit Free Press, E.D. Stair vehemently defended the banks and refuted the claims made by Father Coughlin. Stair characterized his broadcasts as “flamboyant demagoguery.” The Free Press went so far as to say that Coughlin had “robbed the people of confidence in these directors and their banks, was one of the chief causes of withdrawals of funds,…[and] did much to bring about the present. More damaging to Coughlin’s reputation was the accusation by The Free Press that the priest had secretly speculated on stocks with the money donated to The Radio League by listeners. Their proof was a photostatic copy of his transactions from the bank. In response, Coughlin first denied, but then later admitted, that he had invested large sums of listeners’ contributions. Nevertheless, he contended that the photostatic copy had been altered. The priest maintained that although he had speculated in the stock market, he was not culpable of any impropriety because he had only invested the funds as a way to keep them safe condition (Marcus, 1973, p. 51). Not one to be docile, Coughlin repeatedly called for
an investigation into the Detroit banking abuses, and because of his efforts, a special
grand jury convened, but no indictments of Stair or other bankers were ever made

Warren (1983), Ward (1933), and Marcus (1983) all give different
interpretations of the “newspaper war” between The Free Press and Father Coughlin.
The incident and its contrasting interpretations could fill an entire book, but the
following analysis gives an overview of the main issues at stake. In his coverage of
the “newspaper war,” Warren primarily focuses on the drama between Coughlin and
E.D. Stair. He pays special attention to the personal attack that the priest made on
Stair. The reader learns almost nothing about Coughlin’s political position on the
banking industry beyond the fact that he believed banks were corrupt and that “the
radio priest placed himself on the side of ‘the people’” (p. 49). This vague and brief
nature in which Warren describes Coughlin’s attack on the bankers and advocacy for
the common people drastically understates the importance of these values to the
priest. Warren writes nothing about how Coughlin assailed “grafting, grasping,
greedy bankers” for protecting themselves during the banking crisis and letting the
depositors, “the scrubwoman, the laborer, the farmer and the policeman… to suffer
first” (Ward, p. 179). The combination of the lack of coverage of Father Coughlin’s
denunciation of bankers for abusing the funds of depositors and the focus on
Coughlin’s personal attack offers an oversimplified version of the incident. Warren’s
analysis also leaves readers with the impression that Coughlin’s character was a one-
dimensional bigot solely interested in making personal attacks and not employing
rational political arguments.
A redeeming element of Warren’s analysis is that he astutely notes that Ward (1933), a close associate of the radio priest, published his authorized biography of Coughlin shortly after the newspaper war. As previously referenced, Ward includes the complete text of each sermon from the newspaper war and gives a detailed refutation of each accusation made against Father Coughlin. Ward debunks many of the charges by *The Free Press* against Coughlin were baseless, such as the incorrect claim that Coughlin had not paid income tax on his stock profit. Tull corroborates the fact that Coughlin had indeed paid taxes, and had in fact overpaid some of them. As highlighted by Warren, “Ward also sought to depict the speculating priest as a frugal shepherd, concluding that Coughlin had saved 97K of the original $110K investments by not placing it in the failed banks” (p. 52). As evidenced by this argument by Ward, Warren accurately assesses that many of Ward’s points were aimed at downplaying Coughlin’s speculation. Upon a closer reading of Ward’s text, it becomes clear that it is aimed at saving Coughlin’s reputation.

Between the three authors, Marcus offers the most balanced view of the whole affair. He provides context for the abuses made by the Detroit bankers and details Coughlin’s denunciation of their practices. On the flipside, Marcus also does not sugar coat Coughlin’s role in the affair and recognizes that both men could be accurately accused for getting overheated and making virulent personal attacks on the other (1973, p. 49).

Although the bankers were never indicted, listeners of *The Golden Hour* responded positively to his attacks on the Detroit bankers. Many weeks Coughlin’s mail room received more than 400,000 letters from listeners, the majority of which
included favorable comments of Coughlin’s criticism of bankers in Detroit (Marcus, 1973, p. 57). In addition to the credibility on the nation’s fiscal policies that the public attributed to Coughlin for his dealings with the Detroit banks, elected officials in Washington also took notice. Six senators and fifty-nine congressmen signed a petition requesting that President Roosevelt assign Father Coughlin to the delegation of the United States of the London Economic Conference. Roosevelt did not appoint him, but also did not allow for any international monetary reform, which Coughlin approved of because of the way it restrained the power of Wall Street (p. 59).

**Remonetization of Silver**

Coughlin’s next idea was an age old one: the remonetization of silver. For over sixty years, agrarian protestors, miners in the west, and others had supported the promoted it. Echoing the populists of the 1890s, Coughlin repeatedly denounced the “fraudulent” way in which the dollar had been separated from silver after the Civil War and the “wholesome, honest” effect its remonetization would have (Brinkley, 1983, p. 112). He saw silver as having a similar impact that he thought the revaluation of gold could once have had: an elimination of “foreclosures and bankruptcies,” stabilization of the banking system and an end of “so-called panics” and a solid currency that would put an end to unemployment. Coughlin did not add any particularly new elements to the already existing silver argument, apparently adhering to the traditional populist belief that the common people would benefit from the increase of currency in circulation, whatever variety it might be (Tull, 1965, p. 240). Being a looser currency than gold, it was believed to lead to more inflation. Silver adherents generally argued that there was ample supply of the white metal in mines
around the U.S., it could be accumulated with little cost to government, and the mining of it would lead to more jobs (Reeve, 1943, p. 244) As Coughlin wittily declared before Congress, “silver is just as good as gold. Christ was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver” (As cited in Marcus, 1973, p. 66). In March of 1934, a House banking subcommittee invited Father Coughlin to speak, where he stated that an increase in the price of silver would halt the decline of rural production and thus help small farmers become more economically stable (p. 77).

While Warren (1996) briefly touches upon Coughlin’s inflationary goal of divorcing the United States from gold standard and replacing it with a silver standard, the author does not explain that Coughlin believed inflation was to help out the common laborers and farmers pay back their debts. Although it is fairly common knowledge that inflationary policies benefit the poor debtors and not the creditors, the author of *Radio Priest* instead suggests Coughlin’s underlying motive for inflation was based in his Anglophobia: “Coughlin attacked the gold standard, which he alleged was maintained solely at the behest of the British bankers” (p. 58). Although Coughlin did have an aversion to Britain, Warren’s lack of information detracts from Coughlin’s primary goal of helping the poor, and thus erases Coughlin’s general left-wing concern from the issue. The Roosevelt administration did not show any enthusiasm for switching the country’s monetary system to one based in silver. Coughlin’s belief in the more radical silver standard was one of the main ways in which he challenged the Roosevelt administration and an issue that divided the priest and the president (Marcus, 1973, p. 66).
Publication of the Silver List

In the context of potential legislative action on the silver standard, Henry T. Morgenthau Jr., FDR’s Secretary of the Treasury, made public a list of individuals who had large silver holdings in April, 1934. One of the names on that list was Amy Collins, Father Coughlin’s secretary, who owned 500,000 ounces of silver. Although Collins said that she had independently invested the funds of the Radio League of the Little Flower without the knowledge of Father Coughlin (Warren, 1996, p. 59). Considering that Father Coughlin had complete control over the organization, no one believed that Collins acted on her own volition (Marcus, 1973, p. 68). In response to the publication of the list of names by Morgenthau, Coughlin labeled Morgenthau’s publication of the list of silver speculators as a “clumsy effort to protect the gold advocates, the Federal Reserve bankers and the international bankers of ill repute” (Warren, 1996, p. 60). Through this evaluation, Coughlin is not so subtly accusing the administration of being beholden to international financiers. Coughlin also labeled Morgenthau as a “tool of Wall Street and as being opposed to “Gentile silver” (Warren, 1996, p. 60). Without actually saying the word “Jew,” Coughlin was undoubtedly implying that Morgenthau preferred gold, the standard both symbolically and literally linked to Wall Street and the Jews, over “Gentile silver” because he was Jewish. While Coughlin can rightfully be accused of not practicing what he preached, literally, Morgenthau’s publication of the list of names was a form of cheap...
warfare where he discredited many prominent individuals who owned silver without engaging with the actual policies regarding currency.

A side by side comparison of Warren (1996) and Tull (1965) reveals that they portray the silver list episode in very different ways. Warren briefly acknowledges that Morgenthau released the list before upcoming silver legislation, but chooses to emphasize the cruel tone of Coughlin’s broadcast in which he struck back against the Roosevelt administration. Directly after quoting Coughlin’s rebuttal, Warren indicates his sympathetic feelings about how the Roosevelt administration had to deal with Coughlin by describing the “political wariness” that the priest caused the President (pp. 59-60). Thus, it becomes clear that Warren believes the administration was justified in publishing the list. Contrary to Warren, Tull pointedly states that the act of publication was a “shrewd move” and that the administration “turned on him [Coughlin] without warning” (p. 55). Warren’s portrayal of the silver list incident seeks to dismiss Coughlin by making a personal attack on him, but not his policies in two ways. First of all, Warren upholds that the decision by the Roosevelt administration to publish the silver list was an acceptable form of politics and hones in on the fact that Coughlin had speculated in silver. Secondly, Warren psychologizes Coughlin by depicting the rebuttal Coughlin made as inappropriately harsh, and thus characterizes Coughlin’s nature as unreasonable and mean spirited.

Marcus (1973) believes that the public lost a lot of faith in Coughlin after they found out about his sizeable involvement in silver speculation. The priest came across as a hypocrite for consistently denouncing all forms of monetary speculation when he himself was speculating with donations from his followers (p. 70). Furthermore, it
made the public question if Coughlin had an underlying motive was to make a personal profit. *The Nation* took glee in the priest’s embarrassment, although most did not believe he personally profited off of the investment (Tull, 1965, p. 55). For reasons that he did not explicitly state, Coughlin also abandoned the revaluation of silver and instead advocated for a more radical monetary policy late in 1934 (Brinkley, 1983, p. 112).

**Coughlin’s criticism of the New Deal (Part I)**

Beyond advocating for the issue of the currency, Father Coughlin was also frustrated with President Roosevelt for not going far enough to help Americans suffering from the dire economic conditions of the Depression. Despite Coughlin’s constant praise of Roosevelt for the president’s first couple years of office, the priest did not hold back when it came to criticisms of the New Deal (Tull, 1965, p. 52). As a general critic of the National Recovery Association, he denounced the hourly wage that the program paid workers. He stated “Forty cents is slave rates not wage rates,” and condemned the way in which the program ended up enabling manufacturers to pay workers less and make a personal profit (Coughlin, 1934, p. 54; Tull, 1965, p.52).

Reviewing the status of labor in his March 4, 1934 sermon, Father Coughlin proclaimed that “the present limitation of hours of labor and the present minimum wage are not sufficient to solve the problem of unemployment” or for the worker to have “purchasing power.” Rather than abandoning the National Recovery Act completely, in March of 1934 Coughlin believed it should more forcefully “regulate business,” “harness the machine,” and establish a higher minimum wage a shorter
maximum working week” (Coughlin, 1934, p. 54). Furthermore, he found it illogical that it neglected to limit any national profits for industry (p. 200).

Coughlin contended that every American who wanted to work had the right to receive an annual living wage. One idea he proposed was a form of “state capitalism” to redistribute the wealth in the form of credit. Because capitalism was unwilling to change its corrupted nature, the responsibility lay in the hands of the government to “control credit.” Coughlin proclaimed, “Call this credit by what name you will—a bonus, a check, or an unemployment insurance. But credits must be issued to all.” Although Coughlin never proposed a specific plan during Roosevelt’s first term, the priest was very insistent on it (Tull, 1965, p. 55)

Another program of the New Deal that Coughlin disapproved of was the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. Commonly referred to as the AAA, it offered farmers subsidies for limiting and destroying crops and livestock in order to decrease overproduction and restore prices paid to farmers. While the AAA achieved its goal of raising the prices of the farmers’ goods, commercial landowners ended up benefitting more than sharecroppers or small-scale farmers. Coughlin’s main issue was that food was being destroyed while people were waiting in line, labeling America as a country “where we burn wheat and cotton and a land where we burn common sense at times” (1934, p. 64). More than anything, the priest found it illogical. On top of this reason, Coughlin claimed that the U.S. was importing food from other countries, thus defeating the purpose of the AAA (Coughlin, 1934, p. 201).
Assessing the overall effectiveness of the New Deal in March, 1934, a year after its inception, Coughlin labeled it “more or less successful.” The big exception was the Home Owners Loan Corporation, which he saw as a disaster because it was a “postponement of the inevitable day” of foreclosure and bankruptcy (Tull, 1965, p. 53; Coughlin, 1934, p. 200). However, as 1934 progressed, the priest lost faith that the New Deal would be able to effect substantial economic reform. This lead the priest to establish the National Union for Social Justice (Coughlin, 1935, p. 7).

The National Union for Social Justice

In November, 1934, Father Coughlin announced that there would be a change in the style of “his own public career and for the political life of the country.” After reading numerous letters from listeners, he felt called to take a new course of action, the “challenge for me to organize these men and women of all classes…for obtaining, for securing and for protecting the principles of social justice.” And so began the National Union for Social Justice. In the long run, the National Union for Social Justice would become what Brinkley called “something very close to a third party” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 133). Originally Coughlin’s intent had been to form a nonpartisan organization to be “a lobby of the people to bring united pressure upon the representatives at Washington for the purpose of securing the passage of those laws which we want passed” (p. 134).

In an effort to underscore the significance of his new political venture, Father Coughlin even requested that Bishop Gallagher introduce the broadcast in which he presented them. Always one to give Father Coughlin his full support, Bishop
Gallagher said that the priest “has undertaken to apply Christ’s principles to everyday problems” (Marcus, 1973, p.73)

Following the introduction by the Bishop, Father Coughlin defined the phrase “The National Union for Social Justice.” The most obvious definition was of the term “national,” of which Father Coughlin said meant that “it is not for Michigan or for New York only. It is for every State in the nation” (Marcus, 1973, p.73). The term “union” referred to the inclusive nature of the NUSJ for all American citizens (p. 74). Although many would accuse Coughlin of bigotry in the years to come, Coughlin proclaimed that the National Union “will be founded on God-given social truths which belong to Catholic and Protestant, to Jew and Gentile, to Black and white, to rich and poor, industrialist and laborer” (p. 71). Lastly, the words “social justice” signified that “it stands for a fair and equitable distribution of wealth, of profits and life.” Also worth mentioning is that the social justice ideology of the NUSJ followed in the Catholic tradition of the *Rerum Novarum* and *Quadragesimo Anno* (p. 74).

