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The three musketeers of discontent (from left to right): Francis E. Townsend, Gerald L. K. Smith, and Father Charles Coughlin, at the height of their collaboration in 1936, as they attempted to defeat New Deal politics and politicians.

Gerald L. K. Smith

From Wisconsin Roots to National Notoriety

By Glen Jeansonne

In August 1936 Gerald L. K. Smith addressed a packed Cleveland stadium at the convention of Father Charles E. Coughlin's National Union of Social Justice. The afternoon was hot, and the audience sweltered. Smith, sweating profusely, stripped off his coat and tie and gulped directly from a pitcher of water without bothering to use a glass. The theme of his speech was the iniquity of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Smith claimed that the policies of FDR's administration represented "the most historic and contemptible betrayal ever put over on the American people. . . . Our people were starving and they burned the wheat . . . hungry and they killed the pigs . . . led by Mr. Henry Wallace, secretary of Swine Assassination . . . and by a slimy group of men culled from the pink campuses of America with friendly gaze fixed on Russia."¹ The audience roared. Smith smiled and sat down. Ten minutes later no one could remember what he had said.

In the 1930s, with Americans struggling for survival in the worst economic disaster in their history, Smith addressed more and bigger live audiences than any speaker of his generation. They rarely left disappointed. With his beak-shaped nose and piercing blue eyes, standing six feet tall and weighing over two hundred pounds, he was a dynamo, an extraordinary demagogue who swayed thousands and infuriated millions. His crisp voice, his spontaneous gestures, his transparent zealotry fixated audiences. Routinely, Smith was mesmerizing, though often vacuous. His oratory impressed crowds, raised emotions, thrilled the masses. Journalist William Bradford Huie wrote of Smith in the 1930s: "The man has the passion of Billy Sunday. He has the fire of Adolf Hitler. . . . He is the stuff of which Fuehrers are made." "Before a live audience," another journalist wrote, "he makes Father Coughlin seem somewhat less articulate than a wax-work." He was, said Huey Long, "the only man I ever saw who is a better rabble-rouser than I am." H. L. Mencken, who in his long journalistic career had listened to orators from William Jennings Bryan to Franklin Roosevelt, wrote: "Gerald L. K. Smith is the greatest orator of them all, not the greatest by an inch or a foot or a yard or a mile, but the greatest by at least two light years. He begins where the best leaves off."² Gerald L. K. Smith was also a son of Wisconsin, born and bred.

Gerald Smith's story began at the turn of the twentieth century in rural southwestern Wisconsin, where his parents' families had moved in the 1850s and 1860s via western Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Indiana after several generations of steady westward migration. His American roots on both sides of his family lay in the South and the border states—Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee—and went back to the 1600s. His ancestors included Quakers, Tories, a Civil War veteran, and virtually every strain of pre-Revolutionary Anglo-American imaginable. He was particularly proud of his father's Virginia forebears, though his father, Lyman Z. Smith, himself had been born in Wisconsin and Lyman's father, Zachariah, in Ohio.³

The Smith clan eventually settled in the Kickapoo River valley and three adjoining townships in three counties of the state's Driftless Area: the Town of Clayton in Crawford County, the Town of Sylvan in Richland, and the Town of

Kickapoo in Vernon. The Driftless Area, a place where the last glaciers ground to a halt about twelve thousand years ago, offers a landscape that is rugged and unscathed. It is a region characterized by hogbacked hills and ridges, deep valleys (coulees), and high prairie. In the days before modern transportation, these elements made for isolated environments, few and small towns, and regional rather than village-based identifications and loyalties. Demographically, the area now is associated with a mixed population of Norwegians, Germans, and old Americans. But when Gerald L. K. Smith's ancestors settled there, they found themselves among a substantial population of settlers very much like themselves: American stock

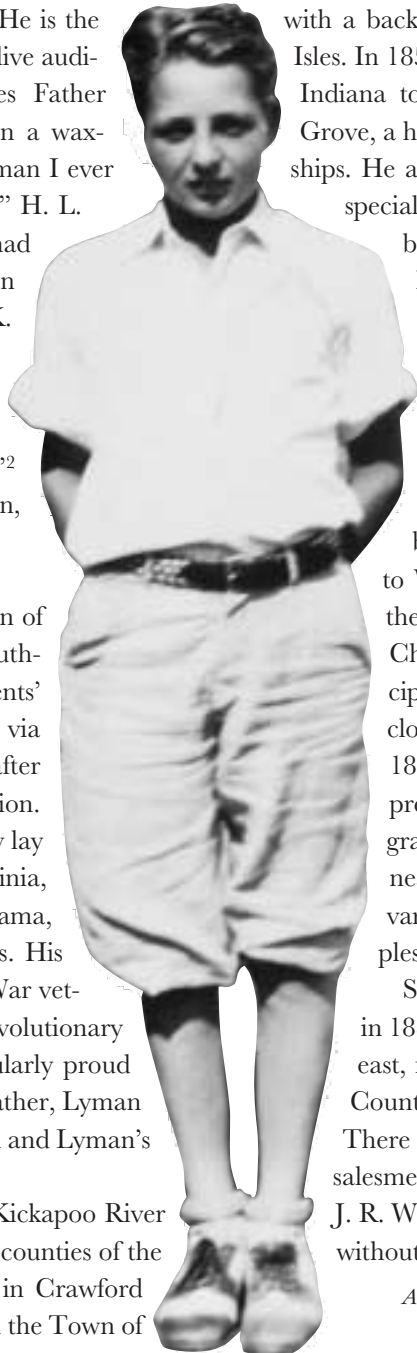
with a background in the South and roots in the British Isles. In 1855 Smith's grandfather Zachariah moved from Indiana to Wisconsin and selected farmland at Sugar Grove, a hamlet virtually on the border of all three townships. He acquired several hundred acres and eventually specialized in buying and selling horses, shuttling

between Montana and Wisconsin. The Smiths had ten children, successively in Ohio, Indiana, and Wisconsin as the family moved west.

