INTRODUCTION

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For a few weeks in the fall of 1934, events in California threatened to push Adolf Hitler off the front pages of American newspapers. An extraordinary political story was unfolding. The internationally known author and long-time socialist Upton Sinclair had captured the Democratic party nomination for governor on the strength of an audacious plan to “End Poverty in California.” Riding on the hopes of hundreds of thousands of working-class and unemployed Californians who had endured four years of economic depression, Sinclair’s EPIC movement had stirred an equally charged conservative opposition, who saw in it a threat to “sovietize California.” The result was one of the angriest electoral contests in twentieth-century American politics and a collision that echoed far and wide. California’s distinctive multifaction two-party political system was born in that encounter, as was the national media’s fascination with California politics. In Washington, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal administration came under new pressures as a result of EPIC, and the altered political priorities and social policies of 1935 show the impact. More significant, Sinclair’s End Poverty movement and the Republican countercampaign that kept him out of the California governor’s mansion may have changed the tools of American electoral politics. The first election in which Hollywood money and talent figured prominently, the 1934 contest has been credited with the birth of modern media politics.

The EPIC story belongs to a pivotal year in a pivotal decade. Like 1919 and 1968, 1934 was a year of exceptional turmoil and uncommon challenges to the political order—a year that convinced many Americans that society was poised on the brink of dramatic change or irreversible conflict. The early years of the Depression had been remarkably calm, particularly in comparison with Europe, where the crisis had turned the continent into a battleground between fascism, communism, and assorted other political passions. Americans reacted differently. All through the Hoover years, as the economy declined and jobs and homes were lost, the political life of
INTRODUCTION

due to circumstances. 

the United States had remained largely undisturbed. Organized labor quietly absorbed its losses in the early 1930s. And while the tiny Communist party and still smaller Socialist party tried to stir the unemployed to action in the major cities, the radical left remained fragmented, weak, and easy to ignore. So quiescent was the American public that in most locales it was not until 1931 that incumbent officeholders began to pay a price at the polls, and not until 1932 that voter dissatisfaction finally cost the Republican party its majority following.

But 1932 was no climax. The election of Roosevelt and Democratic gains in Congress and in many state governments marked the beginning, not the high point, of political mobilization and conflict. Roosevelt’s inauguration and the early New Deal plans he announced in the spring of 1933 opened the door to all sorts of non-governmental initiatives, which soon threatened to overwhelm the New Deal administration. Labor unrest was part of it: 1934 saw a massive wave of union organizing and strikes roll across the industrial heartland, touching big cities and small, climaxing in full-blown general strikes in San Francisco and Minneapolis.

Paralleling conflicts at the factory gates were a variety of political movements that emerged suddenly to challenge the moderate economic policies of the New Deal. In the upper Midwest, a revived Farmer-Labor movement led by Minnesota’s governor, Floyd Olson, demanded that Washington move toward social-democratic policies of public ownership and public spending to rebuild the economy. In the South, the flamboyant Louisiana senator Huey Long built a potentially potent network of “Share the Wealth” clubs with his slogan “Every man a king” and a vague plan to confiscate and redistribute the fortunes of the nation’s millionaires. From Detroit, a Catholic priest, Father Charles Coughlin, kept an audience of millions tuned to his weekly radio broadcasts as he railed against the conspiracy of bankers that had driven the nation into bankruptcy. And that is only part of the list. The year also witnessed the beginnings of Francis Townsend’s Old Age Revolving Pension movement, with its fanciful plan to end the Depression through generous pension spending. In Wisconsin, Senator Robert La Follette’s sons built a new Progressive party, which soon controlled the state, and in Oregon and Washington, another left-wing political movement, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, began electing public officials. The far right was active too, as the Silver Shirts and other fascist groups claimed headlines and growing memberships. It was, in short, a year of explosive political initiative, much of it outside the old, established political parties, much of it ideologically unorthodox by standards of recent American poli-

[iv]
INTRODUCTION

tics, much of it as threatening to FDR's Democratic party as it was to the conservatives in the Republican party.

EPIC was part of this explosion. It started as a lark, one of a limitless number of schemes and projects tested over the years by America's best-known, if not always most respected, radical. Upton Sinclair was about to turn fifty-five in the summer of 1933 when the idea of EPIC began to take shape in his mind. His writings (among them The Jungle and more than forty other books) had fueled radical causes since 1904, and for most of that time he had carried a Socialist party card. Since 1915, he had made his home in Southern California, in faintly bohemian but decidedly upscale Pasadena, whose tranquility he managed now and then to disturb. Sinclair was an expert at gathering media attention. If his endless stream of books did not make headlines, his personal crusades on behalf of such disparate causes as civil liberties and mental telepathy always did. Californians had come to know him also as a perennial Socialist party candidate for statewide office, usually the governor's. He rarely campaigned in an active way, but his name, a speech or two, and a few I-dare-you-to-print-this letters to the state's major newspapers had usually earned him at least 50,000 votes, far more than other Socialist party candidates had received in recent years.