The Sixteen Principles, the guiding tenets of the NUSJ and the cornerstone of Coughlin’s ideology, clearly articulated many of the political goals for the nation that Coughlin had preached in previous sermons. The principles, as printed, featured a preamble that reminded the reader that “we are all creatures of a beneficent God, made to love and serve Him.” The preamble also echoed Coughlin’s earlier statement that “wicked and grasping” international bankers with their concentration of wealth were responsible for the general economic injustice. Through various principles, the document signaled the need for the people to reclaim the nation and its institutions, reflecting Coughlin’s general theme of plebiscitary democracy. In addition of the
right for unions to organize, Coughlin also contended that “liberty of conscience and liberty of education,” including the freedom to religious worship, were fundamental rights. Other principles asserted the need for wages for laborers and profits for farmers that would ensure they able to make a decent living. He called for the nationalization of resources, which included “power, light, oil and natural gas and our God-given natural resources” in addition to aspects that related to finance such as “banking,” “credit,” and “currency.” Besides those resources, the “Sixteen Principles” maintained that all other property should be privately owned. However, above all, human rights came before property rights, and that “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.” As becomes evident, while the preamble mentions the priest’s religious faith, the principles themselves were all dealt with social and religious concerns (Coughlin, 1935/1971, pp. 17-18).

In March of 1936, Father Coughlin started publishing a national weekly periodical by the name of Social Justice as another platform, in addition to The Golden Hour, to express his political views and mobilize the NUSJ. Every issue listed an abbreviated version of the Sixteen Principles. Although many articles were written by the Father Coughlin’s associates and not the priest himself, they nevertheless asserted his beliefs (“Social Justice: A Weekly Newspaper, 1936).

**Federal Control of the Currency**

Through the 16 Principles of Social Justice, Coughlin advocated for a new approach to economic reform that would hopefully be more effective in increasing the
currency supply and putting financial control back in the hands of the people. Instead of trying to change the “composition” of the currency, Coughlin now advocated to take the “control” of the currency from the hands of private bankers and instead put it in the hands of the federal government (Brinkley, 1983, p.123).

Coughlin’s new ideas regarding the currency were a significant element of his new overall ideology for reform. In subsequent broadcasts, Coughlin advocated for a “Bank of the United States of America,” a national depository, that would replace the Federal Reserve (Marcus, 1973, p. 67). This proposal was clearly expressed in the sixth principle of the 16 Principle of Social Justice, which states that “I believe in the abolition of the privately owned Federal Reserve Banking system and in the establishment of a Government owned Central Bank” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 123). One significant change in this new system is that the Bank of the U.S. would be controlled by elected representatives from each of the 50 states rather than prominent figures from the financial world, thus establishing a real “financial democracy” (p. 113). Furthermore, it would require all other forms of paper money to stop being used within a year, making the paper notes from the Bank of the United States the only physical currency in the country (Brinkley, 1983, p. 112). Congress would play a more significant role in this new economic system too, which Coughlin expressed in the seventh Social Justice principle: “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” (p. 288). One underlying assumption of this new proposed banking system was that it would increase the amount of currency in circulation. As Tull (1965) writes, Coughlin followed in the true “Bryan-Populist
tradition” by contending that “nationalization of the currency was the most important single step on the road to prosperity and that unemployment would double unless this new credit system were put into operation” (Tull, 1965, p. 53). This call for a dramatic restructuring of the nation’s economic system was a much more left-wing, radical solution than anything Roosevelt ever advocated for.

**Criticism of the New Deal (Part II)**

By March of 1935, Coughlin still publically maintained that he and his members of the NUSJ would “dedicate our strength to support the new deal provided it remains true to its original plans” but had only offered negative comments about its implementation and was openly critical of FDR (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 202). In a sermon titled “Two Years of the New Deal” from early March, 1935, Coughlin gave a scathing assessment of Roosevelt’s accomplishments.

President Roosevelt not only compromised with the money changers and conciliated with monopolistic industry but he did not refrain from holding out the olive branch to those whose policies are crimsoned with the theories of sovietism and international socialism. (p.194)

It is critical to understand that Father Coughlin was not just arguing that Roosevelt’s New Deal was ineffective in practice, but that President Roosevelt himself was too conservative to implement real reform that would “drive the money changers from the temple” and aid the working class. Using an extended metaphor of a poker game,
Father Coughlin described the “five cards” that the administration had “dealt” via the New Deal, which “contained the same joker, the same hidden cards which were found in the old deal” (Coughlin, 1935, p. 199). These “five cards” are representative of Coughlin’s overall critique of how the New Deal did not “drive the money changers from the temple.” Furthermore, they point out problems that the principles of the National Union for Social Justice Sought to remedy.

In the “game of poker,” the first bad card dealt by the Administration, as described by Coughlin, was a continuation of “the Hoover policy of lending public cash to private banks” that would permit bankers to keep making a profit off of “the unskilled laborer and “unsuspecting famer” instead of setting up government controlled banks in the interest of the people (Coughlin, 1935/1971, pp. 199-200). The second and third critique put forward by Coughlin pertained to how the government had refinanced farm and home mortgages, which meant that the “government was simply taking over unsound mortgages from unsound banks” and “preserving the evils of capitalism.” Although Coughlin was vague on this point, he maintained that the “Federal Housing Program” props up banks “under the old deal.” Coughlin’s fourth point related to his previously mentioned critique the National Recovery Administration. In this sermon, the priest offered a more scathing denunciation of than he had a year earlier for its low wage (p. 199). The most potent elements of the speech were the ways in which Coughlin implied that Roosevelt’s policies of economic reform were no better than those of Hoover. Roosevelt certainly did not want to be likened to the president for whom “Hoovervilles” were named after given his lack of regard for the poor.
The fifth and final card rebuked the tariff on imports. In theory, the tax levied from tariffs went to the government, but Coughlin stated that “only a tiny fraction every reaches the public treasury.” From the priest’s perspective, whatever increased wages the industrial laborers might gain from the higher profits their industrial employer was making, the laborers subsequently lost in purchasing power due to higher taxes (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 200). Coughlin’s position on protective tariffs is different than that of most economic nationalists, who want tariffs in order to block cheap imports. The priest provided generally vague reasoning for why he was against tariffs. The information he did provide seems like he was against them because they were not effective in practice and ended up negatively impacting the laborer, whether or not his reasoning held true.

In summary, the “five cards” as described by Coughlin list different elements of the way in which the administration continued to “serve private finance” at the cost of laborers and common people rather than overhauling the system on behalf of a state controlled system that served the interests of the nation. In “Two Years of the New Deal,” Coughlin also extended his criticism of the administration to show how it was not interested in a more equitable distribution of wealth argued on behalf of a more equitable distribution of wealth. While Coughlin never called for a completely equal share of wealth between wall people, he wanted a more equitable and decentralized distribution of wealth where Americans would be able to maintain a decent standard of living.

Hyde Park Meeting
Using Joe Kennedy as a messenger, Roosevelt requested Father Coughlin to come meet with him at Hyde Park during early September of 1935. At this point, the priest and the priest were no longer had the same aims of reform, Roosevelt’s being more conservative that Coughlin wanted to settle for, but they had not completely broken ties. To the meeting, Coughlin brought a photostatic copy of a secret check from the American federal government written out to the Communist party in Mexico. The Mexican bishop had given it to Father Coughlin the hopes that the priest could use his political connections to get an explanation from the U.S. government. Roosevelt did not know anything about this but promised to look into it. The details are still somewhat fuzzy as to everything that happened during this gathering at Hyde Park. What is known is that during this five-hour long meeting, Father Coughlin pressed FDR to replace the Federal Reserve System with the Bank of the United States of America and institute inflationary monetary policies. Roosevelt politely refused to agree to anything, and instead, recognizing the numerous and dedicated group that followed the priest, urged Coughlin to realign himself with the current administration in the upcoming presidential election. Central to Roosevelt’s argument was the reasoning that if Coughlin were to spearhead a third party campaign, it could split the democrats and lead to a Republican victory. Just as Roosevelt had been on the issue of the currency, Coughlin also refused to commit to anything (Marcus, 1973, pp. 98-100).

The two prominent men had previously ceased to work as political allies over Coughlin’s insistence on more inflationary monetary policies as early as the spring of 1933, but the Hyde Park meeting in 1935 was a formal indication of their split.
Official Split

In a sermon from mid-November, 1935, Coughlin stated that the principles of the New Deal and those of the NUSJ “are unalterably opposed.” The radio priest went on to say that “I have been in error. Despite all the promises, the money changer has not been driven from the temple. The slogan “Roosevelt or Ruin” must now be altered to read “Roosevelt and Ruin” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 110).” Among Coughlin’s other concerns were that the “labor legislation enacted by this government was another phase of a sham battle to protect plutocracy.” Still unable to understand why crops would be destroyed while urbanites were standing in breadlines, even for the purpose of raising prices, Coughlin labeled the AAA as “economic hoaxing” and said it was driving a “clever wedge between the city and the farm” through its policies (“Coughlin Breaks with Roosevelt,” 1935, p. 15). This sermon once and for all told Coughlin’s listeners that he was no longer interested in working to reform the policies of the New Deal, but was interested in his own course.

Above all, Coughlin and Roosevelt officially severed their political alliance because of political differences. While they had some interpersonal tension, much of it originated from political disagreements between the two leaders. Coughlin was frustrated that Roosevelt had used him to win the Catholic vote and then, once in office, largely ignored his recommendations on fiscal policy (Marcus, 1973, p. 60). From the beginning of their rocky political alliance, Coughlin had consistently called for reform that was more radical than any measures the President envisioned. As was
previously mentioned, Coughlin consistently attacked the New Deal from the left for being too conservative in its reform efforts and criticized it for not doing nearly enough to alleviate the suffering of the common person (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 194). As an indication that the split lay in policy concerns, The New York Times cited that “Father Coughlin completed his break with the administration on questions involving money, labor and agriculture” (“Coughlin Breaks with Roosevelt,” 1935, p. 15). From Coughlin’s perspective, Roosevelt had not followed through on his promise to take measures to effectively curtail the financial abuses of Wall Street and help ordinary citizens have a decent standard of living. In regard to ideas surrounding economic reform, Coughlin undoubtedly stood to the left of Roosevelt on the conventional political spectrum. Further evidence of this lay in the fact that the priest quoted and agreede with a text that criticized the New Deal for helping the rich instead of the poor titled The Economic Consequences of the New Deal. For all intents and purposes, the authors have impeccable “left-wing credentials:” One of the authors was Benjamin Stolberg, who worked as a journalist and labor activist by profession, and above all, identified as a socialist. (Coughlin, 1935, p. 193).

Distortion of Coughlin’s Split with FDR

Ferkiss’ (1954) analysis of the reason why Coughlin split with Roosevelt contradicts the analysis provided by Warren (1996) and Brinkley (1983). Ferkiss clearly states that Coughlin’s ideas for reform were farther left than those of the president. He writes, “The strategy of…Coughlin was to try to build a popular fire under the Administration so as to orient it leftward, despite Roosevelt’s instinctive
leanings to the right” (p. 171). Although quite concise, Ferkiss’ assessment of the division is accurate. In contrast to Ferkiss, Warren and Brinkley dramatically understate the role that Coughlin’s left-wing ideology played in the split between Coughlin and FDR. Both Warren and Brinkley depoliticize the divergence between the priest and the president by focusing on the interpersonal relationship between the two political leaders and largely attribute the split to Coughlin’s narcissistic need for power and fame.

Although Warren’s two chapters on Roosevelt largely avoid a consideration of Coughlin’s politics all together, he subtly reaffirms Coughlin’s right-wing orientation. The first page of Warren’s chapter that deals with Roosevelt, “A Player on the New Deal Team,” utilizes the “marker” of Coughlin’s anti-communist sentiment to code the priest as right-wing. Warren implies that Coughlin’s support for Roosevelt lay in the priest’s belief that Roosevelt would quell the spread of communism through the inclusion of a brief quote from one of the priest’s speeches. In 1930, when Roosevelt was still the governor of New York and had not yet announced his bid for the presidency, Coughlin applauded Roosevelt for his efforts against the spread of communism:

Pay no heed, therefore…to those men who intimate that our system of economy is basically wrong. Spurn them when they advocate the doctrines that smack of communism, of Russian Sovietism. Another Roosevelt shall have the courage to uncloak the hypocritical human factors who have debased our system. (Coughlin as cited by Warren, (p. 40)
Although Roosevelt’s stance against communism was something that Coughlin admired the president for, a closer study of Coughlin’s actual stance instead of just Warren’s manipulated version shows that Coughlin was clearly more interested in Roosevelt’s economic recovery program to “drive the money changers from the temple” (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 193).

Beyond briefly incorporating Coughlin’s aversion to communism, the main content of the two chapter in which Warren writes about Roosevelt, Chapter 3 “A Player of the New Deal Team” and Chapter 4 “Off the FDR Bandwagon,” address elements of the personal relationship between the priest and the president. The details include how the priest and the president got in contact, their various correspondence, and certain incidents that affected the status of their relationship (Warren, pp. 40-56). For example, the reader learns about when the two political leaders met for the first time and how the convened both in Manhattan and Poughkeepsie (p. 41). When there is mention of something somewhat political, it was generally about the status of political corrupt political figures, such as the Mayor of New York, James J. Walker, and not about policy (pp. 41-42). By focusing on interpersonal details and events, Warren slyly avoids detailing the majority of Coughlin’s left-wing political ideology. Warren’s focus on the interpersonal elements of political incidents gives the illusion that he is writing about something politically substantial without actually doing so. It is necessary to note that Warren is not so much concerned about Roosevelt himself, but rather seeks to generally exclude all evidence that could hint that Coughlin held progressive views in favor of helping the poor.
Brinkley offers a more detailed analysis of Coughlin’s policies than does Warren, but he dramatically understates that Coughlin’s political ideology was more radical than FDR’s. In declaring “No single factor or incident soured the relationship,” the author of *Voices of Protest* is attempting to attribute their divergent paths to any array interpersonal and political elements and incidents, rather than acknowledging the fact that Coughlin was consistently pushing FDR left. As previously stated, Brinkley upholds Roosevelt as the perfect example of American liberalism and has no interest in legitimizing any person or idea who pointed out that Roosevelt could be doing more to alleviate the suffering of poor Americans (1983, p. 60).

Brinkley also places a lot of weight on Coughlin’s egotistical personality as a disrupting factor the divide between Coughlin and Roosevelt:

Yet such was his [Coughlin’s] thirst for power and acclaim that when, early in 1934, he finally recognized that he was not to play the major role in the Administration he had envisioned, he began to explore the possibilities of charting an independent course. (p. 60)

This quote implies that Coughlin did not diverge from FDR due to serious political differences, but because his narcissistic he could not handle the lack of praise and approval from the president. Brinkley’s psycho-analysis of Coughlin’s relationship with Roosevelt shares remarkable similarities to Brinkley’s earlier account of Coughlin’s relationship with his mother as a
young boy. This similitude shows that Brinkley’s subtle comments about the
defective nature of Coughlin’s mentality from the beginning of *Voices of
Protest* were laying the framework for him to later be able to label Coughlin
as crazy and dismiss him as irrelevant when he criticizes Roosevelt.