The youngest was Lyman, Gerald's father, born in 1863. While living in Indiana from 1846 to 1855, Lyman's parents helped start a Disciples of Christ church at Burlington, a small town west of Kokomo. The Smiths brought their interest in Christianity with them to Wisconsin and were instrumental in founding the Sugar Grove Church of Christ. (The names Church of Christ, the Christian Church, the Disciples of Christ, and "Campbellite" churches are closely related.) The congregation got going in 1855, and Zachariah later donated land for the present building. Some seventy years later his grandson Gerald began his ministerial career in a nearby Church of Christ in Soldiers Grove, and various cousins of Gerald have served the Disciples ministry almost without a break ever since.⁴

Shortly after Lyman married Sarah Henthorn in 1886, the couple moved about one hundred miles east, from Sugar Grove to Pardeeville in Columbia County, a town that had excellent rail connections. There both Lyman and his father-in-law traveled as salesmen for home medical products, probably for the J. R. Watkins Company of Winona, Minnesota. Being without the services of a Disciples church, Lyman

As an adolescent Smith showed a serious side.
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WHS Archives, CF 6728, WHi(X2)14428

Dr. Francis E. Townsend was a lifelong advocate of a pension plan that he designed for the elderly. In 1936 Townsend visited Wausau; the man welcoming him at the microphone is most likely Gerald L. K. Smith.

Smith “conceived the idea of getting a man to come to our town and hold a meeting, which resulted in a good Bible School and a small Church,” erected in August 1895.⁵

Gerald Lyman Kenneth Smith came into the family on February 27, 1898, his parents’ second and last child. The family did not remain in Pardeeville long thereafter. George Henthorn, Gerald’s grandfather, died on March 18, 1900, and was buried in Pardeeville. Lyman suffered chronic health problems, and his overall health deteriorated significantly that same year. By June the Smiths had moved back to their home area in the southwestern part of the state, living on a 120-acre subsistence farm in the Town of Sylvan. When his health permitted, Lyman farmed and occasionally took to the road again, this time peddling household products in nearby counties for the W. T. Rawleigh Company of Freeport, Illinois.⁶

Apart from his own recollections, details about young Gerald’s boyhood are scant, but the family situation suggests it was not typical. The family practiced devout Christianity, of course, and church and household religious activities loomed larger in Gerald’s life than in the lives of most boys. Smith’s parents taught him to interpret the Bible as the literal word of God, and Smith read the Bible repeatedly, cover to cover. His

reading did not extend to broader areas of American history and literature. Always, Smith reacted emotionally rather than intellectually to what he read. He proudly remembered a proverb of his father’s: “If it is more than the Bible it is too much, if it is less than the Bible, it is not enough; if it is the same as the Bible we don’t need it.”⁷

Gerald was his father’s boy. When Lyman was ill, as he often was, his son had to help care for him; when his health improved, the elder Smith would often take to the road, selling. Yet Lyman’s illness brought them closer together than many sons are to their fathers, and Smith credited him with much of his later success as a speaker and writer. As Smith explained: “And I learned more at my father’s knee than I learned at all the colleges and universities and high schools, outside the technical knowledge, that I ever attended.”⁸ Smith resented his mother, the family disciplinarian, of whom he said: “She was not a son worshipper. She never hesitated to criticize me and point out my mistakes.”⁹

As was typical in rural Wisconsin around the turn of the last century, Smith’s formal education began in a spare, one-room schoolhouse without indoor plumbing. The school was about a mile northwest from the Smiths’ equally spartan four-room



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*Smith and associate editor Bernard A. Doman (right) examine the first copy of Smith's *The Cross and the Flag*, his journalistic mouthpiece. The monthly, a rabidly anti-Semitic, anti-Communist, anti-black, anti-labor, and anti-New Deal publication, helped Smith raise money and promote his campaign for the U.S. Senate in 1942, in which he ran as a republican. *The Cross and the Flag* reached about twenty-five thousand subscribers.*

house in Richland County. School was taught by young girls barely older than some of the farm boys in the classroom, and classes for grades one through eight were held in the same room. By the time he was nine, Smith claimed to have memorized the lessons through grade eight—having heard them year after year. Imagining himself a prodigy, he believed that his family, though poor, was superior to the other Kickapoo Valley residents. “We had nothing in common with the illiterates that were in that area,” he boasted.¹⁰

Smith said that he soon outgrew the rural school and persuaded his parents to let him attend the better schools in Viola, about seven miles north. He remained there through his freshman year, until his father’s health improved so significantly that he could return to traveling sales full time. The Smiths moved to Viroqua, where the schools were larger and better, although they did not sell the farm.¹¹

Young Gerald seems to have found in high school his future as an orator and speaker. His “Senior Superlative” in the annual called him “the most talkative.” As a newcomer to Viroqua in his sophomore year, he was elected class president. Along the way to graduation in 1915, he was president of the school’s literary society, business manager of the 1915 annual, “yell master” for the sports teams, Duke Orsino in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (the senior class play), a member of the

track association in his junior year, a performer in the minstrel show, a soloist in the glee club, and a standout in oratory and debate. In his first year at Viroqua, Smith was one of the debaters “who put one over Tomah,” along with Joe Roman, a member of the only Jewish family in town. In oratory in his senior year, he took first place in the league contest at Sparta, delivering William Jennings Bryan’s famous “Cross of Gold” peroration “with the fire and eloquence of a Daniel Webster.” For his senior annual, he wrote essays about school spirit and a thirty-below-zero basketball excursion to Viola. (In his autobiography, written many years later, the mercury had dipped to forty-eight below.) Despite his extracurricular and church activities, Smith remembered that he was not a “goody goody” and “knew my way around with the high school girls.” In short, he was a high school success, and he graduated from the German-language sequence (the school offered several language-based courses of study) with a class of twenty-four on June 4, 1915. The author of the class prophecy twitted him: “But I must confess I have been rather disappointed in

Gerald Smith. I had always imagined him as the graceful wearer of the white tie and Prince Albert in some large church, but after he finished his seminary course, he went to raising chickens down on the Kickapoo.”¹²