The idea for EPIC, Sinclair claimed, first came to him in the mail, in a letter from a Democratic party activist urging that he run for governor once again, but this time as a Democrat. But that was only part of it. He had been working on a plan—a bold, unorthodox blueprint for ending the Depression. California, along with the rest of the country, was suffering the greatest economic crisis in its history. The state's unemployment rate had stood at 29 percent when FDR assumed office six months before and had changed only slightly since. The administration's emergency relief spending was finally putting some money into the hands of the unemployed, but hundreds of thousands of Californians were still jobless, and tens of thousands were homeless. The New Deal was not going to solve the crisis, Sinclair was sure. The National Recovery Administration's policy of supporting corporate profits while restricting production made no sense, not when people were hungry and in need. Nor did the New Deal's massive relief programs, which Sinclair thought were wasteful and would ultimately bankrupt the government.

His Socialist party did not seem to be coming up with answers either. The party was in the midst of a comeback in 1933. It had almost disappeared in the 1920s, shattered by the split in 1919 that generated the Communist party and battered by the postwar Red Scare and the lingering climate of antiradicalism. The Depres-
INTRODUCTION

sion had reenergized the SP, and Norman Thomas's 1932 presidential campaign had brought the party almost 900,000 votes. But in truth, the left was failing, Sinclair realized, despite the unprecedented opportunity at hand. With capitalism apparently crumbling all around, the American public still feared the term socialism and remained stubbornly wedded to its two old political parties. It was time to try something new, time to see what could be done working on the inside with an "Americanized" version of socialism.

So, in early September 1933, Upton Sinclair walked into the Beverly Hills city hall and changed his voter registration to Democrat. On his desk at home was a nearly complete draft of the platform he would bring to the California voters, his plan to end poverty in California. "I say, positively and without qualification, we can end poverty in California," it would announce. "I know exactly how to do it, and if you elect me Governor, with a Legislature to support me, I will put the job through—and I won't take more than one or two of my four years."

The plan had elements that later would appear sensible, like pensions of $50 a month for the elderly and disabled. Other provisions were within the realm of political possibility, such as one to replace sales taxes with sharply graduated income and property taxes. But the heart of the platform was an elaborate project that mainstream economists and orthodox Socialists alike would denounce as unworkable and conservatives would charge was more than dangerous. The new government would establish a network of cooperative colonies for the state's 700,000 unemployed, basing them in idle factories and vacant farmland, which the state would seize under its powers of eminent domain or through confiscatory taxes. The state would capitalize and manage these cooperatives, which would exchange their products within a giant, cash-free network. Modeled, although Sinclair did not say so, on Soviet collective farms, the EPIC colonies were not envisioned as temporary projects. They were to be the seedbeds of a new cooperative economy, an economy of "production for use" that would ultimately supplant the old economy of "production for profit" as workers, farmers, and even businessmen realized the efficiency and numerous personal and social advantages of cooperation.

Sinclair sketched his vision in a booklet that became the principal organizing tool of the campaign. Bearing the remarkable title, I, Governor of California: And How I Ended Poverty: A True Story of the Future, the 64-page pamphlet narrated its story backward from the future in the style of Edward Bellamy's utopian novel Looking Backward (1888). Writing from the fictional vantage point of 1938, "Governor" Sinclair details the steps that have brought Cali-
INTRODUCTION

fornia out of the Depression and made it the model for recovery for the rest of the nation and the capitalist world.

The booklet also depicted the campaign that had supposedly carried Sinclair into the statehouse. It proved to be a marvelous bit of forecasting. Apart from the final vote, events happened just about as he said they would. Publication of the booklet in October 1933 set off a flurry of interest. People from around the state ordered copies, distributed them to friends, and then set up EPIC clubs to discuss the plan and organize the campaign. By December, there were dozens of such clubs, and Sinclair had launched a weekly newspaper, the EPIC News. By May, when the number of clubs had grown to the hundreds, the old-line Democratic party began to understand the implications. Although desperate to fend off "the socialist carpetbagger," the party's bitterly antagonistic factions could not unite around an alternative candidate for the upcoming primary election. One of the contenders, Sheridan Downey, saw the handwriting on the wall and signed on as Sinclair's running mate for lieutenant governor. That left George Creel, who had been head of President Woodrow Wilson's Committee on Public Information during World War I, and more recently had served as West Coast chief for Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration, as the most credible opponent.

