

The opening of the 1936 presidential campaign found Coughlin at the height of his power. With Long dead no one, Roosevelt always excepted, rivaled him as a media star. And with Share Our Wealth moribund or defunct, his National Union for Social Justice was the largest organization of its sort in the country. Even the most skeptical estimates put its membership in the millions, with thousands of chapters throughout America, notably in the Midwest and Northeast, that is, in the farming communities and small towns on the one hand and the Irish-American neighborhoods of the big cities on the other.³⁴ By March 1936 NUSJ also had its own publication, *Social Justice*, really a mouthpiece for Coughlin's opinions and other matters of lesser interest to the faithful.

His Royal Oak parish furnished the appropriate monument to the power he had acquired. Crucifixion Tower, 180 feet high, overwhelmed the landscape, just as he intended it should. Adorning its base were immense reliefs of the Archangels Raphael, Gabriel, and Michael, the last sculpted in the image of Bishop Gallagher, all "eclipsed," in the words of a *Fortune* writer, "by a monster figure of Christ on the Cross illuminated at night by a battery of floodlights."

The interior was equally impressive. In the basement were the printing facilities; also the army of clerks at their desks who handled the mail and collected checks and money orders and cash, amounting to upwards of five million dollars a year. A store sold photos of Coughlin, religious articles, copies of his sermons, and various tracts, anti-Communist, anti-atheist, anti-Masonic, to the multitude of daily visitors. Coughlin's office was situated high up in the Tower. He reached it by walking up a narrow spiral staircase, then through a succession of doors, each opened by a secret device. (For good measure, he also packed a revolver.) The church proper was awesome in size and ponderous in effect, with its heavy oak walls and marble statuary, a far cry from the tiny besieged wooden building that greeted him in 1926.³⁵

Coughlin ran a Sunday school in the church for nicely groomed and well-disciplined teenagers, who after saluting him would recite this vow: "I pledge myself to do all in my power to destroy Communism. If necessary, I will surrender my life . . . rather than obey the dictates of Karl Marx and those who hate our country and our church."³⁶ Among

these last mentioned Coughlin might have been tempted to include the leaders of the American government from the President down.

He was enormously encouraged by the performance of the congressional candidates the NUSJ backed in the April and May 1936 primaries. Exactly how well they did is, retrospectively, open to doubt. The important thing is that the press at the time thought Coughlin's influence counted for much, that his support made a measurable difference in the outcome.³⁷ Certainly Coughlin thought it did. And that conviction, coupled with his deepening aversion for Roosevelt, led him into his fateful decision: to favor a party that would be consecrated to the 16-point NUSJ program, a party that would in the short run, beginning with the 1936 election, force major concessions from whoever controlled the government, even Roosevelt, and in the long run come to dominate it. Forming a party was a bold move. Coughlin was treading where no Catholic clergyman had dared go before. Alive in everyone's memory was Al Smith's unhappy experience, and Smith was a layman. But with Bishop Gallagher in his corner, and blithely confident that millions of Americans would back him, Coughlin mounted his crusade in the spring of 1936.

Even before the campaign started it was as clear to Coughlin as it was to every other politico that Roosevelt would win the election. The economy was doing too well. The New Deal reforms, including the most controversial ones, had gained general acceptance. And Roosevelt himself still commanded American politics. Only the extent of his victory was at issue. Apart from Jim Farley, whose opinions were dismissed as hyperbolic, few imagined that he would swamp the opposition so completely, that he would reduce the Republican Party to a corporal's guard, locally as well as nationally, and just about wipe Coughlin's effort off the face of the earth.

Coughlin's errors of judgment and defects of character invited the misfortunes that befell him and his choice for President, Representative William Lemke of North Dakota. Lemke had little to recommend him beyond his standing in the radical agrarian community. He was simply out of his depth in the campaign. He had been selected on Coughlin's