Smith did not enter a seminary after high school, but in the fall of 1915 he did enter college—Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana, then known as “the poor man’s Harvard.” (It has been a Lutheran university since 1925.) In Smith’s day the school was owned privately by Henry Baker Brown, a Disciples of Christ minister, who made it possible for many young men to receive an education and support themselves with jobs at the school and around town. Smith made his way by mowing lawns, washing dishes, waiting on tables, and serving a small congregation in nearby Deep River, Indiana. Valparaiso was basically a two-year, degree-granting school, and Smith received a bachelor of oratory degree there in August 1917, having taken additional classes in religion. He had hoped to attend graduate school at the University of Illinois but came down with nephritis and returned to the family farm to recuperate.¹³

In addition to his schooling and Christian upbringing in Wisconsin, Smith remembered being influenced selectively by Robert M. La Follette, the state’s Progressive governor (1901–1906) and U.S. senator (1906–1925). Smith’s father was

a disciple of La Follette, and he passed La Follette's speeches and magazines to his son. The most prominent politician in the Kickapoo Valley in that era was James O. Davidson of nearby Soldiers Grove, a Progressive who was La Follette's lieutenant governor and his successor as governor. Davidson's influence in his home area also may have affected the Smith family's allegiance to progressivism. What Smith remembered most was La Follette's anti-monopoly crusade and his defense of "the little man." "My father was a La Follette man," Smith recalled. "He believed in Bob La Follette. In those days he was honestly progressive, and you could say 'progressive' without having to explain that you weren't a Muscovite."¹⁴

In January 1918, when he was only nineteen, Smith accepted his first pastoral call, to the Soldiers Grove Church of Christ, a six-year-old congregation with a brand new, cement-block church and a \$2,500 debt. (One of Smith's relatives, John Chitwood, was an officer of the church.) By June, "with no outside preaching," sixty-five new members had joined the church roll, and Bible school enrollment had more than doubled. In June the congregation invited a visiting minister from Illinois, George L. Snively, to its homecoming weekend, and he raised pledges of \$4,100 "to liquidate the old debt, complete our basement and buy a new bell." The delighted congregants took up collection to thank Smith and bought him a gold watch "as a reminder of their love and esteem for himself and his work."¹⁵

Smith did not mention his Soldiers Grove work when he



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Although New Orleans governor Huey P. Long was assassinated in 1935, Smith continued to worship his former mentor and boss, the "Kingfish," for the rest of his life. Here Smith and his wife, Elna, place a wreath on Long's tomb and monument near the Louisiana State Capitol in Baton Rouge.

completed a pension fund questionnaire in 1925 for the Disciples' home office. He wrote that his pastoral career began two years later, in January 1920, when he accepted a pastorate at Footville, about ten miles west of Janesville. There, too, he quickly became a success with his preaching. "Bro. Smith preaches the gospel plainly week after week, but the people seem to delight to hear it," so much so that within a year the small congregation had grown by 125 members. Articles about him and his work appeared regularly in the Disciples of Christ official publication, the *Christian Standard*. While at Footville, Smith met a strikingly attractive church singer from Janesville, Elna Sorenson, daughter of a middle-class, devout family. Elna and Gerald dated for a year and then were married on June 21, 1922. A quiet, modest, beautiful woman, Elna supported her husband in all of his political and anti-Semitic crusades, a true helpmate who made his priorities her own. Over the course of their fifty-two-year marriage, Elna

Smith would give birth to their son Gerald, Jr. (Gerry), work the crowds at Smith's speaking engagements no matter how many protestors were present, serve as an associate editor of many of his publications, and even marry the man Smith had chosen for her before he died.¹⁶

By the time of his marriage, Gerald had left Footville and had been, for only a year, pastor of a newly organized congregation in Beloit. While there he accepted a speaking engagement at the denomination's national congress in St. Louis, talking about how he had overcome difficulties in a rural

church setting. The talk proved to the body's national leaders that Smith possessed exceptional oratorical gifts, and thereafter his career took off. He received a 25 percent raise (to \$2,500 a year) by moving to a church in Kansas, Illinois, where he stayed a year; then in late 1923 he accepted a call to a church in one of the denomination's most important strongholds, Indianapolis, for an annual salary of \$4,000. He was only twenty-five. His ministry there abruptly ended in 1929 when Elna was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and doctors urged the couple to move away from the coal-infused air of the midwestern industrial city. Although Smith considered offers to relocate in several locations, it was the combination of a job offer from the largest Disciples church in Louisiana, in Shreveport, and the discovery that Shreveport also had an excellent reputation for tubercular convalescence that made the choice clear. Smith's original plan was to remain in Louisiana only for the amount of time Elna needed for a full recovery. He had no idea that this decision would land him in a place where his rhetorical skills would carry him from the pulpit to the national political lectern.¹⁷

Smith's serious political career began in Shreveport, Louisiana. As before, he proved an effective and controversial pastor, converting souls and raising money. In the course of advocating for several congregants who were facing foreclosures, Smith met the Louisiana politician known as "Kingfish," Huey P. Long. As governor and then U.S. senator, Long was the most powerful politician in Louisiana's history. He saved some of Smith's parishioners' homes and businesses, and Smith adored him for it.

Smith later said that the banker who wanted to foreclose was a Jew.¹⁸ But this statement is no indicator as to why Smith veered off his pastoral path into anti-Semitism and hatemon-gering. In fact, it was as a minister in Shreveport that Smith



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Smith holds a flag representing the so-called British-Israel movement. According to Smith, Jews masterminded a plan to force the United States back into the British Empire. The flag he brandishes would replace the American flag as America once more became a colony.

engaged in some local ecumenical work, even joining with a rabbi and scheduling reciprocal visits to each other's congregations.¹⁹ From an early age, Smith had displayed symptoms of a bipolar disorder, prone to episodes of manic energy and frantic work, followed by relapses into periods of depression and withdrawal. Prior to his marriage, while still a young man, he had suffered two nervous breakdowns. His hatred of Jews

and other minorities seems to have arisen more from a generalized authoritarian personality than from any specific incidents with minorities in his formative years. In addition, his fervent Christianity inclined him to view Jews as the enemies of Jesus.²⁰