Warren is more forthright in his act of psychologizing Coughlin and labeling
him as crazy than Brinkley. The author of *Radio Priest* characterizes the alliance as
one where President Roosevelt distrusted Coughlin from the beginning and Coughlin
desperately tried to become part of Roosevelt’s administration. Stepping away from
politics completely, Warren provides a general analysis of Coughlin’s psyche:
Coughlin’s ambivalence toward authority—the dependency he felt on it and his
testing of its limits—is a vital key to understanding the priest’s personality (1983, p.
61). After framing Coughlin in this light, Warren’s next comment pertains to how
Coughlin’s psyche impacted his decisions:

By late 1934, Coughlin had become even more frenetic, as if he were
competing with the man in the White House whom he sought to
impress, to counsel, and perhaps, in his most arrogant moods, to
control. Failing all of this, he struck out on his own and formed his

In the fissure between Coughlin and Roosevelt, Brinkley’s analysis generally
aligns with that of Warren in his effort to defend FDR’s status. In effect, both Warren
and Brinkley are asserting that Coughlin decided to form the NUSJ independent of
Roosevelt because of his need for notoriety, and not because the priest had legitimate political qualms with Roosevelt’s policies. This psychoanalysis detracts from Coughlin’s verifiable critique that in many ways, bankers were still executing corrupt financial practices and taking advantage of average Americans.

Chapter 3: Coughlin Charts an Independent Course

The NUSJ Springs into action

For the first major initiative of the NUSJ, Father Coughlin chose to challenge the imminent American membership in the World Court, starting his targeted attacks in late 1934 and early 1935 (Brinkley, 1983, p. 134). While Brinkley claims that this attack was due to Father Coughlin’s personal animosity towards the Roosevelt administration after the two parted ways, the opposition to the United States in foreign involvements is consistent with the priest’s past political positions. Membership in the World Court would not mean any big changes for the United States in practice, but would nevertheless be a noteworthy emblematic gesture that the U.S. wanted to take on international responsibility in the future. When the senate debate on the ratification of a treaty that would permit the United States to join the World Court finished on Friday, January 25, 1935, enough senators supported the treaty for it to pass. Nevertheless, the official vote would not occur until the following
Tuesday, which was just enough time for Father Coughlin to make his mark on the World Court controversy (Brinkley, 1983, p.135).

On Sunday, January 27, Father Coughlin delivered a fiery sermon titled “The Menace of the World Court” in which he started by highlighting the values of patriotism and nationalism (Brinkley, 1983, p. 135). He went on to assert that senators who voted in favor were about to forfeit our sovereignty and “direct the destinies of the United States along the course which will be mapped for us by the League of Nations, overwhelmingly dominated by the great powers of Europe” (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p.122). Although Coughlin said that he simplified with the oppression of Jews and other oppressed populations abroad, he said that The NUSJ was “chiefly concerned with obtaining economic peace for my fellow citizens” (p. 123). The United States government was “ready to join hands with the Lazerre Freres, with the Warburgs and Morgans and Kuhn-Loebs” instead of “rescuing [America] from the hands of the international bankers” who had caused The Depression (p. 125). Coughlin’s claims were substantiated by the fact that Senator Nye (R-ND) had found evidence that some bankers had indeed profited from dealings in WWI (Marcus, 1973, p. 35). Furthermore, The World Court has taken no action when its own members have been at war, and has “thus demonstrated that it has no power to keep peace in the world by its decisions” (p. 131). Soon after the broadcast ended, dedicated followers sent so many telegraphs telling their senators to vote against joining the World Court that the lines of Western Union were jammed (Brinkley, 1983, p. 136). The final count of the official vote on Tuesday was much different than what it had been forecasted to be the previous Friday; the treaty did not get the
required two third majority vote (Brinkley, 1983, p. 136). Observers credited the
defeat of the treaty to Coughlin, but other well-known figures may have also played a
part. Huey Long delivered a harsh critique of the treaty from the floor of the Senate.
The vast network of newspapers owned by William Randolph Hearst printed many
attacks against the treaty, using what Brinkley refers to as his common “sensationalist
scare techniques” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 137).

Unfortunately for Coughlin, blocking the treaty to enter the World Court was
the only real legislative success that he would have that year. The radio priest’s
legislative proposals suffered defeat after defeat in 1935 (Brinkley, 1983, p. 139). The
author of *Voices of Protest* emphasizes that the majority of Coughlin’s legislative
initiatives pertained to monetary policy were a failure, which uncoincidentally
happened to be the same policy sector in which Coughlin challenged Roosevelt the
most. This failure on Coughlin’s part enables Brinkley to imply that Roosevelt’s
policies were more legitimate.

Coughlin had started off the year on a promising note by attending a currency
inflation meeting on behalf of the National Union for Social Justice at the Capitol
called by Senator Elmer Thomas of Oklahoma, author of the Thomas Amendment to
the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Other parties present included Dr. Irving Fisher of
Yale, the Committee for the Nation, and other Senators including Borah (ID),
Wheeler (MT). They agreed upon a string of resolutions that would be incorporated
into legislation, such as “detachment of the dollar from the gold standard,”
“amalgamation of the 12 reserve banks into one central bank,” “investigation of those
who hold government obligations for the purpose of ‘determining and disclosing
potential enemies of this nation here or abroad” and “paying off all bank depositors (“The New Congress Gets Under Way,” 1935, pp. 62-63). As the progressed, Coughlin became increasingly focused on reorganizing the Federal Reserve System and giving the federal government complete authority over the country’s banks (p. 138). Another piece of legislation on which Coughlin failed to gain traction had to do with farm reform (Bennett, 1969, p. 82).

Temporally following the break between Coughlin and Roosevelt, Warren uses the organizational structure of the NUSJ as another “marker” of Coughlin as being a member of the political right. He writes, “The vagueness of goals and Coughlin’s tightly held power suggested to many that the NUSJ was an authoritarian enterprise strongly reminiscent of European fascism” (1983, p. 74). In other words, Warren is implying that Coughlin was an authoritarian figure because he made all of the decisions in the NUSJ instead of distributing power to other leaders within the political organization. Equating tight control of an organization to an authoritarian dictatorship over an entire country is a large and unsubstantiated leap. This dig at Coughlin serves as one of Warren’s weakest examples to lead readers to place Coughlin on the right of the political spectrum.

Given National Union for Social Justice’s generally unsuccessful record with Congressional lobbying in 1935, Coughlin changed his approach. The NUSJ would now focus on congressional primaries, directing most of their efforts towards Ohio and Pennsylvania. The NUSJ disregarded party lines and backed candidates that endorsed the Sixteen Principles of Social Justice. Support from the NUSJ consisted of speeches from Coughlin at political rallies and members of the NUSJ canvassing
houses in their respective locales with campaign literature. The NUSJ, under the
authority of Father Coughlin, endorsed twelve Republicans and twenty Democrats.
The priest was ecstatic when twelve of the endorsed candidates from Pennsylvania
won their races, taking it as an indication of the effectiveness and potential of the
National Union for Social Justice in the political arena. Although the NUSJ
contributed to the victory of candidates in close races, it is important to note that 10
out of the 12 endorsed candidates were incumbents. The NUSJ was also credited for
successful races in Ohio, Wisconsin, Massachusetts, and Maine, although many of
these candidates were already likely to win prior to the NUSJ endorsement (Bennett,
1969, pp. 82-83).

The apparent success of the NUSJ in congressional races led many to wonder
if the organization would support a candidate to run against Coughlin’s former
political ally, President Roosevelt, in the upcoming 1936 presidential race (Bennett,
1969, p. 83). Before focusing on congressional races, Coughlin had made it publically
clear that he and Roosevelt were no longer on the same path when he stated that the
goals of his organization and those held by the New Deal were incongruent. The
author of *Demagogues of the Depression*, David H. Bennett, also succumbs to
psychologizing Coughlin’s choice to take a different political path that Roosevelt.
Bennett poses the question, “Would his hatred of Franklin D. Roosevelt lead him to
contest the presidential election himself?” (p. 83). Although Coughlin does indeed
call out Roosevelt by name in when announcing their ideological split in a speech
from December, 1935, he does so in a way that criticizes the President for his
ineffective policies, not trivial personal characteristics (Coughlin, 1935/1971, p. 95).
The successes of the National Union in Congressional races indicated that it might have some luck in running for an even more prestigious level of office. Considering how highly Father Coughlin valued his priesthood, it is unlikely that he ever considered running for political office, nor is there any evidence to suggest that he wanted to. Nevertheless, he could still assert his political influence and play an influential role in a third political party. (Brinkley, 1983, p. 110). After first denying that he had any interest in converting the National Union into a third political party, Father Coughlin began to show signs of interest later on. A primary motivation was his lack of faith in either of the dominant political parties. In the late spring of 1936, Father Coughlin said, “I am simply disillusioned…Democrats and Republicans, a plague on both your houses” (Bennett, 1969, p.83). It seemed that a third party route was in store.

**The Union Party**

Father Coughlin saw William Lemke, a second-term, Republican Congressman from North Dakota, as an appealing ally and excellent candidate for his third party. In mid-June of 1936 Father Coughlin asked Lemke to be the presidential candidate for this third party and so the Union Party was established (Brinkley, 1983, p. 108). This “farmer-turned-legislator” was by no means a titan of American politics of the time, but he had earned himself a modest reputation for defending agrarian values in Washington (Bennett, 1969, p. 98). Lemke opposed the New Deal on the basis that he found it to be unsupportive of farmers. Taking matters into his own hands, Lemke had passed legislation that protected farmers against foreclosures on
their land. The year of 1936 witnessed the narrow defeat of the Frazier-Lemke Act, a radical bill that “provided for government refinancing of all farm mortgages and for a major inflation of the money supply” (Brinkley 1983, p. 110). The North-Dakotan sounded similar to Father Coughlin when he denounced the “Wall Street racketeers” and railed against the inflationary policies such as the Wheeler bill, which dealt with the remonetization of silver, and the Patman Bonus Bill, which advocated for the immediate disbursal of a bonus to American veterans (Bennett, 1969, p. 95).

Through Brinkley’s unflattering description of Lemke as “short,” “unprepossessing,” and colorless, it becomes clear that the historian thinks Coughlin made a bad decision in choosing him. This description is one way in which Brinkley attempts to show that the Union Party was a failure from start to finish with absolutely no positive aspects. Through a closer analysis of the ideology of Lemke and Coughlin as well as the political context in which the Union Party entered the presidential race, Coughlin’s choice of Lemke was not illogical and foolish. Lemke might not have been the flashiest candidate most dynamic public speaker, but a political alliance between Coughlin and Lemke had the potential to mobilize a significant amount of the population. The Union Party could hopefully unite the urban, working-class Coughlinites with the agrarian dissidents that followed Lemke into a progressive collation that did not believe Roosevelt was doing enough for the common people. As Shenton (1958) writes in “The Coughlin Movement and the New Deal,” “No thinking Democrat could ignore the possibility that Coughlin might bridge the gulf between the rural fundamentalist Protestants and the urban Irish
Catholics” (p. 354). Yet again, Brinkley chooses to attack the people rather than the politics.

Unfortunately for both Lemke and Coughlin, the Union Party was not politically successful (Brinkley, 1983, p. 110). The reasons for failure are numerous. On the most basic level, the leaders were unable to implement an effective grassroots campaign and party structure (Bennett, 1969, pp. 242-243). Prominent progressive leaders that spear-headed the Union Party race besides Father Coughlin include Gerald L.K. Smith, leader of the Share Our Wealth movement, and Dr. Francis E. Townsend, best known for his old-age pension proposal. All of these men had big personalities and did not work well as a team. Furthermore, important progressive dissident leaders such as La Follette, Olson, Bingham, Amlie, Williams, and Sinclair refused to get involved and ended up supporting the re-election of Roosevelt, saying that it was too dangerous to risk splitting the ticket. Above all, and unsurprisingly, Brinkley believes that the most damaging dynamic of the Union Party’s presidential campaign was its opposition to Roosevelt. Listeners of Coughlin’s broadcasts were already aware of their split, but the presidential race made it glaringly apparent and they had to pick a side. When it came down to voting, they chose to vote for the President over Coughlin (Brinkley, 1983, p. 110). Those who had held both men in high regard were most likely turned off by Coughlin referring the president as a “liar,” “betrayer,” and “scab” intermittent with his critiques of the New Deal (Marcus, p. 138).
Catholic hierarchy chooses Roosevelt over Coughlin

Another factor that drew votes away from Coughlin was that the Catholic hierarchy in the United States generally favored Roosevelt over Father Coughlin. Influential clergy members such as Cardinal Patrick Hayes of New York, Cardinal George Mundelein of Chicago, and Bishop John F. Noll of Fort Wayne all expressed support for Roosevelt or rejected the idea that they favored Coughlin (Shenton, 1958, p. 364). Nevertheless, no statement proved as detrimental for the Union Party among Catholic voters as a speech made by Monsignor John A. Ryan. Ryan was a prominent progressive Catholic social reformer and a professor at the Catholic University of America. Earlier in the 1930s, Ryan had praised Coughlin’s effort for social and economic reform, but when Coughlin broke with Roosevelt, Ryan no longer approved of the priest of Royal Oak. While the majority of the Catholic clergy approved of Roosevelt, Ryan demonstrated such strong support for the New Deal that he was given the nickname “Monsignor New Deal” and offered the benediction at the inauguration of President Franklin Roosevelt's fourth term (Nehaus, 2001).

On October 8, 1936, Ryan made a gave a 30-minute-long speech over national radio titled “Roosevelt Safeguards America” in which he squashed accusations of the Roosevelt administration being inspired by communism and condemned the Union Party. Aware that political alignment with a presidential candidate from an individual of his position in the Church would be controversial, he stated “I am making tonight what is liable to be called a political speech. It is not that. It is mainly a discussion of
certain political events in the light of moral law.” Despite this this appeal to “more law,” most listeners understood the speech for what it was: a political endorsement for the reelection of President Roosevelt. Towards the end of the speech, Ryan encouraged Catholics to vote for Roosevelt and denounced the Union Party’s and Father Coughlin’s political program on the basis that its message was in opposition to the Papal encyclicals and promoted class antagonism (Shenton, 367). Citing his own understanding economics as vastly superior to Coughlin’s, Ryan declared “that Father Coughlin's explanation of our economic maladies is at least 50 per cent wrong, and that his monetary remedies are at least 90 per cent wrong” and to vote for Roosevelt over Lemke, the president “who has brought about more fundamental legislation for labor and social justice than any other president in American justice” (Ryan, 1930). Knowing that many members of the Catholic clergy opposed Coughlin, a decent number of his followers turned towards Roosevelt (Shenton, 1958, p. 364).

Brinkley’s dramatic slander of the Union Party

i. The Union Party Campaign

Now that Coughlin was a direct opponent of Roosevelt in the election of 1936, Brinkley’s goal is to thoroughly dismiss the campaign, its platform, and the citizens that chose Coughlin over Roosevelt. Brinkley uses the decline in the quantity of letters “to the President from men and women urging him to heed Father Coughlin’s advice” as evidence that the vast majority of Coughlin supporters had chosen
Roosevelt over the priest. This interpretation of why the president was receiving fewer letters from Coughlinites encouraging him to follow the Priest’s recommendations is not logical. Given that Coughlin and Roosevelt had publically separated by the time the Union party was formed, it would not be likely that Roosevelt would be interested in following the advice of Father Coughlin, and the public was well aware of this political break. Therefore, why would they send letters to Roosevelt if they knew that they would have no bearing? Furthermore, after the establishment of the Union Party, followers of Coughlin did not need to support a Democratic or Republican presidential candidate in the hopes that this individual would implement their political objectives. In 1936, supporting Lemke served as the most direct way for Coughlinites to achieve their political goals on the national level. In contrast to Brinkley’s assertion that, “The evidence was unmistakable” that former Coughlinites did not have enthusiasm for the Union party, it appears as though Brinkley exaggerated this piece of evidence (1983, p. 111).