Sinclair had chosen his target well. California's primary election system permitted anyone to run for a party's nomination, and the Democrats, the junior party in the state since the 1890s, were particularly vulnerable to such a move. Democratic fortunes had reached an all-time low in the 1920s, when registration favored Republicans three to one. As late as 1931, not a single Democrat held statewide office, while Republicans claimed 12 out of the state's 13 congressional and Senate seats and an incredible 111 out of 120 seats in the state legislature. The Republican monopoly had started to disintegrate in 1932, when Roosevelt carried California, sweeping into office with him a sizable contingent of Democratic congressmen and legislators. But California's Democratic party still faced major problems. The leadership could not put aside the feuds between wet and dry and Catholic and Protestant factions that had complicated the 1920s. Equally important, they had done little to shape a liberal agenda. Always responsive to the ideological leadership of William Randolph Hearst, whose five in-state newspapers had been the voice of California Democrats for more than thirty years, the party leadership remained cautious and conservative at a time when Democrats in Washington and elsewhere were practicing active liberalism.

Now it was too late. By June, EPIC had nominated a slate of
INTRODUCTION

candidates for the legislature and had built up a political organization the likes of which California had never seen. Operating out of a huge headquarters in downtown Los Angeles, scores of volunteers coordinated a network of over fifty district organizations and nearly eight hundred EPIC clubs. In addition to the weekly newspaper, which was distributed by the hundreds of thousands in local editions, the campaign operated speakers' bureaus, research units, women's clubs, youth clubs, and drama groups. It put on radio broadcasts, plays, and rodeos, was making a film, and drew big crowds to a lavishly staged EPIC pageant that depicted the lessons of production for use—all this in addition to a heavy schedule of campaign speeches and rallies.

Even so, the August 28 primary election results came as a surprise, not because Sinclair won but because of the scale of his support. He captured the Democratic nomination with more than 436,000 votes, more than any primary election candidate in California history, more than all of his Democratic opponents combined, and more than the Republican he would face in November, the incumbent governor, Frank Merriam. Standing with him in the general election would be Sheridan Downey and forty-nine EPIC endorsed candidates for the state legislature.

Who were these voters who had turned the Democratic party over to a former socialist? A scornful George Creel blamed Los Angeles, claiming in a widely quoted Saturday Evening Post article that EPIC appealed to the same sort of disoriented Southern Californians who had previously flocked to Aimee Semple McPherson's Angelus Temple and other dreamland “religious, political, and economic cults.” Historians have generally concurred, echoing Carey McWilliams's assessment that EPIC belonged to the desperate unemployed and the disaffected lower middle class of depression-battered Los Angeles. But a close inspection of voting patterns shows something different. Southern California provided most of the votes, but EPIC belonged solidly, almost exclusively, to working-class voters.

The race had been close in many parts of California, and George Creel had actually won in the city of San Francisco, but in Los Angeles and the other counties of Southern California, Sinclair had buried the opposition, collecting two-thirds of all Democratic votes in Los Angeles County. Many of his voters were new Democrats (the party had added 350,000 registrants in the seven months prior to the election), and they were overwhelmingly working-class. It was in the blue-collar neighborhoods of central and east Los Angeles, and even more in the industrial suburbs stretching south to Long Beach that EPIC found its key support. In South Gate,
INTRODUCTION

Lynwood, and Hawthorne, Sinclair won by margins of 80 percent and more, amid record-breaking turnouts. George Creel meanwhile owed what modest support he received in Southern California to hillside and westside middle-class neighborhoods, where Sinclair's message had been badly received, and where in the election to come Republicans would pile up a huge anti-EPIC vote.

Elsewhere in California, the patterns were somewhat more complicated, but Sinclair's support everywhere was limited by class. With the exception of some of the activists drawn into EPIC (many of them former socialists), he had little luck appealing to white-collar or well-educated voters. In the Bay Area, middle-class Democrats supported Creel in the primary, then defected to the Republicans in the general election. Working-class voters split between the two major Democrats: Sinclair enjoying a substantial lead among blue-collar voters in the East Bay; Creel getting a slight edge in San Francisco, thanks to the support of many of the city's labor leaders. But unlike Creel's middle-class supporters, those blue-collar votes—indeed blue-collar votes nearly everywhere—would go to Sinclair in the November election. Even more than the primary, the vote in that contest would break strictly on class lines.