It was not any form of bigotry that heralded Smith's departure from the ministry and his entry into politics. Rather, it was Smith's growing public association with Huey Long and support of the politician's liberal, often radical agenda that alienated the wealthy and conservative board members of Smith's church. Seven months after arriving in Louisiana, Smith left his Shreveport church just before being fired; he never returned to the pulpit. It was in the early 1930s that he began to nourish secret fascist sympathies, which grew more pronounced as he aged. In January 1933 he wrote to a certain Hugo Fack, who had traveled to Germany and there met the leaders of the new Nazi government:

*I am anxious to get in touch with his Honor, Adolf Hitler, but knowing that you are recently removed from Germany, before doing so I desire your opinion of conditions in that country. They look good to me. Can you give me a code for getting in touch with Herr Hitler or one of his representatives in America?*²¹

Just after quitting his Shreveport church, Smith found himself attracted to the native Nazi William Dudley Pelley and his paramilitary Silver Shirts. Pelley, a religious mystic who claimed to have died, gone to heaven, and returned to North Carolina, planned to overthrow the American government. Smith started a march up the Mississippi Valley to join him, writing: "By the time you receive this letter I shall be on the road to St. Louis and points north with a uniformed squad of young men composing what I believe will be the first Silver Shirt storm troop in America."²² The rendezvous never materialized. Few recruits swarmed to Smith. Disappointed, discouraged, he returned to Shreveport.

Smith soon found a more promising channel for his energy. Huey Long offered him a job. Long was planning to challenge Franklin Roosevelt for the presidency in 1936. The focus of his appeal was a plan to confiscate millionaires' incomes and redistribute them to the masses. It was an attractive program to many in the depths of the Great Depression, when Americans were turning to strange messiahs and desperate schemes. Demagogic and impractical, Long's approach was nonetheless clever and strategic. Smith was to be its chief advocate, touring the nation to organize local units of the Share-Our-Wealth Society.²³

Smith loved the work, and he thrilled rural audiences with his oratory. Farmers and merchants flocked to his speeches and joined clubs. He exhorted them to "pull down these huge piles of gold until there shall be a real job, not a little old sow-belly, black-eyed pea job but a real spending money, beefsteak and gravy, Chevrolet, Ford in the garage, new suit, Thomas Jefferson, Jesus Christ, red, white and blue job for every man."²⁴ Those who signed up for the local clubs received membership cards and became part of Huey Long's growing mailing list, targets for additional propaganda. Smith rejected criticism that he was all noise and no content. He had a program: impeach traitors (including FDR), deport Jews and blacks, repeal the income tax, outlaw communism, and make America, capitalism, and Christianity synonymous.

President Roosevelt worried about Huey Long, perhaps unnecessarily, though no one could predict public attitudes if the Depression persisted. But the hopes of Long, Smith, and their partisans crashed when Long was assassinated in September 1935. (Smith believed Long's assassin, Dr. Carl Austin Weiss, was a Jew. He was actually a Catholic.)²⁵ Smith delivered Long's funeral oration at the Louisiana capitol before 150,000 people. "This tragedy fires the souls of us who adored him," he said. "He has been the wounded victim of the green goddess; to use the figure, he was the Stradivarius whose notes rose in competition with jealous drums, envious tomtoms. He was the unfinished symphony."²⁶

Losing out in the political power struggle in Louisiana that followed Long's death, Smith went in search of an ally. He found one in Dr. Francis E. Townsend of California. Townsend, like Long, had a panacea for the Depression. It was called the Townsend Recovery Plan and involved paying unemployed people over sixty-five two hundred dollars a month, which they had to spend before the next installment, all financed by a national sales tax. Smith insinuated himself into Townsend's organization, joining the board of directors, raising money, and organizing a youth corps. A marriage of convenience, the Townsend-Smith alliance served both men well. The doctor needed Smith's youth, vitality, and charismatic oratory as much as Smith needed Townsend's movement and credibility.²⁷

Father Charles Coughlin was also on the scene. Coughlin was a formidable figure. A Catholic priest with a large congregation in suburban Detroit, he had the largest radio audience in the nation. More people listened to "the radio priest" than to Roosevelt or to "Amos 'n' Andy."²⁸ Coughlin had broken with Roosevelt after initially supporting him. The priest thought Roosevelt was too timid to inflate the currency sufficiently, too stubborn to accept his advice or recognize his stature.

The 1936 presidential campaign brought together Smith, Townsend, and Coughlin in the Union Party. Their united following was enormous and fanatical, and Smith and Coughlin were the most eloquent public speakers in the nation. None of them was a credible candidate; Coughlin was a priest born abroad, Smith was a disreputable demagogue with no political experience, and Townsend was a septuagenarian. They therefore selected a candidate who seemed to them an amiable puppet, no threat to their dominance in an anti-Roosevelt third-party movement or to their substantial egos: William Lemke of North Dakota.

On July 15, 1936, a horde of elderly people assembled in Cleveland for Townsend's national convention. Impoverished, idealistic, desperate, they sang hymns and prayed for the return of prosperity through the

Townsend plan. Townsend delivered a long, dry speech explicating the statistical implications of his plan. Some people nodded off. Smith spoke next, and no one dozed, though he spoke for three hours, forcing later speakers off the program. Brandishing a Bible, he said that if it was rabble-rousing to defend the Constitution, praise the flag, and advocate the Townsend Plan, he wanted to be the best rabble-rouser in the country: "You give me Santa Claus and the Bible and the Constitution and the Flag and the Townsend Plan, and I will do ten thousand times as much as you will with the Russian primer, no Santa Claus, and the Lenin communistic Marx plan."²⁹ As H. L. Mencken reported, Smith's speech "ran the keyboard from the softest sobs and gurgles to the most earsplitting whoops and howls, and when it was over, the 9,000 delegates simply lay back in their pews and yelled."³⁰

Three weeks later, eight thousand Coughlin supporters met in the same Cleveland auditorium where the Townsendites had gathered for Coughlin's convention of the National Union for Social Justice. Townsend, Coughlin, Lemke, and Smith spoke, but it was Smith who stirred audiences most successfully. "A nursing baby, they say, is content while it's taking milk,"



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In his 1942 campaign for the Republican nomination from Michigan for the U.S. Senate, Smith promised to end rubber rationing and provide enough tires for everyone. According to Smith, his friend Henry Ford was working on a synthetic material that could provide abundant tires but was being held back by the Roosevelt administration.

he told the Coughlinites. "You sit in your places and take it while I pour it on, and I'll tell you when to clap. I come to you 210 pounds of fighting Louisiana flesh, with the blood memory of Huey Long, who died for the poor people of this country, still hot in my eyes."³¹ Smith evidently had transplanted his roots from the Driftless Area of southwestern Wisconsin to the red clay of Louisiana.