While the Union Party cannot be considered a political success by any means, Brinkley grasps at straws to make some of the campaign events seem like absolute failures. For example, he writes, that instead of the target audience of 50,000, “Hardly 10,000 showed up; and though Coughlin delivered an impressive and fiery speech, his audience seemed more concerned with keeping warm than expressing their approval” (1983, p. 111). First of all, Brinkley is attempting to make a crowd of 10,000 people at a single event seem like a small amount, which clearly it is not. Furthermore, the observation that Coughlin’s crowd did not cheer as loud because they were cold is not proof of lack of support for Coughlin. Not everyone had such a low interpretation of
Coughlin’s political endeavors. In summary, although Lemke was never a serious threat to Roosevelt, Brinkley played down the crowds he gathered in order to delegitimize Coughlin and the Union Party as a joke of political campaign.

ii. “Crackpot” Union Party Supporters

Brinkley’s most egregious error in this section is the demeaning representation of the Union Party supporters in a way that the source he cites does not factually warrant. Brinkley describes the Union Party supporters as unhinged, extremist devotees of Coughlin. He writes:

Coughlin’s critics had long dismissed his supporters as “chronic malcontents,” “crackpots,” or “ignorant illiterates.” By the fall of 1936, such characterizations were, for the first time, reflecting the truth. Coughlin now retained only those relatively few supporters whose loyalty to him had been so intense, so single-minded, indeed, so fanatical that it could survive almost anything. At one time, such people had been a relatively small part of his constituency. Now they came close to constituting the whole. And they tended to be men and women suffering deep personal anguish, people whose fears and frustrations were pushing them to the brink of irrationality. (1983, p. 111)
The sole source that Brinkley cites for this paragraph is an article titled, “The Coughlin Movement and the New Deal” by James P. Shenton written in 1958 and published in the *Political Science Quarterly*. As research for the article, Shenton studied a vast array of letters written by Union members in 1936. Whereas Brinkley paints a picture of Union party members as irrational, Shenton’s original article generally portrays them as sane people who are living in troubling economic conditions and the letters they sent as bitter, but does not mention anything about their irrationality: “The letters [written Union Party members] expressed a populistic identification with the underdog, and the conviction that the underdog had been betrayed by the New Deal and left with no true spokesman but Coughlin” (p. 367).

By writing that the support for Coughlin from these supporters was “so fanatical that it could survive almost anything,” Brinkley implies that Coughlin had drastically changed his ideology or acted in a way that was inconsistent from the priest’s previous track record. Coughlin did indeed start his own third-party movement, the Union Party, but the ideology of this party remained consistent with his previous left-leaning viewpoints, namely, that more drastic reforms needed to be made to the economy. Shenton does not directly state or even imply that Coughlin was suddenly behaving in a way during the end of 1936 in which supporters of sound-mind would have long abandoned him. Nor does Shenton ever allude to Coughlin supporters being “intense,” “single-minded,” or “fanatical.”

Brinkley makes a correct statement about the demographics of the Union Party when he writes that they were “more uniformly Catholic, mainly Irish and Germans.” Shenton did an analysis of letters written to Coughlin during this period
and found that the vast majority of correspondents had Irish and German names. This finding supports the previous conclusion that there was a “concentration of the Union Party vote among Irish and German Catholics” made by in The Future of American Politics by Samuel Lubell. On a side note, Shenton cites other primary sources in which Irish and Germans denounce Coughlin, and it should therefore not be assumed that the majority of Irish and Germans supported Coughlin (1958, p. 357).

In this same paragraph, Brinkley makes an assertion about the demographics of the Union Party that is much more provocative than his comments about their ethnicity. He claims that members of the Union Party “were, by and large, less prosperous, less educated, less articulate than those who had deserted.” This claim significantly deviates from the facts and arguments put forth from the source cited, “The Coughlin Movement and the New Deal.” In this instance, Brinkley fails to mention in this paragraph that he is drawing conclusions about the character of Union Party supporters primarily based on letters written in response to the highly contentious speech by Ryan, “Roosevelt Safeguards America,” and not about the general nature of the election. Given the abrasive and public nature of Ryan’s denunciation, it would be logical to conclude that these letters to Ryan would be more emotional and include stronger language than general letters from Union supporters.

One correspondent wrote to Ryan, urging him to “Remember [that] Rev. Chas. E. Coughlin has been fighting the battle for the Poor against the wealthy,” which is a theme frequent throughout these letters (Shenton, 1958, p. 367). As previously mentioned, Shenton does not imply in any way that the prose of these letters are inarticulate, but instead, that they are from “people whose distress is too
urgent to permit them to have any sympathy for experiment or half-measures” (p. 370). Present among Coughlin’s followers was a sentiment that Roosevelt’s New Deal efforts for recovery had not done enough to help the poor.

Given that Shenton makes no claim about the education level or articulation of the Union Party members, this is presumably Brinkley’s own interpretation based on the quotes from letters. Although several letters from Coughlin followers in the Shenton text do in fact contain spelling errors, the majority do not. In a footnote, Shenton explains by noting that he did not make any effort to correct these errors. More than anything, the letters express the distress that these people felt in regard to a government that was not helping them enough and an acute frustration with Ryan, who represented a “luxurious” Church hierarchy that they felt was “indifferent” to their struggle” (p. 367). Overall, Brinkley’s description of the level of education and Union party members is baseless and unsupported by evidence. It is fair to say that Brinkley employed a fair amount of artistic liberty in his utilization of the Shenton text. While some of Brinkley’s statements about Coughlin supporters are accurately pulled from this article, Brinkley has twisted and exaggerated some of Shenton’s words in order to paint an unflattering picture of Union Party members.

Brinkley’s description of Coughlin’s steadfast political supporters during the 1936 election as “less prosperous” is an inappropriate and unsophisticated argument. Beyond the fact that this assertion is not supported by any hard evidence and not explicitly stated by Shenton, the way he incorporates this “fact” into his argument is weak. By first describing the Coughlinites as “chronic malcontents,” “crackpots,” or “ignorant illiterates” and then later in the same paragraph as “less prosperous,”
Brinkley, is, in effect, using the characteristic of low socio-economic status as a supporting argument for the former description. Furthermore, later in the same paragraph, when Brinkley describes the Coughlin supporters as being “on the brink of irrationality,” the historian is, to all intents and purposes, interrelating the lack of sanity and lack of wealth of Coughlin supporters. This is an extremely ungrounded connection. Brinkley seems as though he is trying to strip the Lemke campaign of all legitimacy by portraying the supporters as penniless, crazy individuals that lack any type of personal agency or critical thinking skills and thus blindly follow their leader, Father Coughlin. It seems that for someone living in a state of poverty, it would be an extremely rational act to support Father Coughlin because he advocated for reforms that would greatly benefit the poor. While one cannot ignore that Father Coughlin had extremely problematic elements to his ideology, he also addressed legitimate economic problems that other politicians pushed under the rug.

One of the most questionable pieces of evidence that Brinkley uses to describe Coughlin’s supporters during the 1936 election is an article titled “Father Coughlin’s Children” by reporter Jonathan Mitchell in the August 26th issue of The New Republic. Quoting Mitchell, Brinkley writes: “‘They indulged,’ one reporter observed, ‘in cries, shrieks, moans, rolling of the eyes and brandishing of the arms that—performed in their own family circles—would have caused their relatives to summon ambulances’… ‘Three hundred of them would stand [there] from head to foot, until they were brushed aside by the ravenous idolaters behind them’” (p. 112). A further examination of “Father Coughlin’s Children” reveals that the whole article is written in a sensationalistic style. In only the second paragraph, Mitchell refers to
the Townsend convention of July, 1936 (a political rally to gain support for the Union Party hosted Dr. Townsend) as the “Townsend orgy,” which further demonstrates the way in which Mitchell is writing. The overdramatic, exaggerated descriptions scattered throughout Mitchell’s article suggest that he is making no effort to recount the Union party events in an objective way, and therefore should not be taken as fact of what actually transpired. The personal associations and political leanings of Jonathan Mitchell also indicate that he would have a clear bias against Coughlin. Mitchell was a “New Deal writer and Roosevelt admirer” and later a speechwriter for Morgenthau, the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury that had personally defamed Father Coughlin for silver speculation 1934 (Pearson, 1954, p.6; Morgan, 2004, para. 3). The political views and future position within the Roosevelt administration that Mitchell would hold suggest that he would have contempt for Coughlin and his supporters on the grounds that the priest was challenging Roosevelt’s bid for president, regardless of what actually occurred at the Cincinnati rally. Overall, both Mitchell himself and his newspaper are weak sources in Brinkley’s endeavor to make the Union Party supporters seem as lewd and deranged as possible.

**The Final Outcome of the Union Party**

Election day resulted in an overwhelming failure for Father Coughlin. The Union party only received 892, 378 votes, which came out to be less than two percent of the vote. For Father Coughlin, the outcome was devastating. He had made a pre-election promise to retire from public life if the Union Party candidate received less
than 9 million votes. Depressed by dramatic defeat in the election, Coughlin followed through on this promise. He announced that he would no longer be delivering broadcasted sermons and that the National Union for Social Justice would no longer be an active organization (Marcus, 1983, p. 138).

**Brinkley’s Post Election Dismissal of Coughlin**

The last mention of Coughlin in the body text of *Voices of Protest* describes the dramatic loss of the Union Party in the presidential election of 1936. The decision to end the body text of a book titled *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression* at this point in time is peculiar; at the end of 1936, both the Great Depression and Father Coughlin’s public advocacy for political reform were far from being finished. Brinkley does include information of Father Coughlin’s career after 1936, but it is in the epilogue, and even then only offers a brief summary. Through the structural decision to include Coughlin’s subsequent life in an epilogue and exclude it from the text of the main body, Brinkley is implying that Coughlin ceased to be relevant in the American political scene after he broke with Roosevelt and his party lost the 1936 presidential election.

The first sentence of the epilogue that mentions Coughlin only confirms that Brinkley finds Coughlin to be insignificant political force that went crazy “The nation had not heard the last of Father Coughlin…[after the end of 1936] but his days as a serious political force were over. The remaining years of his public career were a time of steady deterioration, of a pathetic decline into bigotry and hysteria” (1983, p. 115). While Father Coughlin did not have as large a following or political prestige that he
had had prior to 1936, Brinkley’s characterization of Coughlin’s post-1936 career is overly dismissive and misleading. As a testament to his continuing influence, “1938 proved one of his best years in terms of finances, with $574,416 collected from devoted followers” (Bennett, 1969, 280). It would be a more accurate assessment of *Voices of Protest* to say that Brinkley dismisses Coughlin as a largely unimportant political challenger to Roosevelt, and once he establishes that through the portrayal of the Union Party campaign, Brinkley dismisses him completely.

**Coughlin’s Early Anti-Semitism**

Both Brinkley (1983) and Warren (1996) agree that Father Coughlin’s anti-Semitism became much more pronounced in 1938 and that he privately held some anti-Semitic views from the beginning of his life as a public figure, a theory corroborated by the priest’s “close associates and backers” (Warren, p. 132). However, a central difference between the two authors is that they disagree when Coughlin’s anti-Semitism appeared, as was stated in the “Introduction.” Both authors list some of the potentially anti-Semitic statements that Coughlin made early in his career but have differing interpretations of their meaning and divergent opinions on the extent to which those statements define Coughlin’s views. Brinkley believes that Coughlin “said very little about Jews before 1936, or, indeed, before 1938,” while Warren believes that anti-Semitic comments and themes were a common element of Coughlin’s ideology prior to those years (Brinkley, p. 116; Warren, p. 133). Lucia Cremoni, a former fellow at the American Jewish Archives, takes a position much closer to that of Warren in her article “Anti-Semitism and populism in the United
States in the 1930s: The case of father Coughlin” (1998). She writes that anti-Semitism “had always been a kind of undercurrent” in Father Coughlin’s discourse. She continues on to say that Father Coughlin made no noteworthy changes to the content of his speeches between the 1930-36 period and the post-1936 period, it was only that he made quantitative increases on the details and precision when associating the Jews as crooks (p. 25).

*Radio Priest* provides substantial evidence that Coughlin was an anti-Semite from the beginning of his career. Warren explains how Coughlin delivered a subtle indictment of Jews as the “cause of contemporary social and economic problems” through a sermon on February 2, 1930 (1996, p. 133). The priest traced the origins of socialism to Adam Weishaupt, founder of the Order of Illuminati, and quoted Weishaupt as saying “destroy Christianity and civilization will be happy.” Father Coughlin went on to state that this is the “belief of its author” and the thought of the “old testament” (“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, p. 41). The mention of the “old testament” is no doubt a direct reference to the religious canon of the Jews. Through those claims, as well as similar ones in the same speech, Coughlin is holding Jews responsible for the apparent atheism and deterioration of society. Along this same line of thought, Coughlin repeatedly pointed out that Karl Marx was a Jew, which the priest effectively associated with what he interpreted as Marx’s ideology of “anarchy, atheism, and treachery” (“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, p. 57). Examples of this include phrases such as “the German Hebrew, Karl Marx” from 1933 and “the German Jew, Karl Marx” (Warren, p. 133
(“Investigation of communist propaganda,” 1930, p. 57). Clearly, one did not have to look hard to find instances of anti-Semitism.

Warren also points out how Father Coughlin linked Jews to the practice of usury and the subsequent exploitation of common Americans in his radio sermons from the early 1930s. In the Fall of 1930, Coughlin asserted “the majority of the working class” had been taken advantage of by “billionaires, the bulk of their money having been made through the revival of the usury or this usury or abnormal compound profits so openly condemned by the fundamental laws of justice”

(“Investigation of Communist Propaganda,” 1930, p. 21) In yet a different speech, Coughlin referred to bankers as “modern Shylocks,” the merciless money launderer from *The Merchant of Venice* stating they “have grown fat and wealthy, praised and deified, because they have perpetuated the ancient crime of usury under a modern racket of statesmanship.” A couple of other times in the early 1930s Coughlin also drew an allusion to Shakespeare’s Shylock, such as when he spoke about the old man with a “Jewish gabardine” who had been “rated on the Rialto for his usury” (Warren, 133). The year 1931 heard Father Coughlin compare the capitalism of his modern era with the offenses of the historical Jews: “... in the midst of our glowing prosperity we, as did the Jews of old, deserted the principles of the God Who was so generous to us. We set up the golden calf of our cruel financial system” (Brinkley, 1983, p. 116). The priest from Detroit made a handful of other comments of the same nature. If Coughlin had only spoken one of these quotes in the early to mid-1930s, it would not be enough to confirm that he publically expressed anti-Semitism. However, reading them as a conglomerate shows how the quotes complement one another to paint a
subtle, yet present picture of the way in which the Jews were intrinsically linked to corrupt finance that exploited working Americans.