What EPIC had done was reshuffle the electorate. For a generation, the Republican party had encompassed most of California's citizenry in a remarkably stable two-wing, cross-class coalition. Now Sinclair had stolen much of its progressive wing with a program that appealed very strongly to the less privileged segments of the population. In addition to finding a natural following among the unemployed, he had also struck responsive chords among employed blue-collar voters. California was returning to political alignments that it had not known for a generation. Like the Workingman's party of 1878, the Democratic party of the 1880s, and the Union Labor parties of the prewar period, EPIC had resurrected the politics of class.

Fear had also been resurrected. The road to the primary had been easy; the next two months had a different momentum. While national media turned up the spotlight, Sinclair's campaign met one obstacle after another. The first disappointment came from the White House. Fresh from his primary triumph, Sinclair had left for a cross-country speaking tour to capitalize on the headlines and seek an audience with the president. Roosevelt met with him, but would offer no endorsement, despite Sinclair's efforts to tone down some aspects of his plan. That rejection cleared the way for many of California's established Democratic party leaders to defect to the Republican camp.

Of equal import was the new role of the state's major newspa-
INTRODUCTION

pers, many of which were linked to the conservative wing of the Republican party. The press had been relatively quiet during the primary campaign, suspecting that Sinclair would be easier to defeat than the moderate Creel. But the huge primary vote for the former socialist raised the stakes; now it seemed that he might actually win. Joining in the panic that gripped conservatives throughout the state that summer and fall of 1934, the state's major newspapers pounced on the Democratic candidate in a display of partisan viciousness almost without parallel. Sinclair details the distortions and slanders in the account you are about to read.

Several missteps also hurt the EPIC cause. Sinclair's careless comment about the unemployed flooding into California if he won gave the opposition some of its best ammunition, while awkward attempts to soften the EPIC program to appeal to New Dealers and moderates pleased no one and cut into the campaign's credibility. To make matters worse, a third party candidate, Raymond Haight, running under the banner of the old Progressive party, was now making a claim to the ideological middle ground and picking up disaffected Democrats and moderate Republicans. By October, EPIC was in trouble. And the record-breaking voter turnout on November 6 confirmed it. Sinclair doubled his primary tally, but his 879,537 votes were well behind Frank Merriam's 1,138,620. The Republican had not, however, received an electoral majority. Raymond Haight collected 302,519 votes.

The election did not finish EPIC. Although his supporters were devastated, and Sinclair himself was exhausted, the year-long campaign had accomplished too much to be considered a loss. The idea that almost 900,000 Californians had voted for EPIC was electrifying: Sinclair had received almost exactly the number of votes in one state that Norman Thomas had gained in his nationwide Socialist party presidential campaign two years earlier. Those same California voters had also just elected thirty-eight Democrats to the eighty-seat Assembly, twenty-four of them EPIC nominees. Several EPIC-endorsed state senators and U.S. congressmen would also be taking office. In addition, EPIC candidates had captured Democratic central committee posts around the state, giving the movement effective control of the party machinery. Sinclair saw in this a beginning, not an end, to the EPIC story. Now, he decided, the time was ripe to take the message of "production for use" beyond California.

I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked was written as Sinclair contemplated that new campaign. Dashed off in five weeks of feverish writing, it was intended to spread the End Poverty plan far and wide. Offered as a daily series to newspapers that had been
INTRODUCTION

Clamoring for Sinclair's story, the account was published in more than fifty papers across the country, representing millions of readers. But as a national movement, EPIC did not live up to its creator's dreams. Clubs sprang up in many states, but only in the Pacific Northwest did the movement catch on. End Poverty campaigns in Oregon and Washington surpassed the successes of California. In Washington, an EPIC spin-off called the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation elected congressmen and a U.S. senator, in addition to a variety of state officeholders, and went on to influence Democratic party affairs for the next decade.

Elsewhere, EPIC ran into too much competition. By 1935, the spectrum of radical reform proposals had become impossibly wide, as political movements of various descriptions jockeyed for members and headlines. Just as important, both the labor movement and the Democratic party were on the move, providing options for activists eager to push for comprehensive change. The 1934 elections had sent a message. Left-wing Democrats had won election to legislatures and Congress from a number of states, and now the machinery of formal politics was grinding out new New Deals in state capitols throughout the land. While EPIC ideas about cooperative production surfaced frequently in the year or two after the campaign, the movement itself got lost in the commotion, and outside the West, it never gained much of a foothold.