Father Coughlin, upstaged for the second time in three weeks, discarded a planned joint tour with Smith. William Lemke, eclipsed in the presence of more effective demagogues, campaigned alone. The press ignored him, focusing on Smith and Coughlin. Smith was intoxicated by the campaign, flattered by the media attention, invigorated by audience feedback. He asserted that Lemke would win because he permitted "the Rev. Charles E. Coughlin to define his money plank . . . Dr. Townsend to define his old age security plan . . . [and] Gerald Smith to define his plank on labor, education, and home-steads."³²

Smith and Coughlin provoked each other's worst instincts. Ambitious, arrogant, thriving on adulation, lusting for power, they both peaked in excesses a week before the election. Smith

began to consider himself bigger and more important than his allies. Perhaps he didn't need them. Maybe he could attain power on his own, without puppets such as Townsend and Lemke or a rival such as Coughlin. On October 20, he announced that he was creating an independent movement to "seize the government of the United States."³³ Townsend responded, "If the press reports concerning the fascist action of Gerald L. K. Smith are true, then I hereby disavow any connection that Mr. Smith may claim in the organization of the Townsend National Recovery Plan. I am against fascism."³⁴

The sponsors of the Union Party gave up before the vote. Coughlin found Smith frightening. Townsend had never been enthusiastic about the Lemke candidacy, caring only about his own program. "I would vote for a native-born Chinaman if he was for the plan," he admitted.³⁵ In the election of 1936, Roosevelt was reelected in a landslide. Lemke won only 891,858 votes—less than 2 percent of the total—and carried no states. Alf Landon, the Republican candidate, carried only two states. The Union Party never offered another candidate.³⁶

The Union Party effort in retrospect was pathetic. Its organizers spent only \$95,000; the Republicans spent \$14 million, the Democrats, \$9 million.³⁷ Though Smith and Coughlin were charismatic speakers, it did not follow that they were effective politicians. They did little grassroots organizing; precinct work bored them. They were naive to attack a popular president; Wall Street would have been a more viable target. They made no overtures to organized labor. Supreme egotists representing special interests, they thrived on discontent, but there was less of it in 1936 than in 1932. Roosevelt's New Deal had worked no miracles, but it had provided hope; the economy had improved. The demagogues' proposed panaceas were passing fads; they could not practice restraint or argue rationally. Voters believed FDR could deliver while the Union Party could not.

Gerald L. K. Smith's audiences peaked with the 1936 campaign, but his following remained loyal. He settled in Detroit and befriended Henry Ford. Ford financed a series of radio broadcasts and impulsively told Smith he would make a great president. Smith started more modestly, running for the United States Senate in 1942. Smith sought the nomination of Michigan's Republican Party, winning 100,000 votes and running second in the primary. He then ran in the general election as a write-in candidate, but he finished last. His political plans crushed, he turned to red-baiting and anti-Semitism. He credited Ford with revealing the connection between communism and Judaism. "The day came when I embraced the research of Mr. Ford and his associates," he wrote, "and became courageous enough and honest enough and informed enough to use the words: 'Communism is Jewish.'"³⁸



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Smith became increasingly unpopular because of his lack of patriotism before and during World War II, and his bigoted beliefs angered many. Pickets greeted him in many cities where he conducted speaking engagements.

At the close of his pastoral career in 1934, Smith not only continued to speak but also to write—more than five hundred tracts, pamphlets, and books, and nearly every word of a monthly, *The Cross and the Flag*, which he began publishing in 1942 and maintained for thirty-four years, reaching twenty-five thousand subscribers.³⁹ His writing, like his speaking, was simplistic and hard-hitting, identifying and denouncing villains, praising icons of the right. His short, choppy, adjective-laden sentences with their heavy-handed analogies and crude humor did not appeal to the sophisticated. The only research behind his essays was news clippings, excerpts from far-right



journals, and comments from casual conversations. He was a propagandist, not a scholar, living in a mental world inhabited by stereotyped villains and invidious conspiracies. He read only to confirm his prejudices, not expand his horizons. A workaholic, he ground out articles with assembly-line consistency and shoddy craftsmanship.⁴⁰

Smith's following after the 1930s was small but fanatical. Indeed, he was much more successful as an agitator and fundraiser than as a candidate. He founded a political action group, the Christian Nationalist Crusade, in 1942. He raised money by direct mail and personal solicitation. Criticized for accepting money from Fritz Kuhn, leader of the German American Bund, he responded: "If I am standing in a pulpit and Al Capone comes in and drops a thousand dollars in the collection plate I'm not going to refuse to take it."⁴¹ He metic-

ulously compiled a mailing list and expanded it. Smith averaged about \$80,000 through the mail in the 1940s, over \$175,000 in the 1950s, and about \$275,000 in the 1960s. In addition he sold literature and accepted bequests.⁴² People sent him enough money through the mail to make him a millionaire. He invested most of it in his crusades: books, tracts, travels, recruiting. He lived comfortably but not ostentatiously until old age, when he succumbed to luxury.