In “Gold—Private or Public,” a sermon from early 1933, Coughlin offers an extended history of the Jews and society got to the contemporary situation. He explains how historically, Jews have suffered persecution and exile, often at the hands of Christians, forcing the Jews to turn to finance. He continued on to explain that it was the Christians who are responsible for forcing the Jew to hoard gold the only profession available to them, and the “spirit of gold trading [resides] in the heart of the international Jew,” as some have said. Focusing on the present day, Coughlin said, “If I cared to recount the story of the modern Jew, I could tell you the story of the Rothschilds… “It is all related in one sense to our present misery” and “manmade suffering.” In a statement somewhat contradictory to Coughlin’s assertion that Jews prioritized gold and tribal loyalties over the country to which they live in, he also proclaimed that the Jew finally had a home in the United States and is “just as much an American as anyone of us.” As becomes evident, the sermon advocated for sympathy for the Jew and criticized Christians for their historical persecution of the Jew, while it simultaneously essentialized the Jewish race as gold hoarders (Coughlin, 1933, pp. 64).

The main theme of the sermon closely echoes the writings of Minnesotan politician and populist leader Ignatius Donnelly from 1890. Donnelly wrote, “The great money getters of the world…rose from dealers in old clothes and peddlers of hats to merchants, to bankers.” They are “as merciless to the Christian as the Christian had been to them” (Donnelly as cited in Handlin, 1951). While there is no
doubt that Donnelly added more dramatic flair than Coughlin did, both men proposed a similar historical fable that condemns Christians while ultimately stereotyping the Jewish race as intrinsically connected to money.

Brinkley finds Coughlin’s sermon “Gold—Private or Public” “perplexing” and says that there is “no apparent reason” that the priest engaged in an “extended discussion of Jewish history” in this sermon. The author writes that while the sermon “called for an end to anti-Semitism” but admits that “it also reinforced many of the stereotypes that had traditionally sustained the prejudice” (1983, p. 116). Despite the content of this sermon, Brinkley holds the conviction that Coughlin’s anti-Semitic content prior to 1936 was not substantial and no more than “a few…passing remarks” (pp. 116-117). For Warren, Coughlin’s reason for including a detailed Jewish history in this sermon so is clearly rooted in the priest’s anti-Semitism. Staying consistent with his style of excluding facts that would portray Coughlin as concerned with progressive causes, Warren refrains from mentioning that Coughlin devotes a large portion of this speech to thoroughly describing that the Christians had caused the centuries of oppression and exile that the Jews had endured (p. 133).

The Jewish community also took note of content from Coughlin’s speeches that had tones of anti-Semitism. Minutes from an American Jewish Council meeting show that the AJC believed Father Coughlin as holding anti-Semitic views as early as January, 1934. The AJC meeting minutes reference a news clipping from the Boston News Bureau, which issued a statement “that Father Coughlin’s broadcasting campaign will be “anti” a number of things, and also anti-Semitic (American Jewish Council, 1930).” An instance of direct public rebuke from a prominent Jewish figure
came from Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, a leader of the American Zionist movement and a well-known rabbi in New York. “Beware,” Wise cautioned Coughlin, “‘Beware,’” Wise warned him publicly, “lest you lightly speak words that will feed and fan flames of anti-Jewish feeling.... Do you want to evoke anti-Semitism? (Wise as cited in Brinkley, 1935, p.117) When Wise called out Coughlin for anti-Semitism, it was 1935, and therefore Coughlin was separated enough from Roosevelt by that point for Brinkley to safely mention it without implicating Roosevelt in any anti-Semitism.

On a related note, Brinkley carefully constructs a timeline of the in which Coughlin’s anti-Semitism and the public’s awareness of it increased during the 1934-1936 period. It is hardly coincidental that Brinkley focuses on these years, given that they are also when the political alliance between the priest and President Roosevelt became increasingly fractured. Brinkley is intent on disassociating Roosevelt, the standard-bearer of liberalism who worked for progressive, accountable change, from any hint of anti-Semitism. Brinkley not only has an investment in showing Roosevelt as separate from Coughlin, but also in showing that as Coughlin became more publically anti-Semitic, followers of Coughlin chose Roosevelt over Coughlin, which will be explained in more depth shortly.

Another element that Brinkley and Warren disagree on is the anti-Jewish sentiment behind the terms related to Wall Street such as “financiers,” “international bankers,” “money changers,” or the specific names of bankers. Brinkley articulates that for the first couple of years of sermons, Coughlin used terms such as “money changers” and only at the beginning of 1933 did he start to call out specific bankers by name. Seeking to minimize any conceptions of Coughlin targeting Jewish bankers,
Brinkley specifies that Coughlin disproportionately denounced the names of non-Jewish bankers, and, only in 1935 did he increase the proportion of Jewish names in his sermons. Brinkley’s conclusion is that “The most that can be said is that Coughlin may have implied that Jews made up a somewhat larger proportion of the international financial community than they actually did” (Brinkley, p. 117). In contrast, Warren believes that Coughlin’s stock phrase “international bankers” served as a code word for “Jewish economic exploitation and world power” (Warren, p. 134). A fact Brinkley does not even touch upon is how in “Gold—Private or Public, Coughlin contends that Christians and other gentile bankers learned about the practice of gold hoarding from the Jews and emulated them (Coughlin, 1933, p. 68). Based on this belief, when the Detroit priest denounced non-Jewish bankers by name, he should still be understood as indirectly maintaining that Jews were at the root of the problem. This factor weakens Brinkley’s specific argument that Coughlin did not express early signs of anti-Semitism because J.P. Morgan was the one the priest vilified the most.

Taking both sides of the debate on the level of Coughlin’s early anti-Semitism into account, it becomes clear that Coughlin expressed anti-Semitism from the beginning of the 1930s. While Coughlin’s anti-Jewish message would become significantly heightened later, by piecing the various parts of Coughlin’s Jewish references together, anti-Semitism was a meaningful part of his early message.

The question remains as to if Coughlin’s early followers were aware of the priest’s anti-Semitism and if they harbored anti-Semitic views themselves.

Most important to Brinkley is his assertion that Coughlin’s followers prior to 1936 had no notion of Coughlin’s anti-Semitism. As has been previously stated,
Brinkley clearly does not think so. He writes, “Whatever Coughlin’s private feelings about Jews, there is nothing to indicate that anti-Semitism played any appreciable role in building his early national popularity” (1983, p. 117). Brinkley goes on to explain that Coughlin’s message towards the Jew in the early and mid-1930s lay somewhere between “neutral” and “working in a diffuse way to evoke images and produce stereotypes that could be translated easily into hostility toward Jews” (p. 117).

Brinkley wants to be able to claim the Coughlinites, prior to the priest’s split with Roosevelt, as political progressives, but, from his liberal of view, cannot do if they were anti-Semites themselves, considering that he finds those two elements discordant. Thus, he attentively explains how there is no evidence of accusations of anti-Semitism in response to the “Gold—Private or Public” or that it motivated his to express anti-Semitic attitudes.

Brinkley also goes into detail that of the letters sent to Coughlin, and of the ones that that he had access to, he claimed he encountered very few with anti-Semitic sentiments. Cremoni has a slightly different interpretation of this same issue in which she draws attention to the acceptance of anti-Semitic elements of Coughlin’s speeches. She summarizes the issue by stating that while Coughlin’s allusions to Jewish stereotypes did not receive substantial approval, they also did not seem to provoke indignation either, and were, at minimum, tolerated by his audience. She directly contests Brinkley’s claim that the lack of public disapproval of Coughlin’s anti-Semitism that was a sign that anti-Semitism was absent from Coughlin’s discourse or that it did not resonate with listeners. Instead, Cremoni proposes that the silence indicates “the extended and diffuse nature of the prejudice—about bankers,
'Gentile silver', international finance etc.—” of the era that made it socially permissible for Coughlin to express these ideas (2010, p. 36).

Hitting the nail on the head yet again, Cremoni directly contests Brinkley’s claim of Coughlin’s early anti-Semitism are “misguided but basically irrelevant.” As mentioned earlier, she believes that anti-Semitism was a substantial and consistent pillar of the priest’s message (p. 36). Father Coughlin’s early anti-Semitism was not so much a specific argument, but rather a frame of mind rooted in a blend of populism and anti-Semitic Catholicism (p. 35). More likely than not, the anti-Jewish rhetoric of Coughlin’s speeches also resonated with his followers. Americans of Coughlin’s era who were frustrated with the economy of the Depression would have been accustomed to linking code words such as “international financier” with Jewish bankers. Cremoni accurately notes that progressive views of attacking bankers can very easily lend themselves to age-old tropes of anti-Semitism. In conclusion, while Brinkley tries to claim that neither Coughlin and his supporters, and therefore Roosevelt, were complicit in anti-Semitism during the early 1930s while working for progressive, accountable economic reform, he is clearly wrong. Anti-Semitism was a prevalent element from the beginning of Coughlin’s political career and a theme that most likely resonated with his supporters.

**Back in Action**

The priest’s absence from public life did not last long. Bishop Gallagher passed away on January 20, 1937 and Father Coughlin resumed broadcasts a mere four days later, justifying it by saying it was the Bishop’s dying wish that he returned
to the public sphere. (Marcus, 1983, p. 138). After the death of Bishop Gallagher, Archbishop Edward Mooney became the Church superior to Father Coughlin. For the first several months following Mooney’s accession, Father Coughlin continued to denounce Roosevelt, broadcast over the air, and publish *Social Justice*, but directed most of his energy towards his church and parish. The priest did take a moment to call out President Roosevelt for attempting to increase the number of justices on the Supreme Court. Coughlin contended, and his position is congruent with the historical consensus, that FDR was trying to “pack” the court in order to sidestep its ruling that parts of the New Deal were unconstitutional. Overall, this period was relatively free of controversy compared to his rest of career (p.140).

The period of relative calm came to an abrupt halt on October 4, 1937 when the priest said two things that angered Archbishop Mooney. In a press interview, Father Coughlin said that the appointment of Justice Hugo Black, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan, to the Supreme Court was “a monument to President Roosevelt’s ‘personal stupidity’” (“Religion: Coughlin Silenced,” 1937). Although part of the radio priest’s aversion to Black lay in his own general political distaste for the New Deal and President Roosevelt, he also brought up very valid concerns about having the member of the most notorious American hate group in the highest level of the United States judiciary. Directly following Black’s appointment to the Supreme Court, a reporter published a series of articles, exposing that Black had been a member of the KKK before becoming a Senator in Alabama (Ball, 1996, p. 96). Coughlin believed that FDR and many senators had known about Black’s
involvement with the KKK long before his nomination was confirmed and he was officially appointed (“Debate Preceded Hugo Black’s Confirmation” 1937, p. 6).

Of particular concern to Coughlin was that as a judge, Black would not be loyal to the American people, because he had already pledged his loyalty to the Klan: “Justice Black swore a solemn oath to almighty God before a flaming cross that he would exercise hostility to the Catholic the Negro and the Jew” (“Father Coughlin Wants Black to Wear Hood,” 1937, p. 1). While the hypocrisy of Coughlin calling out someone else for showing racial prejudice should not be ignored, in this instance, Coughlin was clearly attacking Roosevelt from the left by maintaining that someone who was once part of a hate group should not be a Supreme Court Justice.

In the same press interview, Coughlin criticized President Roosevelt’s general initiative to pack the Supreme Court and stated, “May Black be a monument to the New Deal attempt to destroy the independence of the Supreme court” (“Father Coughlin Wants Black to Wear Hood,” 1937, p. 1). Although Coughlin articulates his dislike of the New Deal in this phrase, he is mainly focusing on the greater concern of the President infringing on the constitutionally designated power of the Supreme Court. Concurrent to Coughlin’s press interview, Social Justice highlighted the authoritarian characteristics of Roosevelt. The Social Justice article drew a comparison between how the “tyrannical” King George III controlled the judges of the 13 American colonies and how Roosevelt wants six judges who will ‘carry out his will alone,’ and then concluded that the actions of the two leaders were “dangerously close” to one another (Meechan, 1937, p. 10). Given the number of authoritarian regimes in the 1930s, it can be assumed that the priest’s assertion about Roosevelt’s
similarities to a historically well-known dictatorial ruler held particular significance to Americans who read the article. It should also not be ignored that Father Coughlin was often compared to a dictator, but in this situation, he was the one naming the President of the United States for having dictatorial tendencies.

The other declaration made by Coughlin on October 4th that aggravated Mooney pertained to the Congress of Industrial Workers (CIO), a prominent labor union. Advising the public not to nominate members of the C.I.O. for city offices, the priest strongly implied that the many C.I.O. leaders were communists and that the organization had values that “ran counter to Christian teachings.” Considering that the CIO was a rival of the A.W.I.A., the labor union that Coughlin supported, it is unsurprising that the priest disapproved of it (Marcus, p. 140). Thus, although Coughlin may have been more suspicious of labor unions, this incident should not be used as evidence supporting the claim that Coughlin was against organized labor in general, but instead understood that the priest disapproved specifically of the C.I.O. due to its communist affiliations.

Unfortunately for Coughlin, Mooney did not show the same support or sympathy for Coughlin that his forerunner, Bishop Gallagher, constantly elicited. Through a public statement in the Michigan Catholic, Mooney acknowledged that “there are Communists in the C.I.O. who are making every endeavor to gain control of the organization for communistic purposes” but that the C.I.O.’s public stated principles were not contradictory to Catholicity (reprinted in “Archbishop Mooney Rebukes Coughlin,” 1937, p.15). The archbishop chastised the priest for making such sweeping statements on behalf of the Catholic church, questioned his logic, and
strictly denied Coughlin any type of formal rebuttal (Marcus, 1973, pp.140-141). In regard to Coughlin’s comments on the President, Archbishop Mooney maintained that while priests may disagree with the President, they should remember “their own sacred calling” as Catholic clerics and “exercise restraint.” The Archbishop also affirmed that from here on out he would be more closely offering his “council” on Coughlin’s sermons and other statements before it went on the air (“Archbishop Mooney Rebukes Coughlin,” 1937, p.15). Preferring “silence to censorship” and taking it as a sign he would only be able to talk platitudes, the radio priest cancelled his 1937-1938 broadcast season. Coughlin also declared that Walter Baertschi, a businessman from Toledo, had taken over the publication of *Social Justice* (Bennett, p. 278).

A closer look at the analysis provided by Marcus (1996) of Coughlin’s two October 4th statements about FDR and the C.I.O. reveal that he neglects to include important details from Coughlin’s whole statement. He primarily includes the statements as an explanation as to why Mooney rebuked the priest and Coughlin’s subsequent hiatus from *The Golden Hour*. However, he focuses on Coughlin’s denunciation of the C.I.O. and offer a oversimplified version of his statements against FDR’s appointment of Black to the Supreme Court. Warren mentions authors briefly mention that Coughlin referenced the “personal stupidity” of President Roosevelt without providing the greater context in which the priest said it. Nevertheless, the *Radio Priest* is guilty of leaving out the fact that Coughlin was lambasting the President from the left for putting an individual on the Supreme Court who had sworn allegiance to the KKK. Furthermore, by providing no context as to why Coughlin
castigated the President, Warren is psychologizing Coughlin by leading readers to conclude that it was an unwarranted personal attack and attribute it to Coughlin’s savage personal nature.