The organization faced difficulties in its home base as well. The campaign over, EPIC almost immediately began to fragment. Jealousies were part of it. The movement lost some of its ablest organizers in battles over Sinclair's excessive authority. Difficulties with the Communist party also took a toll. After viciously condemning EPIC during the 1934 campaign, the CP then tried to join and influence the organization, triggering a bitter expulsion struggle. Most damaging of all was the battle that erupted between EPIC's headquarters and some of its newly elected legislators over the proper role of each. State Senator Culbert Olson, leader of the EPIC legislative caucus and new chair of the state Democratic party, wanted EPIC to move to the background and fold most of its functions into the party. Sinclair and most of the activists resisted, arguing that EPIC had to remain an independent movement with its own agenda. The organization continued and had some success sponsoring candidates in the 1935 municipal elections in Los Angeles, but with Olson and the new Democrats taking a separate course, EPIC could not maintain its influence. A final miscalculation all but finished the movement in mid-1936. Still hoping to send a message to Washington, EPIC entered its own "production for use" slate in the California presidential primary in opposition to
INTRODUCTION

the official Roosevelt slate of delegates, although pledged to back
the president on the second ballot. The gambit failed badly. Califor-
nia Democrats had had enough of Sinclair, and perhaps of EPIC.
They voted seven to one for Roosevelt. Sinclair himself lost interest
shortly afterward, and although the End Poverty League continued
to exist for another decade, it very quickly became a small political
sect.

EPIC’s legacy was more impressive than its organizational half-
life. The movement, the campaign, and the election each had a pro-
found impact, certainly on California, very likely on the rest of the
United States as well. Sinclair liked to believe that his movement
strongly influenced the direction of federal policy after 1934, pro-
viding the ideas and impetus behind the creation of the Works Prog-
ress Administration, which in 1935 replaced the patchwork of
emergency relief programs that Sinclair had loudly attacked. The
WPA did not embrace production for use, but it was a massive pro-
gram of public works, designed to put the unemployed to work at
jobs that would contribute to societal needs. Federal policy might
well have taken this turn without EPIC. The idea of work relief
was far from new, and both Harry Hopkins and Roosevelt favored
the principle, but events in California certainly helped push it for-
ward. So, too, the New Deal’s expanded support for producer and
consumer cooperatives can be at least partly attributed to EPIC.
Several federal agencies began to issue grants to cooperative projects
for the unemployed in 1934. The Farm Security Administration
experimented as well with rural cooperatives, setting up collective
farms—including one in California—that in the planning stages re-
sembled EPIC’s proposed land colonies.

Much more significant were the ways in which EPIC trans-
formed California, especially its politics and policy. A divided Dem-
ocratic party was one of the legacies of the 1934 election. Political
alignments were changing in many states in the early 1930s as
Democrats built winning coalitions of working-class, ethnic, and
urban middle-class voters. California followed the broad trend up
to a point, joining other western states in developing a balanced
two-party system for the first time in the twentieth century. But
the Democrats never built the kind of stable coalition that became
politically dominant in many other states.

EPIC had fixed a deep fault line within the Democratic party,
one that would remain for the next twenty years. Sinclair’s cam-
paign marked the beginning of a powerful left-wing presence in the
party. Although EPIC itself melted away, veterans of that cam-
INTRODUCTION

campaign formed the nucleus of a Democratic party faction that was ideologically very liberal and soon closely tied to organized labor, especially the left-wing CIO. Powerful enough to win primaries and nominate candidates, that faction faced almost constant warfare from the antiradical wing of the party, a loose coalition that, like the left, had originated in the 1934 contest. Several hundred thousand Democrats, including many of the traditionalists who had been with the party during the lean 1920s, bolted in 1934 rather than vote for Sinclair, costing him the election. They would do so again repeatedly over the next two decades. Although able to turn out impressive majorities for Roosevelt in presidential elections, the new majority party in California could not function on the state level.

The election of 1938 almost proved otherwise. Culbert Olson, leader of what had been the EPIC legislative caucus and the favorite of left-wing and liberal Democrats, won the nomination and swept on to victory over a tired Frank Merriam. But the intraparty warfare resumed almost immediately in the legislature, as conservative Democrats joined Republicans to block Olson’s legislative program and undermine his administration. Defeated when he ran for reelection four years later, Olson would remain California’s only twentieth-century Democratic governor until Edmund G. “Pat” Brown won the office in 1958.