Smith's list of allies was long, but his list of enemies was longer. He called President "Roosenfelt" a traitor and exclaimed in 1936: "We're going to get that cripple out of the White House."⁴³ He predicted the president's defeat in 1940: "Practically everybody that goes to church regular, is willing to work hard, and takes a bath once a week is against Roosevelt."⁴⁴ Smith detested Roosevelt's successor, Harry "Solomon" Truman: "Don't think for a moment I think Harry Truman was a Communist. He wasn't smart enough."⁴⁵ Dwight D. Eisenhower was a "Swedish Jew," a dupe of his brother Milton, a general who gave away Eastern Europe to the Russians and "fraternized in drunken brawls with [the Russian general Georgi] Zhukov."⁴⁶ Smith made no distinctions among conservatives, liberals, and socialists. They were all enemies of the Republic, the conservative Richard Nixon as well as the liberal Lyndon Johnson. Johnson was "guilty of murder, homosexuality, a wide variety of perversions, thievery, treason, and corruption."⁴⁷ Nixon was a "super-beatnik who seems to be a cross between Elvis the Pelvis and Franklin D. Roosevelt."⁴⁸ George Wallace of Alabama was more to his taste but insufficiently militant on the race issue. Wallace wanted to segregate blacks; Smith wanted to deport them. Still, he called Wallace "the most Christ-like man I know."⁴⁹ To Smith, the only reliable Americans were his allies on the far right, and he broke with most of them because of his egocentric personality. Smith was simply too extreme for most rightists. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy rejected his support. William F. Buckley tried to convert him to moderation but gave up.⁵⁰

Smith barnstormed the nation in the 1940s, crusading against communism, the "Jew-infested" United Nations, and the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and NATO. He moved his headquarters to St. Louis in 1947, to Tulsa in 1949, and to Los Angeles in 1953.⁵¹ He appeared in public infrequently in the late 1950s, but in the 1960s he rejuvenated and reoriented his career by constructing what he termed his "Sacred Projects" in the Ozark hamlet of Eureka Springs, Arkansas. A prosperous spa in the 1890s, Eureka Springs was economically moribund until Smith began his projects there. He bought a Victorian house called Penn Castle in 1964, renovated it luxuriously, and made it his summer home. In 1966



Bentley Historical Library, The University of Michigan

Smith supporters hold signs promoting the Wisconsinite's candidacy for president in 1944 as the candidate of the America First Party, his political creation. Smith's America First Party had no direct connection to the prewar, isolationist, America First Committee.

he constructed and dedicated the “Christ of the Ozarks,” a seven-story cross-shaped rendition of Jesus—half as tall as the Statue of Liberty and twice the size of the well-known “Christ of the Andes” in South America. The statue, which still stands in Eureka Springs, weighs 340 tons; the face is fifteen feet high, and the hands are seven feet long. Smith thought it was more beautiful than the sculpture of Michelangelo and predicted that it would last a thousand years. Art critics were less generous; one compared it to a milk carton with a tennis ball stuck on top and characterized it as “ugliness and sham.”⁵²

In 1968 Smith began staging a Passion Play in an amphitheater carved into the side of a mountain outside Eureka Springs. Performed on a four-hundred-foot street of Old Jerusalem, it includes 150 actors and actresses nightly, illuminated by powerful colored spotlights, miming a script broadcast over a stereophonic system. The cast includes live sheep, goats, donkeys, Arabian horses, pigeons, and camels. The two-hour play drew more than 28,000 spectators the first year in a 3,000-seat theater. By 1975 the theater expanded to a capaci-

ty of 6,000, and more than 188,000 attended the play, making it the largest outdoor pageant in America. Jews complained that the play was anti-Semitic, but Smith rejoined by calling it “the only presentation of this kind in the world that has not diluted its content to flatter the Christ-hating Jews.”⁵³

Smith’s Sacred Projects revived the economy of Eureka Springs, and he became a local hero. The community expanded its restaurants and hotels, and other entrepreneurs moved in. By 1975 Eureka Springs was the leading tourist community in Arkansas, and Smith had bigger plans yet. He planned to construct a Disney-like replica of the Holy Land, including the Sea of Galilee, the River Jordan, and scenes from the life of Jesus. Visitors could even be baptized in the river. Smith’s new Holy Land, slated to cost \$100 million, provided inspiration for other religious entrepreneurs, such as Jim Bakker.⁵⁴ However, only the Great Wall of Jerusalem had been completed in 1976 when Gerald L. K. Smith died of pneumonia at age seventy-eight.

Smith was buried at the feet of the “Christ of the Ozarks,” an appropriately gaudy memorial. He went to his grave unrepentant. His Sacred Projects represented only an alteration in direction, not a change of heart or a renunciation of Jew-baiting. Through the last four decades of his life he had continued to publish *The Cross and the Flag* and write inflammatory tracts. His Sacred Projects had brought him a veneer of respectability but not peace of mind, and at his death he was still consumed by hatred and bitterness. *The Arkansas Gazette* concluded his obituary with these words: “To have the power to touch men’s hearts with glory or with bigotry, and to choose the latter, is a saddening thing.”⁵⁵ ❧

Author’s note: I would like to thank my former student Charles Malecki for his significant assistance on this project. Charlie was a master’s student at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee at the time of this writing and has written on the anti–Vietnam War movement on the Milwaukee campus.

¹ Herbert Harris, “That Third Party,” *Current History* 45, no. 1 (October 1936), 85–86.

² The quotes, in order, come from: William Bradford Huie, “Gerald Smith’s Bid for Power,” *American Mercury* 55 (August 1942), 145; Harris, “That Third Party,” 85; Raleigh G. Hoover, “America First Ropes Bison for Symbol,” *Detroit News*, 31 August 1944; and H. L. Mencken, “Why Not Gerald?” *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 7 September 1936.