The flip side of Warren’s omission of Coughlin’s discourse on Justice Black is that it draws more attention to on Coughlin’s comments on the C.I.O. By honing in on Coughlin’s attack on a labor union for having communists in its leadership, Warren effectively supports his claim that Coughlin was an enemy of the left. Additionally, Warren does not clarify that Archbishop Mooney corroborated Coughlin’s claim that the C.I.O. had communists, therefore making the priest’s accusations seem like a conspiratorial communist witch hunt. In summary, Warren’s account of Coughlin’s comments from the October 4th press interview strategically excludes evidence that shows Coughlin’s left-wing perspective. Radio Priest also leads readers believe that he was aligned with the right through twisting Coughlin’s statement.

A New Superior for Coughlin: Archbishop Mooney

Another factor that may have contributed to Coughlin’s waning popularity in 1937 can be partially attributed to the increased criticism and lack of support from the Catholic clergy, rather than Brinkley’s implication that it is solely due Coughlin’s own initiatives. The most obvious is the change in Father Coughlin’s immediate superior. While Bishop Gallagher had steadfastly defended Father Coughlin against the rebukes of prominent members of the Catholic hierarchy, Archbishop Mooney prevented the radio priest from speaking his mind. As Victor Ferkiss writes in his dissertation, The Political and Economic Philosophy of American Fascism,
“Gallagher’s death in January 1937 and the accession of Archbishop Mooney was a blow from which Coughlin’s career never recovered” (Ferkiss, 1954, p. 174). In his analysis of Coughlin’s waning popularity, Brinkley did not take the role of Coughlin’s Church superiors into account, preferring to attribute it to Coughlin’s embittered nature.

It is worthwhile to explain some of the other ways in which Gallagher repeatedly supported Coughlin in the year prior to his death. In July of 1936 Bishop Gallagher and Bishop Schrembs travelled all the way to Rome to see “the Holy Father and the Roman Curia” in order to defend Coughlin and Gallagher against the increasing number of denunciations from other members of the Catholic clergy, but unfortunately, the two American bishops did not find any support for their cause there (Boyea, p. 220). Father Coughlin received a secret visit from Monsignor Joseph Hurley, the Vatican Secretariat of State, in the summer of 1936, in which he urged the controversial priest to ‘be prudent and that he should say nothing which might diminish respect for constituted authority.’ Further disapproval from Rome arrived in September, 1936 when the Apostolic Delegate Cicognani wrote to Gallagher that Father Coughlin did not have the approval of the Holy See, as Bishop Gallagher had previously implied in a recent issue of the Michigan Catholic. Cicognani wrote, “It is not true that in ‘in the absence of criticism’ (from the Holy See) ‘we assume that everything is satisfactory’ as your Excellency has stated in the Michigan Catholic of September 10th. I trust that this point has been made sufficiently clear.’” Throughout all of these events, Coughlin had the steadfast backing of his bishop and did not back down (p. 222).
Those who wrote off Father Coughlin’s career as finished following the 1936 elections and rebuke from Mooney were highly mistaken. Baertschi side-stepped Archbishop Mooney and called upon the Vatican to allow Father Coughlin to return to the air in the fall of 1937. Father Coughlin’s followers did not remain silent, and held major protests and rallies in metropolitan areas throughout Michigan and Ohio. In response to Coughlin’s appeal, Pope Pius XI directed Archbishop Cicognani, the current Apostolic Delegate to the United States, issue a statement that upheld Archbishop Mooney’s actions. Even after the direct statement, Father Coughlin refused to give up and used a different method to appeal to the Vatican. The November 29th issue of *Social Justice* issues a page long appeal from Baerstchi to keep up the struggle and send a form letter to The Vatican requesting permission for Coughlin to speak over the air. The form letter referred to Pope Pius with the utmost respect, begging Him to permit Father Coughlin to be “free and unrestrained in preaching the doctrine of Christ to the poor and to all who will listen. The thousands of letters received by the Vatican must have had in impact on the His Holiness, because following a meeting between Coughlin and the Apostolic Delegate in December, the radio priest returned to the air in January of 1938 (Marcus, pp. 144-145).

**Christian Front**

Referring to Father Coughlin in the third person, the May 23rd 1938 issue of *Social Justice* announced the “Million League” a campaign to spread the principles of social justice in order to “save our country’s institutions” from the “isms investing
America.” The announcement came complete with a “co-operative coupon” that individuals interested in assisting Father Coughlin could fill out and send back to Royal Oak. With a headline that read “One million subscribers…five million readers…by Christmas,” the “Million League” appears to be an effort to sell more subscriptions to Social Justice rather than a new political sub-organization (“Eternal Vigilance is The Price of Liberty,” p. 23). The next several issues of Social Justice developed the concept of the “Million League” into something that more poignantly called for action. The Million League would be locally divided into independent small units of 25 people each, referred to as Social Justice “platoons.” The articulated goal was to have the Million League “national organization” formed by 1940, comprised of the individual “Platoons,” to have an influence on the 1940 presidential election, or, in Coughlin’s words, “the crisis of November, 1940” (“Form Your Social Justice Platoons of 25 Now,” p. 23). The use of the military term “platoons” made some people raise their eyes, but it seemed to be in-line with Father Coughlin’s self-cultivated persona as the leader of Americans trying to defend the nation from the threat of communism and fascism (Marcus, 1983, p. 155). Each week the calls for joining the Million League became more intense, stating that the United States will be Armageddon “the last stand of Christian civilization,” and, “if the battle is won in America, sanity in government can be preserved in the world” (“Eternal Vigilance is The Price of Liberty,” p. 23).

Father Coughlin employed the name “Christian Front” in his call for the Million League in late June of 1938, stating that “The saving of America must be done by a Christian Front” (“Liberty’s Sun Setting?,” 1938, p. 23). The priest had
gotten the name “Christian Front” from Franco, the political counterforce to the Popular Front, the latter being a grouping of various Marxist and groups of the far left. Soon, Social Justice began to just refer to the Christian Front and not to the Million League, but the basic structure remained the same (Marcus, 1973, p. 155).

Among the responsibilities of the Christian Front neighborhood platoons were to understand “the [16] principles of social justice, establishment of…programs for the poor, and preparation against the day when they will be needed” (Social Justice as cited in Warren, p. 188). The clear emphasis is on helping poor, but the phase “when they will be needed” no doubt had an ominous ring of potential violence.

Absent from the Coughlin’s biography by Brinkley, and downplayed in the Coughlin’s biography by Warren, is the fact that Coughlin instructed the platoons to prioritize fighting poverty to help the nation “out of our economic dilemma” via a Social Justice issue from May. Quoting the encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Atheistic Communism, Coughlin directed the platoons to offer aid to the working man and the poor before they became “easy prey” for the communists. Specifically, Father Coughlin wrote, “Go to the poor and to the working man, is my first command” and that the platoons offer assistance by setting up soup kitchens, caring for children, or “distributing clothing amongst the needy” (“Go to the Poor!” p. 3). There is no doubt that the neighborhood platoons supported by Coughlin would become a more hostile force at a later date, but in the spring of 1938, the radio priest instructed the platoons to concentrate on universally charitable and peaceful acts of goodwill. The aforementioned authors cannot reckon with the fact that the platoons, even though the term evoked a militaristic and threatening image, were told to focus on such
universally accepted charitable acts, that they exclude this element from their analysis entirely. Again, Warren and Brinkley demonstrate their adherence to the belief that progressive causes, such as helping the poor, are incongruent with someone who spouted anti-Semitism, and therefore need to sweep Coughlin’s advocacy for the poor under the rug. This is not to say that anti-Semitism by Coughlin or the Christian Front is acceptable in anyway, but by excluding Coughlin’s assertion that the organization should focus on the poor, Brinkley and Warren do not account for one of the reasons that the Christian Front garnered so much support.

An unsigned report by a cleric tells of one of the first platoon meetings, which is believed to have occurred in the late spring of 1938. About 40 gathered in the Paulist Fathers’ rectory in midtown Manhattan. They discussed general issues such as their eagerness for the Christian Front to be a nationwide unit and more specific ones, such as a plan to gather donations for Spain. All throughout, reference to the destructive tendencies of Jews were made, with one speaker even delivering his thoughts on the history of how the Jews broke up the protestants and now are seeking to also split apart the Catholics (Warren, 1996, p. 189). From an analysis of the individuals that attended meetings such as these elicited a much more explicit focus on the evils of the Jewish race than Father Coughlin instructed them to do. Besides acting on their own accord, it is also probable that their focus on the wicked dominance of international Jews was fostered by Coughlin’s other speeches around the same time.

Through print and radio, Father Coughlin employed increasingly combative and aggressive language to describe the Christian Front throughout 1938 and 1939. In
the discourse surrounding the Christian Front, the Royal Oak priest emphasized the
necessity to be Christian, active, and militant the most because “nobody has the right
to remain indifferent when religion or the public welfare are in danger” of being taken
over by communism” (Coughlin, 1939b). For instance, the headline of an article in
the July 31st issue of Social Justice in 1939 stated “Units of Militant Christian Front
Are Being Formed in Middlewest” and stated:

Out of hectic events in New York and along the Eastern
Seaboard...this inevitable counteraction to Communism...is taking
concrete form and marching forward.

Organized along militant lines, as a defense mechanism against
Red activities and a protector of Christianity and Americanism, the
Christian Front is spreading from Greater New York into Philadelphia,
Boston, and other Eastern Centers.

Sports and athletic prowess are two of the main objectives of
the Christian Front. (“Units of Militant Christian Front,” 1939, p. 3).

“Sports” functioned as a thinly cloaked word for rifle practice. One
platoon visited training camps to improve their marksmanship and practiced
“Nazi-like regimentation” (“18 Seized in Plot to Overthrow U.S.,” 1940, p. 3).
Observers commented that “the Christian Front and Christian Mobilizers are
openly national American movements that resembled Nazism.” Coughlin
never advocated for open violence, but also did not take strong actions to
condone it, and there were reports of hostile street skirmishes, especially against newspaper stands which did not sell Social Justice.

Father Coughlin was careful to clarify that he was not the direct leader of The Christian Front. He said “it is not becoming for me to identify myself with this organization or any other organization.” The given rationale for staying “aloof” from most organizations was based on Coughlin’s status as a clergyman and the poor outcome of his involvement with the National Union in 1936. Despite the fact that Coughlin and Social Justice would remain “disengaged” and “independent” from the organization, he maintained that he would be still “support a Christian Front whose advertised principles and whose officers propose to defend the unjust aggression of anti-Christian forces, even though some members of the Christian Front will be deserving, by the reason of ill-advised actions, of just criticism” (“My Position Towards Organizations,” 1939, p. 6). Through this announcement, which some suspect to have been mandated by Archbishop Mooney, Coughlin removed himself from direct blame for the actions done by members of the Christian Front. A student at Fordham Law School, Jack F. Cassidy, stepped up to head the Christian Front, but The New Republic featured an expose on Father Coughlin, accusing the priest of still being heavily involved (Warren, 1996, p. 190; “The Brooklyn Beer Hall Putsch,” 1940, p. 99). It remains unclear as to what extent Coughlin was involved not just with preaching general principles of the Christian Front, but with its actual groundwork.

There was no doubt overlap between Coughlin’s followers and those of other groups who held strong anti-Semitic views and supported the Nazi regime, such as with the German American Bund. The Madison Square Garden Bund rally on
February 20, 1939 had both Coughlinites and Bund members in attendance. The media criticized Coughlin was for supporting and associating with the openly pro-Nazi organization. In response, Coughlin gave a speech titled “The American-Christian Program” in which he highlighted that most citizens of the United States still favored Americanism over Nazism or Communism. He also mentioned that it was likely that many patriotic Americans, “who are not Nazi-minded but joined with the American Bundists in protest of Communism” (Coughlin as cited by Warren, p. 178). Although he did not personally associate with the American Bund, he also did not go to great lengths to deny the association, popular link was soon established in the media between the Coughlin’s adherents and members of The American Bund.

**Accusations of Anti-Semitism Amid War in Europe**

In 1938 many European countries were on the brink of War: politicians of Britain, France and Italy engaged in heated debates over the future of Czechoslovakia, “the Munich crisis was in full swing,” and at home in the United States, many Americans were anxious about the idea that their own country might get involved in another world war (Warren, 1996, p. 153). It was in this context that Father Coughlin honed in on the threat of “Jewish financial control.” The priest’s discourse had always made allusions to the evils of “Jewry” from the beginning of the 1930s. The difference was that now Coughlin began to more directly reference other well-known pieces of Anti-Semitic literature and more explicitly include the word “Jew.”
In July of 1938, Social Justice re-printed an adaption of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, one of the most historically well-known anti-Semitic texts. Protocols, asserted the belief that Jewish people were the source of all war and depression in the world. It continued on to say and that Jewish leaders had held a secret meeting to seize control and to impose “financial slavery” on all the worlds’ inhabitants (Warren, 149; Brinkley, 266). Originally appearing right before the 1905 rebellion against Czar Nicholas II of Russia, various translations of Protocols were spread following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution by anti-Semitic monarchists (Warren, 1996, p. 1149). In “From the Tower,” Coughlin’s personal editorial section of Social Justice, he quoted and approved a statement that Henry Ford had previously made on Protocols. In the statement, the automobile industry giant had implied that Protocols was an accurate assessment of Jewish people (p. 150). Towards the end of the Social Justice issue that included Protocols, Coughlin clarified that his newspaper “holds no enmity for the Jews” and “calls upon the righteous Jewish leaders to campaign openly…against these communistic attempts to overturn a civilization.” An issue of Social Justice from July 1938 Social Justice printed Protocols of the Elders of Zion, the hallmark of contemporary anti-Semitism. Protocols asserted the belief, or what is often referred to as a conspiracy, that Jews were the source of all war and depression in the world and that Jewish leaders had held a secret meeting to seize control and to impose “financial slavery” on all the worlds’ inhabitants (Warren, 1996, p. 149; Brinkley, 1983, p. 266). Originally appearing right before the 1905 rebellion against Czar Nicholas II of Russia, various translations of Protocols were spread following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution by anti-Semitic monarchists (p. 149).
On November 9th and 10th of 1938, Kristallnacht occurred, creating a flood of outrage from both civic and religious groups in the United States. Often referred to as “The Night of Broken Glass,” a pogrom executed in Nazi Germany against Jews. Two weeks after Kristallnacht, Father Coughlin preached on “one of the most vital and burning questions of our day—the question of the Jew and of the Christian, and of persecution” (Coughlin as cited by Warren, 1996, p. 155). In this sermon from November 20, 1938, Coughlin touched upon nearly all of his cornerstones of anti-Semitism. Coughlin explained that through a historical sequence of events the greedy practices of international financiers were indirectly responsible for the present Jewish persecution by the Nazis:

If Naziism, a persecutor of Jew and Catholic and Protestant, is a defense mechanism against Communism, be assured that Communism, another persecutor, was a defense mechanism against the greed of the money changers, who persecuted and pillorized the teeming populations of Europe. (Coughlin, 1939a, pp. 39-40)

In effect, Coughlin was holding Jewish bankers responsible for Nazi violence against all Jews, although he made a point to specify that innocent, religious Jews were not responsible for the crimes perpetrated against them. He also articulated the stereotypical trope of “tribalism,” which asserts that by nature, Jewish people are loyal only to other Jews, and not to any nation-state, and but nevertheless exercise great control over nations. For instance, Coughlin expressed this aforementioned view when he said that Jews were a minority with “no flag of their own” “but a closely
woven minority in their racial tendencies; a powerful minority in their influence” (1939a, p. 36). Citing research done by the Catholic Professor Dennis Fahey of Dublin, Coughlin also described on evidence that Jewish bankers had funded the Russian Revolution, a claim which was highly contested (1939a, p. 41).