A revitalized Republican party was another legacy of 1934. Despite an electorate that became more and more Democratic in registration, in state politics the Republicans managed to hold on to power nearly continuously through the New Deal period. This made California unique among states with sizable metropolitan populations. Merriam’s victory was one of the few GOP triumphs of 1934, a year that sent the Republicans reeling toward oblivion in most parts of the country.

Sinclair’s incursion into the Democratic party had given the Republicans a rare chance to move to the middle, a strategy that paid off, not only in that election, but throughout the next two decades. Frank Merriam inaugurated the strategy with his belated and clumsy endorsement of the New Deal midway through the 1934 campaign. He more or less maintained that course during his next four years in office, supporting tax and relief programs much represented by conservative Republicans, while maintaining good relations with Washington. But even more than Merriam, it was the young Republican district attorney of Alameda County, Earl Warren, who best understood the lessons and opportunities of 1934. An adviser to Merriam and successful candidate for state attorney general in 1938, Warren crafted a liberal Republican politics that
INTRODUCTION

carried him into the governor's mansion in 1942 and kept him there for three terms.

In one sense, then, EPIC changed the course of California politics by returning things to their old channel: the Republican channel that so dominates the state's twentieth-century experience. In another sense, all the channels were new. California would never again be a one-party state, and rarely would its political life be contained within two cohesive parties: 1934 had given birth to the pattern of politics that still prevails, a politics of party factions and extreme variation, which ultimately became standard for Republicans as well as Democrats. The political system that later in the century would alternate liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans in the governor's mansion, while bringing still more extreme differences into congressional and legislative delegations, had its origins in the turbulent campaign of that year.

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Although EPIC has been the subject of numerous articles, chapters, dissertations, and, most recently, of a fine book, I, Candidate for Governor: And How I Got Licked arguably remains the best source for understanding the campaign. Written immediately after Sinclair's November 6 defeat, it captures the intensity of the moment as no secondary account can. Its narrative of the events of the campaign is full, if a bit disjointed, and needs little annotation despite the passage of six decades. Most important, I, Candidate reveals the personality at the center of these events. Filled, as nearly all of his books are, with autobiographical detail, the book introduces the many sides of Upton Sinclair.

There is Sinclair the political wizard, concocting a program out of bits and pieces of earlier radical strategies. He borrowed much of the program's gradualist, consensus spirit and softened socialist terminology ("production for use") from Edward Bellamy, who over fifty years earlier had invented an "Americanized" socialism. The key electoral strategy of invading one of the old parties was also taken from the past, principally from the experience of the radical Non-Partisan Leagues that after World War I briefly captured Republican parties in several midwestern states. Inspiration also came from more recent projects. The Technocracy movement had generated great enthusiasm in Los Angeles in 1932 and 1933 with its plans for a nonmonetary economy of abundance based on scientific planning. Echoes of that efficiency ethos would appear in EPIC. The barter clubs that had sprung up by the score in Southern California in the early Depression were a still more important source of ideas, for it was there that Sinclair saw the basic model for the [xiv]
cooperative network that would be EPIC’s answer to unemployment and California’s gateway to socialism.

The wizard was also a brilliant publicist. The genius of EPIC was as much in the packaging as in the plan. Sinclair worked the media better than anyone on the left; he knew how to attract publicity. But what was ultimately more important was his ability to address the working-class audience that became EPIC’s primary constituency. His writings had never aimed at highbrow readers. Sinclair had started out writing adventure serials for the pulps while still in high school, and one of his special gifts was storytelling; he could build drama into any scene. Another was pedagogy; he would turn the same scene into a lesson in radical politics. No one did it better. His books had educated two generations of radicals and were especially prized by the young and the modestly educated. In an age that had been inventing popular media, his books had been the reader’s digests of American radicalism.

That special skill is evident in I, Candidate, as it was throughout the campaign. Master of the clever phrase and powerful slogan, Sinclair was unmatched in his ability to bring ideas down to the level of common sense, while persuading his audience that no other level was valid. The intellectuals of his day found his style annoyingly egocentric, but for hundreds of thousands of modestly educated Californians, his self-presentation as teacher-with-all-the-answers was powerful and self-affirming. He was the teacher, but he taught that they were the experts, insisting that the so-called economists were fools, and that the only kind of economics that made sense had to be based on common sense. Thus he set up his appealing equations: that cooperation was more efficient than competition; that capitalism begot overproduction, which in turn begot unemployment; that putting people to work made more sense than giving them handouts; that state management and planning would balance production and consumption; that “production for use” would end the Depression. It was all so straightforward. “I have spent my whole life studying the idea of production for use,” he assured his audiences. “It is to me as obvious as arithmetic, as certain as sunrise. If you give hungry men tools and access to land, they will grow food; if you give them access to factories, they will turn out goods. Who but a lunatic—or a hireling—would question it?”