³ For Smith family background, see *History of Vernon County, Wisconsin, Together with Sketches of Its Towns, Villages, and Townships* . . . (Springfield, IL: Union Publishing Company, 1884), 613; Mouraine Hubler, *The Battin Family Genealogy* (Rockford, MN, 1981), 1–2, 43–49; and U.S. Census Office, 10th Census, 1880, *Population Schedules of the Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Wisconsin*, microfilm publication MT9, roll 1451 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, n.d.), Vernon County, Town of Kickapoo, supervisor’s district 3, enumeration district 13, p. 347, dwelling 188. For Smith’s mother’s families, see I. O. (Ira Ona) Chitwood, *Descendants of Matthias Chitwood* (Winfield, TN: H. Chitwood in cooperation with R. Chitwood, 1986), 94, 145, 171–172, 185; and Norma L. Henthorn and Raymond M. Bell, *The Henthorn Family: Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, with Notes on Cresap and Quinn Families* (Bethany, OK: N. L. Henthorn; Washington, PA: R. M. Bell, 1990), preface; and George Henthorn household entry, dwelling 99, p. 15, Town of Clayton, Crawford County, Wisconsin, 1870 U.S. Census, library, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁴ On settlement, see Alice E. Smith, *The History of Wisconsin. Volume I: From Exploration to Statehood* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1973), 467–475. For the Smith family and church history, see Wisconsin Historical Records Survey, Division of Community Service Programs, Work Projects Administration, *Inventory of the Church Archives of Wisconsin: Disciples of Christ* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Records Survey, 1942), 22; 10th Census,

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1880, Vernon County, Town of Kickapoo, supervisor's district 3, enumeration district 13, p. 347, dwelling 188; and *History of Vernon County*, 613.

⁵ L. Z. Smith Information Schedule, L. Z. Smith file, archives, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville (first quote); *Columbia County Directory, 1895–1896* (Portage: Wisconsin Publishing Co., 1895), 129; John O. Holzhueter telephone conversation with Burdett W. Wakeman, La Crosse, 28 June 2000, concerning the association with Watkins; "Mrs. Barbara Heal, 80, Dies Monday Morning," *Delavan Enterprise*, 27 February 1969, p. A13.

⁶ Gerald L. Smith birth certificate, Columbia County birth records, reel 35, record 466, in *Wisconsin Birth Records*, roll 19b, library, Wisconsin Historical Society; George W. Henthorn death certificate, Columbia County death records, volume 1, p. 520, in *Wisconsin Death Records*, roll 10D, library, Wisconsin Historical Society; *Pardeeville Times*, 17 and 24 March 1900; U.S. Census Office, 12th Census, 1900, *12th Census of Population, 1900 [Schedules]: Wisconsin/Census Office*, National Archives microcopy T623, roll 1813 (Washington, D.C.: Census Office, for sale by the National Archives Trust Fund Board, 1978), Richland County, Town of Sylvan, supervisor's district 2, enumeration district 122, p. 291, dwelling 197; Viroqua High School, *Pipe of Peace [Annual]*, 1915, 90 (L. Z. Smith advertisement for Raleigh products); *Wisconsin Christian Monthly* 7, no. 10 (June 1915), 5; *Map of Richland County, Wis.: Printed for and Pub. by the Richland Rustic* (n.p.: Hixson Map Co., 1903), Town of Sylvan, section 8.

⁷ *The Cross and the Flag* 11, no. 9 (December 1952), 2.

⁸ Glen Jeansonne, taped interview with Gerald L. K. Smith, Eureka Springs, Arkansas, 10 August 1974.

⁹ Gerald L. K. Smith, *Besieged Patriot: Autobiographical Episodes Exposing Communism, Traitorism, and Zionism from the Life of Gerald L. K. Smith*, ed. Elna M. Smith and Charles F. Robertson (Eureka Springs, AR: Elna M. Smith Foundation, 1978), 12.

¹⁰ Jeansonne interview with Smith, 10 August 1974.

¹¹ Glen Jeansonne, *Gerald L. K. Smith: Minister of Hate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 16; Viroqua High School, *Pipe of Peace [Annual]*, 1915, 17 (Smith's senior sketch).

¹² Smith's high school career can be traced through the 1913 (pp. 32, 46, 47), 1914 (pp. 31, 54, 55, 59), and 1915 (pp. 10, 17, 19, 39, 40, 45, 47, 48, 49, 59, 81, 98, 102–103) *Pipe of Peace* annuals at the Vernon County Historical Society. See also articles in the *Vernon County Censor*, "Masculines a Majority" 3 June 1915, 1, and "Graduate with Honors," 9 June 1915, 1. Smith's high school recollections come from J. Fraser Cocks, III, taped interview with Gerald L. K. Smith, Los Angeles, 28 March 1968, in the Smith Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

¹³ Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), 130–131; John H. Strietelmeier, *Valparaiso's First Century: A Centennial History of Valparaiso University* (Valparaiso, Indiana: Valparaiso University, 1959), 48–61; Smith, *Besieged Patriot*, 5, 143–145; Jeansonne interview with Smith, 10 August 1974; Cocks interview with Smith, 28 March 1968.

¹⁴ Cocks interview with Smith, 28 March 1968; entry for Smith, Gerald L. K., in *Current Biography*, 1943.

¹⁵ "More About the Home-coming at Soldiers Grove, Wis.," *Christian Standard*, 29 June 1918 (quotes); *Kickapoo Scout*, 29 January 1920, 1; William M. Ward, *The First 100 Years: A History of Soldiers Grove* (Soldiers Grove: Edward W. Herbst, 1964), 115–116; Wisconsin Historical Records Survey, *Inventory of the Church Archives of Wisconsin: Disciples of Christ*, 48.

¹⁶ Gerald L. K. Smith Information Schedule, Gerald L. K. Smith file, archives, Disciples of Christ Historical Society, Nashville; articles in the *Christian Standard*, "Five Modern 'Timothies,'" 15 January 1921, 10; "Constructive Program of a Rural Church," 26 March 1921, 1, 15; Jeansonne, *Gerald L. K. Smith: Minister of Hate*, 6, 20–22, 23, 77, 98, 117, 127, 139, 147, 148, 183, 190, 196, 201, 209–211.

¹⁷ Articles in the *Christian Standard*: "New Testament Church Congress Program," 7 October 1922, 14, "A Group of Specialists," 9 September 1922, 1–2, "Acts of the Brethren," 11 February 1922, 23, and 15 December 1923, 18; Jeansonne interview with Smith, 11 August 1974; Cocks interview with Smith, 26 March 1968; Elna M. Smith to Glen Jeansonne, 11 August 1974; Smith, *Besieged Patriot*, 145–146; Gerald L. K. Smith Information Schedule; Jeansonne, *Gerald L. K. Smith: Minister of Hate*, 23.