The priest acknowledged that Kristallnacht was terrible, but simultaneously also called out the radio and the press for their wide coverage of the event and being silent after episodes of Christian persecution. Rather than focusing on the ills of the current Nazi campaign against Jews, the priest encouraged a more general effort to end all types of persecution against all religions (1939a, pp. 34-46). By asking “the world to distinguish between the innocent [religious] Jew and the guilty Jew,” the radio priest implied that the poor, religious Jews were not at fault, as was the priest’s custom (p. 39).

In response to Coughlin’s November 20th broadcast, WMCA, Coughlin’s New York radio station, sent the priest a letter saying that his sermon incited “religious and racial strife.” WMCA then notified Coughlin they would now required him to submit his scripts prior to broadcasting and would not be allowed to use their station if the sermons were found to “spread racial and religious hatred” (Warren, 1996, p. 160). The next Golden Hour sermon, broadcasted on November 27th, replayed a recording of the controversial November 20th broadcast with a brief section afterwards in which Coughlin defended the information he cited as credible and denounced the “vicious campaign of misrepresentation” against him (Marcus, p. 161). Having seen a version of the planned sermon prior to airtime, WMCA refused to carry this broadcast, stating that it did not meet their previously stated standards. Several other prominent stations
around the nation followed suit, include WJJD of Chicago and WIND of Gary, Indiana (Warren, 1996, p. 160).

Christian Fronters, angry that the New York City radio station WMCA removed Father Coughlin from the air staged a demonstration surrounding the station’s building, complete with picket lines. Slogans on the signs held by protestors promoted issues such as anti-Spanish loyalism, anti-communism, and veiled expressions of anti-Semitism in addition to directly protesting WMCA. A memorandum on street disturbances in New York City in response to the Christian Front located in the American Jewish Committee Archives cite that “notorious anti-Semites and men prominent in the Fascist movement” spoke at a rally. The speeches galvanized five thousand people to picket the station the following Sunday, shouting things like “Jewish bankers barred Father Coughlin from the air” and “This is a Christian Country.” They also engaged in altercations that sometimes got violent (‘Memorandum on the Street Disturbances in New York City,” n.d. pp. 2, 20).

Responding to accusations of anti-Semitism made by WMCA and others about his November 20th broadcast, Father Coughlin delivered a sermon titled “Not Anti-Semitism but Anti-Communism” (Coughlin, 1939a, p. 70). In the sermon, Coughlin reaffirmed his stance “that atheistic Jews were too prominent in furthering the cause of Lenin and Trotsky with its religion atheism, its patriotism of internationalism, and its security of confiscation” (p. 71). He then went on to restate his belief that Jewish bankers played a significant role in the Bolshevik revolution. He maintained that he was not an anti-Semite on that grounds that he was not making baseless claims, but that he had “documentary evidence” of the Jewish role in the
affair. The other defense he utilized was that he was not against Jews as a group, but only the Jews who supported communism (p. 81).

The radio priest clearly refused to be silenced by allegations of anti-Semitism. On December 30, 1938, *The New York Post* ran a side by side comparison that revealed that an article by Father Coughlin published on December 5th of that same year was almost word for word the same as an address given by Goebbels’ minister of propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. The article described various crimes committed by communists and financed by Jewish bankers, thus implying that the Nazi campaign against Jewish people was justified (Marcus, 1983, p. 169).

Criticisms of Coughlin’s addresses from civic organizations were also rampant. The primary complaint behind civic groups was the veracity of the political and historical information Coughlin was using. For instance, the Michigan Civil Rights Federation called for an examination on the truthfulness behind facts in Coughlin’s sermons (Marcus, p. 171). Central to public outcry against Father Coughlin were Jewish leaders and organizations. The American Jewish Committee published a book in April, 1939 titled *Father Coughlin: His “Facts” and Arguments* that examines the ways in the priest misrepresented history and misquoted statements related to the role of Jews in world affairs (p. 172). Father Coughlin did not take any of these allegations against his credibility lightly, and in response, published *An Answer to Father Coughlin’s Critics* in March of 1940. The priest painstakingly repudiated specific claims made about the false nature of his documents, and specifically focused on those featured in the book by the AJC.
The Trial of the Brooklyn Boys

In the days following January 13, 1940, the Christian Front made front page news nationwide. After a tip from an undercover agent, F.B.I. chief J.E. Hoover led a group of agents and arrested 18 men planning to overthrow the United States Federal government (F.B.I. Agents Arrest 18 in U.S. Revolt Plot,” 1940). The F.B.I. found them in possession of 18 homemade bombs, 12 rifles, thousands of rounds of ammunition, and an assortment of other arms, as well as the detailed plan for their U.S. government overthrow. The majority of the men arrested were part of various branches of the American armed forces, many were of Irish and German heritage, and nearly all resided in Brooklyn, causing the papers to dub them the “Brooklyn Boys.” The leaders of the movement were found to be William Bishop, head of a secret group inside of the Christian Front called “The Country Gentlemen” or “The Sports Club” and the previously mentioned John F. Cassidy. The plan included recruiting more members, terrorizing Jews, blowing up bridges, obtain control of the all utility facilities, seizure of the gold supply, the assassination of congressmen in order to install an anti-Communist dictatorship. The New York Times points out that it was a “fantastic notion” for this small group of men with such few weapons to think they could carry out such an ambitious program (“18 Seized in Plot to Overthrow U.S.,” 1940).

Initially following the arrests, Father Coughlin disassociated himself with the men arrested. He asserted that he had encouraged “a Christian front” in the fight against Nazism and Communism, but never was involved or supported the “specific” Christian Front of which the “Brooklyn Boys” belonged to and once declined a
donation from the latter organization (“Coughlin Condemns Group,” 1940). In contrast to his first position, Father Coughlin became more defensive of the “Brooklyn Boys” and labeled the arrests as potentially “another smear directed against an active anti-Communist group” orchestrated by Attorney General Murphy (Social Justice, 1940, “U.S. Cracks Down on Christian Front” January 22, p. 3). The priest took a firm stand with the Christian Front, and, by association, with the “Brooklyn Boys” in his January 21st radio address:

Thus, I appear before you today to record the fact that while I do not belong to any unit of the Christian Front, nevertheless, I do not disassociate myself from that movement. Therefore, I reaffirm every word which I have said in advocating its formation; I re-encourage the Christians of America to carry on in this crisis for the preservation of Christianity and Americanism more vigorously than ever, despite this thinly veiled campaign launched by certain publicists and their controllers to vilify both the name and the principles of this pro-American, pro-Christian, anti-Communist and anti-Nazi group… (Coughlin, 1940b).

Three weeks after being arrest by the F.B.I., the “Brooklyn Boys” were charged with one count of theft of government property and two counts of conspiracy. The testimony lasted nine weeks, full of heated questioning and controversy. The Vatican and the government combined efforts to keep Coughlin’s name out of the trial and specifically to prevent Coughlin from testifying. Having Coughlin associated with a plan to overthrow the United States government would look bad for the
Church, and the government was presumably afraid of the further public backlash from Coughlinites. As it was, large crowds formed outside the courthouse, cheering for the defendants and booing the federal officials. In the end, the jury exonerated 10 of the defendants, declared a mistrial for five, and found two guilty for conspiracy. The verdict, all in all, amounted to a failure on the part of the government (Warren, 1996, pp. 194-96).

Brinkley states that the number of members in the Christian Front were never large and estimates that the Christian Front membership peaked at around 1,200 (Brinkley, 1983, p. 115). It is difficult to assess the exact number of people involved in the Christian front due to its decentralized organization, conflicting definitions of how active in a platoon one has to be in order to be considered a member, and how Christian Fronters and general followers of Father Coughlin combined efforts for special initiatives. Additionally, the name “Christian Front” was “applied to a loosely cooperative federation of the anti-Semitic and fascist organizations in the country” (“18 Seized in Plot to Overthrow U.S.,” 1940). However, Brinkley’s figure of 1200 drastically understates the number of people involved with the efforts of the Christian Front. For instance, the aforementioned WMCA protest that gathered 5,000 protesters in a single day and many individuals held up signs that directly mentioned support for the Christian Front (“Memorandum on the Street Disturbances in New York City,” n.d. pp. 2, 20). All things considered, while the exact number cannot be defined, Brinkley undeniably downplays the number of people who mobilized behind the Christian Front in order for him to fit with his overall argument that Coughlin became irrelevant after the loss of the Union Party in 1936.
Anti-Refugee Politics

Father Coughlin played a prominent role in developing the complimentary nationalist and isolationist discourse in regard to what America’s role would be in World War II. He expressed this nationalism in regard to taking in persecuted Jewish refugees from war-torn Europe the financial aid, and direct military support. During the period between November 1938 and the start of World War II in Europe in 1939, Coughlin fought the push for admission of Jewish refugees into the United States (“The Mother of All,” 1938, p. 1).

While xenophobia is one of the main tenants of nationalist discourse in the 21st century, Father Coughlin said relatively little about immigrants. First of all, many Catholics that listened to his show were first or second generation Irish and German immigrants and an anti-immigrant message would have alienated large segments of his base. Secondly, the 1924 Johnson-Reed Act placed such strict quotas on immigration that it satisfied the goals of those who were most strongly opposed to immigration. One of the few times that Father Coughlin expressed opposition to immigration came in 1938, the same year in which he articulated more explicitly open anti-Semitic views. In an article featured on the cover of Social Justice, Father Coughlin contended that “good neighborliness is a good doctrine,” but that given we have not been able to employ our own unemployed and exploited, we have no business opening our arms to foreigners. Social Justice held Frances Perkins, the Secretary of Labor under President Roosevelt, responsible for “opening wide the portals” to immigrants and for acting as “the mother of all,” even if the “foreigners” entertained principle contrary to American ones. The article expressed a wish that all
immigrants would have to “forswear the hyphen of his former nationality…and allegiance to or sympathy with Communism, Nazism, or Fascism” (“The Mother of All,” p.1). Father Coughlin was by far from the only one who’s argument against refugees was laced with anti-Semitism, and a fair number of other groups rallied around the same cause in the name of patriotism (Warren, 1996, p. 174). Through his campaign against refugees, Coughlin was ardently advocating for economic nationalism against those who he felt would undermine the nation, his primary concern being the common people who adhered to Christian values. Father Coughlin’s campaign against Jewish refugees was one of the times that he broke his general rule of only criticizing the upper classes.

**Against Intervention in WWII**

Soon after war broke out in Europe in September, 1939 and until the United States intervened in December of 1941, Coughlin generally took a pro-German and anti-English stance on the conflict (Wappshot, 2015, p.136). In a September issue, *Social Justice* accused England, at the behest of bankers, of entering the war to protect its financial interests that were vulnerable to Hitler, and did not believe that England’s main reason for entering the war was to defend democracy or to fulfill treaty obligations (Marcus, 1973, p. 199). Coughlin’s media outlets also frequently stated that the Germany armed forces were much stronger than those of England, and therefore it was futile for England to keep fighting because they would be eventually defeated (p. 199).
Although Coughlin provided commentary on international affairs, his main concern was keeping America out of the war. Directly after war broke out in Europe in September, 1939, the Roosevelt administration started a campaign to revoke the arms embargo. Roosevelt’s plan, which soon went into effect, was to decrease previous neutrality rules in order to allow for “cash and carry,” a stipulation which would allow the American sale of weapons and military equipment to the Allies. The “cash and carry” phrase referred to the stipulation that the purchasers immediately paid for the items in cash and employed their own ships to transport their newly obtained weaponry (Marcus, 1973, p. 175). Before “cash-and-carry” was put into practice, Coughlin railed against all efforts to enact it, calling for the United States to “withstand the infection of war and dedicate itself to a strict policy of neutrality and peace.” Central to Coughlin’s opposition to “cash and carry” was anxiety that “our engaging in the merchandising of murder is the first step which leads inevitably to the latest step of war.” As indicated in this phrase, Coughlin’s central concern was he believed that “cash-and-Carry” was merely the first step along the road to full-fledged American military intervention. Coughlin highlighted the ways in which munitions makers and bankers, a.k.a. “Jews,” would profit as young American men died in battle (Marcus, p. 197) Illustrations that portrayed the violence of war were a frequent feature in Social Justice, such as one of a collapsed soldier with the caption “Never forget, Mr. and Mrs. America, that…the international warmongers, footing up the manstrength of the United States, are figuring on YOUR BOY for the guns.” On a related note, also present in Coughlin’s argument against repealing the arms embargo was to stay “a mighty bulwark of Christianity and civilization” by following George
Washington’s philosophy of “no foreign entanglements” (Coughlin, 1939, n.p.) He instructed listeners to “organize Christian American pressure” on both Congress and FDR. Listeners responded with gusto and soon Senators and the President began to receive letters in large batches (Warren, 1996) pp. 185-187; Marcus, 1973, p. 175).

These cries against war expressed by Coughlin and other like-minded individuals inspired outrage against the priest of Royal Oak for his strict isolationism. It was also suggested that the real reasons Coughlin did not want to enter the war were rooted in a sympathy and his widespread anti-Semitism. Present in the protests against Father Coughlin were also accusations that he was inciting his “vast audience to physical violence and racial hatred” (Rev. Leon Birkhead as cited by Marcus, 1973, p. 176).

In October, 1939, under public pressure to do something about Coughlin, The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) instituted a new set of regulations that severely limited the amount of radio time permitted to be sold to “spokesmen of controversial public issues.” These issues were specifically discussed by the NAB in regard to Coughlin’s position on the arms embargo (NAB as cited by Marcus, 1973, p. 176). Under the new NAB rules, matters “falling within the sphere of public controversial issues” would only be allowed on the limited time allotted to free public forum types and only if the station had gotten their speeches approved in advance.

There was a public consensus that the elimination of the option to buy radio time for controversial issues was directly targeted at Father Coughlin. Although the NAB instituted these rules in the fall of 1939, The priest was permitted to finish his contract for the 1939-1940 season, and after encountering severe difficulty in gaining any
broadcasting time through public forum programs, he announced in September of 1940 that he would briefly be retiring from the air. Complaints of free-speech arose from those who even disagreed with the priest but they were to no avail. While Coughlin still had his medium of *Social Justice*, 1940 was the end of his radio career (176-178).