But was the teacher perhaps the real fool, or, worse, a charlatan? The plan made no sense to most economists, including many on the left. How would Sinclair finance enterprises employing half a million workers? Could the products really be distributed in such a way as to make them self-sufficient? Would the unemployed really join the cooperatives? What would keep private capital from fleeing
INTRODUCTION

the state, worsening the crisis? How would EPIC acquire the land and factories? How would it handle the unemployed from other states, who were sure to come west? To many analysts, of various political persuasions, Sinclair’s plan seemed a prescription for state bankruptcy, for social chaos, and worse.

Did Sinclair really believe it would work? That is hard to say. Privately, he admitted after the election that he was relieved to have lost. He knew that he had none of the administrative talents necessary in government, and after a year of campaigning, he was dying to return to his writing. But it is also clear that he was thinking about and probably troubled by some of the criticisms of his plan. Indeed, during the campaign, he had modified quite a few provisions, making the twelve-point EPIC plan included in the appendix to this book substantially different from the original program. The difference is in the details, many of which had disappeared by the end of the campaign. In the version published here, there is no longer a calculation of what the plan will cost or how it will be funded. There is less detail, too, about Sinclair’s tax-reform measures, which he had earlier promised would raise millions through steep taxes on wealthy estates and large incomes. More significant, he dropped the idea of confiscating idle factories and farmland; instead, the state would rent them. Also eliminated was the severely criticized proposal for a separate monetary system, the California Authority for Money, which under the original plan was to have issued scrip as a medium of exchange within the co-op system. By the end of the campaign, it had become the California Authority for Barter, charged with working out the procedures for distribution and exchange of goods. There were sound political reasons for these modifications, most of which were hammered out at the state-wide Democratic party convention after Sinclair won the nomination. But they probably also represent some second thoughts on the part of the plan’s original architect, who at precisely that moment was confronting the possibility that he might actually win and get a chance to try EPIC.

Sinclair did not yet realize it, and in fact would never realize it, but the campaign had changed him. By the time he wrote I, Candidate, he was on his way to becoming a New Dealer. Years more would pass before he felt completely comfortable with Roosevelt, and he would go to his grave three decades later still proclaiming his socialist faith, but those months of trying to end poverty in California in 1934 had begun to erode the clarity of his radicalism. The plan that he had devised in late 1933 as an alternative to the weak medicine of the New Deal was by the end of the campaign losing
INTRODUCTION

its visionary force and becoming an extension or refinement of the general thrust of New Deal reform.

It had always had that potential. Part of the political genius of EPIC was its susceptibility to multiple readings. Putting the unemployed to work was an idea that mixed nicely with some very traditional values, and read narrowly the plan for cooperative work projects was not particularly radical, especially if they turned out to be self-sufficient, as Sinclair promised. Barter clubs and self-help groups had been functioning in California’s major cities since 1932, sometimes modestly assisted with public funds. Was EPIC merely proposing a larger, better-funded version of that primitive cooperative network? Sinclair cleverly played both answers from the start, encouraging both radical and narrow interpretations of the plan. Just so he encouraged multiple readings of his relationship to the New Deal, early on claiming an affinity with and trading on the legitimacy of the Roosevelt administration, even while severely criticizing much of the New Deal program. But what began as a pair of strategic positions designed to lure moderate voters led ultimately toward more genuine ambiguity. By the time he wrote I, Candidate, Sinclair was seeing the New Deal in an increasingly positive light. He was still critical and still promoting his End Poverty plan as the solution, but now it was production for use within the framework of the New Deal rather than EPIC as replacement for the New Deal.

This subtle transformation in political values was not his alone; indeed, it was one of the big stories of the 1930s, shared by millions of Americans. Through the EPIC movement, and in other states through a variety of other political experiences, great numbers of Americans came to embrace the Democratic party and the welfare state liberalism that had become its creed. The converted came from various backgrounds, conservative as well as progressive, and among them was much of Sinclair’s generation of radicals, former members of the Socialist and Progressive movements who discovered in the unfolding policies of an activist government major portions of what they had long fought for—rights for labor, sustenance for the poor, controls on the economy, a language of collective good and public authority. Some on the left remained very clear that welfarism was not socialism, but what Roosevelt offered was enough for many. As it opened wide over the course of its first four years, the New Deal became an ever-larger tent, drawing converts of many political faiths. EPIC had helped make that happen. Pushing the New Deal from the left, the various political movements of 1934 led large numbers of activists into the Democratic coalition, effectively [xvii]
INTRODUCTION

bringing to a close the story of democratic socialism and electoral radicalism in the United States, leaving the Communist party as the only important voice of the left.