¹⁸ Smith, *Besieged Patriot*, 7–8; Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Avon, 1971), 369–370.

¹⁹ Jeansonne, *Gerald L. K. Smith: Minister of Hate*, 24.

²⁰ Smith interview with Jeansonne, August 10, 11, 1974. In the August 10 interview, Smith interrupted questions about his boyhood with a thirty-minute tirade against Jews, then slumped in his chair, exhausted, and said: "I just had to get that off my chest. Now, I will answer your questions."

²¹ Gerald L. K. Smith to Dr. Hugo R. Fack, July 8, 1933, File hereinafter cited as "F" 62-43818-939, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).

²² Quoted in Avedis Derounian (pseud., John Roy Carlson), *Under Cover* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1943), 317.

²³ Huey P. Long, *Every Man a King: The Autobiography of Huey P. Long* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1964), 290–294; T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York, 1969), 693; David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Party, 1932–1936* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 120–121.

²⁴ Lillian B. Miller et al., *If Elected...: Unsuccessful Candidates for the Presidency, 1796–1968* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972), 408.

²⁵ Gerald L. K. Smith, *Huey P. Long: A Summary of Greatness; The Political Genius of the Century; An American Martyr* (n.d., n.p.); Glen Jeansonne, *Messiah of the Masses: Huey P. Long and the Great Depression* (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1993), 178.

²⁶ Thomas Martin, *Dynasty: The Longs of Louisiana* (New York: Putnam, 1960), 146.

²⁷ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 22 May 1936; Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression*, 138; Terkel, *Hard Times*, 374; Edward Robb Ellis, *A Nation in Torment: The Great American Depression* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1971), 440–441; *New York Times*, 1 and 2 June 1936.

²⁸ "Gerald L. K. Smith," *Current Biography*, 1943, 708; *Detroit Free Press*, 3 February 1936.

²⁹ Lloyd May Henderson, "The Political Activities of Gerald L. K. Smith" (master's thesis, University of California, 1955), 147.

³⁰ Schlesinger, *The Politics of Upheaval*, 558.

³¹ Harris, "That Third Party," 85–86.

³² *New York Times*, 21 June 1936.

³³ *Detroit News*, 20 October 1936.

³⁴ *New York Times*, 21 October 1936.

³⁵ Schlesinger, *Politics of Upheaval*, 626.

³⁶ George Wolfskill and John A. Hudson, *All But the People: Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Critics, 1933–1939* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 85–87; David Owen Powell, "The Union Party of 1936" (doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 1962), 203.

³⁷ Powell, "The Union Party of 1936," 6–8.

³⁸ Gerald L. K. Smith, "Gerald L. K. Smith and the Jews: A Significant Summary," (n.p., n.d.).

³⁹ Isabel B. Price, "Gerald L. K. Smith and Anti-Semitism" (master's thesis, University of New Mexico, 1965), 143.

⁴⁰ Smith to Mrs. Isabelle S. Brown, 27 January 1965, file 1965, "Bp-Bz" (misc.), box 59, Smith Papers. This and the discussion of Smith's reading that follows are based upon a survey of books taken from Smith's personal library found in box 95 and in Smith to Josef Czumbil, 17 November 1970, file 1970 "C" (2), box 66, Smith Papers.

⁴¹ Huie, "Gerald Smith's Bid for Power," 145–157.

⁴² Christian Nationalist Crusade, annual reports to the Clerk of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1944–1969.

⁴³ Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein, *Cross-Currents* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 29.

⁴⁴ Gerald L. K. Smith to mother, 11 July 1940, box 1, file 1939–1942 (I. 1940–1942), Corr.: 1942, Smith Papers.

⁴⁵ Forster and Epstein, *Cross-Currents*, 29.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Smith's "evidence" that Eisenhower engaged in "drunken brawls" with Gen. Zhukov was a photograph of the two generals toasting the linkup of American and Soviet forces at the close of World War II in Europe.

⁴⁷ Gerald L. K. Smith, "The Ultimate in Corruption," 10 February 1964, Anti-Defamation League files.

⁴⁸ Smith to Benjamin Freedman, 31 October 1960, box 52, file 1960 "F" (misc.), Smith Papers.

⁴⁹ Robert Sherrill, *Gothic Politics in the Deep South: Stars of the New Century* (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1968), 361; Michael Dorman, *The George Wallace Myth* (New York: [publisher unknown], 1976), 87.

⁵⁰ Joe McCarthy to Smith, 1 November 1951, box 35, file 1951, Smith Papers.

⁵¹ *The Cross and the Flag* 12, no. 2 (May 1953), 5; Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, *Anti-Semitism in 1947* (New York, 1948), 81–82; Smith to Ralph Baerman, 15 December 1947, R 14, File "Ralph Baerman"; Smith to Phil H. Davis, Jr., 22 and 25 October, 19 December 1947, Smith to John Daugherty, 24 October 1947, and Daugherty to Smith, 28 October 1947, all in R 14, File "D," Smith Papers; *National Jewish Post* (Indianapolis), 9 January 1948; *Jewish Weekly Times* (Boston), 29 January 1948; *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, 20 February 1948; Smith interview with Cocks, 29 March 1968.

⁵² Edgar A. Albin, "The Colossal Ungainly Christ of Arkansas's Magnetic Mountain," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 20 June 1971.

⁵³ *The Cross and the Flag* 34, no. 9 (December 1975), 30.

⁵⁴ Smith interview with Jeansonne, 11 August 1974; *The Cross and the Flag* 34, no. 12 (March 1976), 15; Gerald L. K. Smith, "An Open Letter from Gerald L. K. Smith," *Eureka Springs Times-Echo*, 13 September 1973, 2 May and 20 June 1974.

⁵⁵ Obituary. *Arkansas Gazette* (Little Rock) April 24, 1976.