The end of the summer of 1940 brought even more disappointment for the priest. After recognizing that running a third party candidate was not practical for the 1940 election, Coughlin extended his support to the Republican presidential nominee, Wendell Willkie, but got rejected on the grounds that Willkie did not want the support of someone who stood for racial or religious prejudice. Another political defeat occurred when Louis Ward, a member of Coughlin’s inner circle and the author of the priest’s authorized biography, lost the Democratic senatorial primary by a large margin (Marcus, 1973, p. 179).

Although Coughlin no longer had the medium of radio at his disposal, he continued to ardently fight against any signs that America might be headed towards entering the war in Europe. He was far from the only prominent American public figure who promoted non-interventionism. In September, 1940 Coughlin was one of a large mix of public figures who banded together under the America First Committee in order to keep the U.S. out of war. Members included individuals from both sides of the political spectrum who had different ideological groundings, but united around opposing any type of involvement of the U.S. in the war and the belief that President Roosevelt was trying to push the country towards war. Noteworthy members include the pacifist and socialist Norman Thomas, Midwestern isolationist senators Burton...
Wheeler of Kansas and William A. Borah of Idaho, as well as other notable isolationists such as Joseph Kennedy, “newspaper baron” William Randolph Hearst, Charles Lindbergh, and Henry Ford. The AFC is yet another example of how certain members of the left and right had commonalities, if not in reasoning, then in ultimate goal (Dunn, 2013).

The AFC boasted of 450 local chapters made up of 800,000 total members, comprise of those who identified as socialists and of those who identified as conservative isolationists (Dunn, 2013). While not every member was anti-Semitic, prominent members of the committee saw the Jews as responsible for pushing the country towards war. In an AFC speech in mid-September in 1941, Lindbergh acknowledged the horror of the persecution that Jews faced in Europe, but also said that the “Jewish groups” “greatest danger to this country lies in their large ownership and influence in our motion pictures, our press, our radio and our government” (Lindbergh, 1941). It should be obvious from this quote that Lindbergh and Coughlin shared a similar brand of anti-Semitism where they believed Jewish people were wielding vast amounts of power and undermining the national interest.

With the atrocities of World War I still in recent memory, most Americans disapproved of Hitler, but had no interest in American entry into the war. Hitler, along with the other authoritarians of the day, seemed irrelevant and too far removed to have impact on their lives (Marcus, 1983, p. 198). Nevertheless, as the war in Europe progressed the tide of American public opinion began to shift towards intervention. When Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, there was an overwhelmingly patriotic response for Roosevelt to go to war with Japan. The Senate
voted unanimously to go to war with Japan, and the majority of those who had
formerly opposed intervention rallied around FDR and decided to support FDR. The
America First Committee first made a statement in support of war with Japan
purposefully excluding endorsement of war with Europe, but then later recognized
that their campaign was over and disbanded (Wapshott, 2015, pp. 337-340).

Father Coughlin was one of the few isolationists who continued to criticize the
United States government even while America was at War. The issue of Social
Justice immediately following Pearl Harbor asserted that because America was at war
“we will submit to the will of the government.” However, Coughlin did not think that
citizens should quietly submit to the will of the government when your morals
informed you it was not taking the right course of action and stated, “when the
Government of our Country is definitely wrong, we reserve the right to say so.”
While criticizing the government and lambasting the Roosevelt administration,
Coughlin still supported the American soldiers who were fighting abroad and wanted
America to win the war (“We’re at War,” 1941, p. 3). This position on the war
reflects Coughlin’s value of supporting the common people of the nation over the
corrupt elites, who he saw as corrupt and not acting in ways that would benefit the
common good of the nation.

An article titled “We’re at War!” in an issue of Social Justice from December,
1941 stated that “greed, gain, pride, power, profit” - these will be balanced tomorrow
by loss, pain, debt and dependence” (“We’re at War, 1941, p. 3). Despite maintaining
that he did not harbor any prejudice against Jews, he labeled American Jews as
responsible for prompting the U.S. to enter the war. Advising Americans against
giving food to Great Britain when American children were going hungry, Coughlin raised the question “Is it too ‘pro-Nazi to demand that American school children be adequately fed before we give billons of dollars worth of food and war materials to Great Britain and the Communist U.S.S.R?” (as cited in Marcus, 1971, p. 205).

Beyond the obvious reference of feeding American children, this phrase alludes to Coughlin’s greater nationalist concern that the United States was expending resources on other countries before attending to the needs of its own citizens.

Now that the United States was actually at war, Coughlin’s criticism of the war brought more backlash from the public. Charging the priest with undermining morale, the left-wing daily P.M. labeled Coughlin and Social Justice were a “direct and unmistakable threat to both the man on the front lines of our fighting forces and to the men on the home front of our factories.” Now that the nation was at war, many deemed it unacceptable to criticize the government in any way. Elected officials also took notice. According to popular columnists Drew Peterson and Robert S. Allen, President Roosevelt instructed Attorney General Francis Biddle to take action on Coughlin (Marcus, 1973, p. 207).

The grand jury started gathering evidence against Coughlin. Evidence was found that Reardon, Coughlin’s emissary, travelled to Germany in the hopes of getting the Nazis to clarify that above all, they were concerned with Communism, not the persecution of religion. Reardon also wanted them to make a stance in support of Christianity. Coughlin acknowledges that this meeting took place, but said Reardon acted upon his own (Warren, 1996, p. 181). An undercover F.B.I. agent claimed that Coughlin was working with German agents to receive and publish Axis propaganda.
through *Social Justice*, namely anti-Semitic material, but Coughlin strictly denies it (Marcus, 1973, p. 209). There is also proof to suggest that *Social Justice* was partially funded by a pro-German lobbyist (Wapshott, 2015, p. 343). To clarify, even though he was allegedly tied to Axis funding and propaganda, at no point did Coughlin ever suggest that America should align with the Axis powers, but consistently criticized the government for getting the country involved in the war point blank (Coughlin’s *Social Justice* headlines as cited by Marcus, 1973, pp. 211-214).

At the same time as this other evidence was being gather, Biddle was working with the Postmaster General, to revoke the second-class mailing status of *Social Justice* on the grounds that it violated the Espionage of 1917. Biddle put together a detailed list of quotes that he considered to be in violation of the Espionage Act, most of which were disparaging comments about the American government, the tax burden it put on the common people, and the way in which the war served the international capitalists (Marcus, 1973, pp. 211-214).

The priest of Royal Oak declared that he would rather be indicted for sedition or resume business as normal, but nothing in between. Afraid that an indictment of Coughlin might cause uproar and division, as well as increased support of Coughlin’s beliefs, Biddle took a different route (Marcus, 1973, pp. 216-117). Biddle informed Archbishop Mooney that if the Church were to cease all of Coughlin’s public activities, the government would be willing to drop the charges against Coughlin. Mooney had wanting to shut Coughlin up for years. May 1, Mooney instructed Coughlin to halt all public activities or face laicization. Valuing his priesthood above
all political concerns, Father Coughlin obliged and ceased publishing the journal. The charges were quietly dismissed (Wapshott, 2015 p. 344).

This was not the first time that the Roosevelt administration had sought to muzzle Coughlin by way of the Church. Roosevelt had previously offered to “appoint to the Vatican an official US envoy if not quite a full ambassador” in exchange for Coughlin’s removal from public life. They had also threatened to conduct a tax audit on the Catholic archbishops if Coughlin was not silenced. The details on the situation are vague, but clearly the first two efforts to get the Church to act were ineffective (Wapshott, 2015, p. 343). Tull (1965) believes that “there can be no doubt” that Mooney disliked Coughlin, but “feared the consequences of decisive action against him” (p. 246). Additionally, given the previous intervention by the Vatican back in 1937 when Mooney silenced Coughlin, it is highly likely that the Vatican, and not Mooney, was also largely responsible for resisting the efforts of the government (p. 246).

After Coughlin was forced to abandon his personal radio program and print publication, he ceased to have a political influence through national media. He announced that the Church had banned him from all non-religious activities and made several veiled attempts to resume political activities, but to no avail. Nevertheless, he continued to preach to a crowd of 8,000 to 10,000 worshippers that showed up at the Shrine of the Little Flower every Sunday and continued to have a local influence until, at the strong urging of his diocese, he retired in 1966 (Marcus, 1973, pp. 217-221). In 1979, at the age of 88, he passed away from congestive heart failure.
By 1938, Brinkley has already dismissed Coughlin and the only information present in *Voices of Protest* is a general summary. Only gives a general summary of Coughlin’s politics. There is not very much material to analyze because both of the authors blatantly omit any type of politics that appeal to left-wing values or an advocacy for the poor. Coughlin continued to draw on right-wing and left-wing themes, oftentimes intertwined in a single message. For instance, his sermon from January 28, 1940 both praised the Christian Front and decried “industrial slavery” (Coughlin, 1940). A speech titled “Christians, Be Militant” proclaimed that “social justice is primarily interested in a just distribution in the goods of this world,” effectively speaking to progressive values, at the same time as it alluded to the Christian Front (Coughlin, 1939b). For instance, Coughlin exclusively preached against poverty in speeches titled “Social Justice and Economic Reform” in mid-March, 1939, and “10 Million Unemployed,” also from 1939 (Coughlin, 1940). Through their omission of Coughlin’s advocacy on behalf of the poor and denunciation of the exploitation of laborers, Brinkley and Warren fail to account for
the reasons why many Americans continued to find Coughlin’s discourse so attractive.

**Conclusion**

It should be clear by now that throughout Father Coughlin’s career, his political message consistently intertwined anti-Semitism and progressive politics. To recapitulate, this confluence challenges the political ideology and historical framework of two prominent biographers of Coughlin: Alan Brinkley and Donald Warren. Warren, an adherent of left-wing ideology, sees Coughlin as an anti-Semite from day one. He largely erases Coughlin’s resonance with left-wing concerns and seeks to associate him with the far-right wing. In doing so, he keeps progressive politics pure and untainted by anti-Semitism. Brinkley, an adherent of liberalism and admirer of FDR, seeks to shield FDR from any association of anti-Semitism or critique. Thus, Brinkley omits all of Coughlin’s anti-Semitism when the priest and the president were politically aligned, and paints Coughlin as an irrelevant fanatic after the priest and the president split. Both Warren and Brinkley engage in twisting evidence, and when all else fails, attempt to psychologize Coughlin. In both cases, all expressions of anti-Semitism remain completely divorced from efforts of progressive change. Although Warren focused on issues generally thought of as “right-wing” in *Radio Priest*, his omission of left-wing issues says more about the identity of the left. Warren’s analysis of Coughlin gives insight into the left and its attempt to separate its identity from any form of bigotry and pin all fault for it on the right.
In the 21st century, an undercurrent of anti-Semitism continues to be present in progressive politics, specifically in the left’s attack on Wall Street. For instance, take Matt Taibbi, an author and journalist with impressive “left-wing credentials” for all intents and purposes. He has been a guest on programs that support progressive, left-wing politics such as The Rachel Maddow Show, Democracy Now, and worked as a contributor on Countdown with Keith Olbermann, just to name a few (Greenwald, Taibbi, and the new Anti-Semitism,” 2009).

In 2009, analyzing the role of Goldman Sachs in the financial crisis of 2008, Taibbi opened article in Rolling Stone by stating “The world's most powerful investment bank is a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money.” He continued this same article, “The Great American Bubble Machine,” by listing a slew of Goldman Sachs bankers by name, the vast amount of political and economic influence they exercise, and the role they played in creating the financial crisis of 2008. Towards the end of the article, Taibbi wrote that “organized greed always defeats disorganized democracy,” and thus tied his article to the greater theme of how finance undermines the greater good of the democratic nation (Taibbi, 2009).

The article, and specifically the aforementioned quote, brought charges of anti-Semitism against Taibbi, highlighted by the fact that Goldman Sachs is popularly thought of as a Jewish firm. The quote went beyond the basic stereotype of Jewish people linked to money. It alludes to other historically anti-Semitic themes of Jewish bankers being a corrupt assemblage of individuals that hold loyalty to no nation and exercise vast amounts of power through international networks of finance.
To some, it even seems to touch upon the “blood libel” that Jews make matzoh out of the blood of Christian newborns (Greenwald, Taibbi, and the new Anti-Semitism,” 2009).

Taibbi was completely taken off guard, apparently unconscious of the anti-Semitic narratives he had conjured up through his critique of Wall Street. In his attempt to escape the charge of anti-Semitism, Taibbi stated that he the thought of religion (i.e. Judiasm) never even crossed his mind, and, if anything, and “what defines these Wall Street characters is not religion but the absence of it.” This rebuttal by Taibbi eerily resembles Coughlin’s defense that he was not interested in attacking “the religious Jews (the good Jews) but the rich Secular Jews who just happen to be Jewish (the bad Jews)” (Greenwald, Taibbi, and the new Anti-Semitism,” 2009).

The potency that the combination of drawing upon anti-Semitic narratives while championing the rights of ordinary Americans against elements of capitalism should not unnoticed. The Daily Kos recognizes that other attempts to attack capitalism, such as “the very clearly articulated Wall Street meltdown, brought about through deregulation in 1999 by Phil Gramm and the republican desire to massively deregulate Wall Street” are generally less effective in gather public attention. It just does not have the same effect of inspiring “mass citizen outrage” as the dangerous Jewish “hidden power at work destroying a country from within” does. Coughlin clearly touched upon a theme that was very effective in mobilizing the masses and which the left-wing largely continues to claim it does not share any association with. Perhaps the left has more in common with the right than it wants to admit (Greenwald, Taibbi, and the new Anti-Semitism,” 2009).
In a more general sense, if Coughlin teaches us about anything, it should be about how powerful and seductive an ideology that appeal to both left-wing and right-wing political concerns is. Dismissing a politician who challenges your political framework, as Brinkley and Warren do, is particularly dangerous when the politician’s message can resonate with both right-wing and left-wing concerns in a single message. Brinkley and Warren had the privilege of writing after Coghlin’s career was over, and thus did not run the risk that their dismissal and weak analysis of Coughlin could negatively impact an election. Dismissing large portions of a politician’s discourse, or by labeling them as crazy leads to a poor understanding of their politics and makes it more difficult to effectively counter them. For example, some people use Richard Hofstadter’s concept about the Paranoid Nature of American Politics as the end all be all in dismissing a political platform as irrelevant. Just because a political argument is based upon falsifications does not mean that it cannot be extremely powerful.

In the Cold War period, Coughlin’s brand of politics, what many would call fascism, was largely absent. This was because the belief in isolationist nationalism was largely absent due to the fact that America established itself as the world’s policeman, and any challenges to that were mainly made on the basis of peace, not nationalism. However, since the end of the Cold War and continuing through today, Coughlin’s fascist brand of political thought has reappeared (Wapshott, 2015, p. 337). Highlighting programs of economic nationalism and variations of phrase “America First,” journalists have likened Coughlin to political commentator Pat Buchanan and President Donald Trump. It would serve well to keep in mind the potent nature of
Coughlin’s political program and to not dismiss it as irrelevant, for that is when it becomes the most dangerous (Warren, M., 2016)

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