There is another side of Sinclair that fairly leaps from the pages of I, Candidate: the competitor, the pugilist, the warrior. He loved combat, or at least political combat, and the meaner the better. He had waged crusades all of his adult life, beginning with his stunningly successful exposé of the meat-packing business in 1906. For almost thirty years, he had practiced the art of muckraking journalism in dozens of books that exposed the insidious corruptions of capitalism. His targets were almost too many to list: journalism in The Brass Check; universities in The Goose Step; public schools in The Goslings; organized religion, The Profits of Religion; art and literature, Money Writes and Mammonart; banks, The Moneylenders; the courts, Boston and Singing Jailbirds; Hollywood, Upton Sinclair Presents William Fox; and we could go on. Each had been an exercise in literary combat.

So is I, Candidate. From the opening paragraph, Sinclair is on the attack, setting up to tell “the inside story” of the campaign, a story that reveals “what money can do in American politics.” Actually, there are two inside stories. A narrative of his own campaign structures the book and dominates the first hundred pages. But interwoven with it, and gradually becoming the dominant story, is his account of the malicious countercampaign, the “Lie Factory,” as he calls it, that pulled out all of the stops to save the “Plutocracy” and smash EPIC. This is where the book gains its power and its significance. And it is where Sinclair exacts his revenge. He may have lost the election, but through I, Candidate he won the battle for history, ensuring the EPIC would be remembered by future generations less for what it tried to do than for what was done to it, ensuring that his opponents would be remembered as the architects of modern American “dirty” politics.

The facts are clear enough. Almost the entire established media in California lined up against his candidacy, in what the Nation labeled “the worst press conspiracy we have ever witnessed.” Balance and fairness disappeared entirely from many of the leading newspapers as they pummeled Sinclair mercilessly from front page to back. This was to be expected from the Los Angeles Times, whose ultraconservative owner, Harry Chandler, had passionately fought reds and liberals for decades. The surprise came when the powerful Hearst newspapers and the usually progressive McClatchy Bee newspapers joined the cause. Among the metropolitan dailies, only the San Francisco News and the Los Angeles Illustrated Daily News
INTRODUCTION

gave Sinclair anything like reasonable coverage, but there was some compensation from the small newspapers that served the blue-collar suburbs where EPIC thrived.

Historians have found greater historical significance in two other aspects of the anti-Sinclair campaign. One is the role of Hollywood, discussed briefly in the account that follows. When MGM's Louis B. Mayer dove into politics to save California from the threat of "Sinclairism" in 1934, he started a pattern of filmland involvement that would reshape American political life. Not that the heavy-handed perversions of media power of that year would become routine. As far as we know, neither the faked newsreels nor the extortionist fund-raising tactics have been repeated. But Hollywood and politics discovered each other in 1934 and have been married ever since. In the years to come, Democrats as well as Republicans would turn to the film community for money and celebrity power. Indeed, it was not long before Washington greeted its first actor-politician. Like the rest of Hollywood, Congresswoman Helen Gahagan Douglas, Democratic representative from Los Angeles for 1944–50, traced her political awakening back to the EPIC campaign. Her political demise at the hands of Richard Nixon in the 1950 senate campaign would be remembered as California's second encounter with the "Lie Factory."

The other innovation is extensively explored in Greg Mitchell's recent book *Campaign of the Century*. The anti-Sinclair campaign was orchestrated by media professionals. Hired by the prominent Los Angeles advertising agency Lord and Thomas, Clem Whitaker and Leona Baxter went into business as the first-ever professional campaign managers and quickly designed a strategy that became a model for modern "hit campaigns." Ignoring the colorless Merriam, whose record and personality offered little voter appeal, they built a campaign entirely out of negatives, exclusively around Sinclair and EPIC.

Sinclair makes reference to Lord and Thomas in the account that follows and in one important passage refers to "political chemists at work preparing poisons" to be delivered to the press and public, but he may not have been fully aware of the dimensions of their work. He certainly knew the end product. It was Whitaker and Baxter who devised the devastating tactic of using Sinclair against himself. Combing his massive bibliography for politically embarrassing quotations, they fed the press a stream of excerpts from his earlier writings that purported to show his extremist views. Featured in the famous front-page "boxes" of the *Los Angeles Times*, these quotations, bearing headlines such as "Sinclair on Marriage,"

[xix]