

Interpreting the New Deal as a Historian

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

The Great Depression was at its worst when President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in March 1933, promising “a new deal to all Americans.” His administration tried to live up to that promise. The New Deal established recovery, relief, and reform programs to regulate the economy and provide assistance to the American people. In doing so, it changed citizens’ expectations about the role of the federal government in their lives.

This tutorial examines how historians have interpreted the New Deal. It also provides you with an opportunity to consider how President Roosevelt understood the impact of his administration:

1. What Is Historiography? A Refresher

Recall that **historiography** is the study of historical writing: the history of history.



TERM TO KNOW

Historiography

The study and interpretation of historical writings.

Historians’ interpretations of past events have changed over time. Historians are obligated to approach history objectively, without bias. However, historical interpretations of the New Deal have changed since it was implemented in the 1930s, influenced by historians’ views of President **Franklin Delano Roosevelt**, the political process, and government.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Democratic president who led the United States from 1933 to 1945 and navigated the country through the crisis of the Great Depression and World War II.

2. The New Deal and the Presidency

In his 1963 book *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932–1940* historian William E. Leuchtenburg wrote that the New Deal “almost revolutionized the agenda of American politics” (p. 326). He suggested that

transformation was possible because of the severity of the Great Depression and the Roosevelt administration's willingness to use executive power to initiate change. "Under Roosevelt," Leuchtenburg wrote, "the White House became the focus of all government—the fountainhead of ideas, the initiator of action, the representative of the national interest" (p. 327).

Leuchtenburg concluded that Roosevelt did much to create the presidency that continues to exist today. As a result of his "**Brains Trust**" and New Deal programs, which required expertise and manpower to administer, thousands came to Washington to work in a variety of capacities. Roosevelt gained the support of thousands more with his "**fireside chats**" on difficult problems like banking, and he increased popular confidence in the government's efforts. According to Leuchtenburg, many Americans came to see the federal government as "an agency directly concerned with their welfare" (p. 331).



TERMS TO KNOW

Brains Trust

Unofficial advisors to President Roosevelt who formulated solutions to problems related to the Great Depression.

Fireside Chat

A series of radio addresses in which President Roosevelt outlined key ideas and programs directly to the American people.



MAKE THE CONNECTION

Does Leuchtenburg's assertion about the power of the Roosevelt administration reflect how Americans view the presidency today?

The New Deal was a period of tremendous growth for the federal government. According to Leuchtenburg, this occurred in part because private charities (e.g., the Red Cross) and state and municipal governments had been unable to provide the necessary relief as the Great Depression worsened. Government growth was also a result of New Deal regulations and reforms that extended federal power throughout the economy. In Leuchtenburg's view, the **Emergency Banking Act** and the **Glass-Steagall Act** are examples of how, during the New Deal, "the financial center of the nation shifted from Wall Street to Washington" (p. 337).



TERMS TO KNOW

Emergency Banking Act

Passed by Congress to address the banking crisis; empowered the Federal Reserve to increase the amount of currency in circulation and reopened approved banks under federal supervision.

Glass-Steagall Banking Act

Prohibited commercial banks from engaging in investment banking; created the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), which insured personal bank deposits up to \$2,500.

For Leuchtenburg, the New Deal began a new era in American government, especially with respect to the presidency and the economy. He wrote that, during the New Deal, reform "meant *economic* reform," in which the executive branch attempted to foster businesses and corporations through regulations and programs (p. 339).

3. The New Deal and American Politics

Subsequent historians disagreed with some of Leuchtenburg's conclusions, especially regarding the amount

of credit Roosevelt should receive for transforming American politics and increasing the power of the presidency. Leuchtenburg argued that the New Deal led the White House to become “the focus of all government,” but historian Barry Karl suggested that this view overstated the powers of the presidency and ignored President Roosevelt’s political skills.

In his book *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945* Karl wrote, “Franklin Roosevelt is best understood as a career politician of an unusually talented order, one who both understood and enjoyed the process of political management” (p. 126). Both historians agreed that the Great Depression, combined with the inadequacy of the local and state response, created an opportunity for Roosevelt to assert presidential power. However, Karl believes that Roosevelt’s political skills played a key role in the enactment of the New Deal agenda.

Karl wrote that Roosevelt’s effectiveness as a politician—and the limits of his presidential power—were on display when he worked with Southern Democrats in Congress to pass the **Social Security Act** of 1935.



TERM TO KNOW

Social Security Act

Created a series of public programs designed to help those most vulnerable—the unemployed, the elderly, unwed mothers, and the disabled—through various pension, insurance, and aid programs.

Some members of Roosevelt’s “Brains Trust” and other advocates of welfare reform envisioned an old-age pension program that covered every American. However, debates on Social Security in Congress focused on which occupations would be included in the program and which would not. The final version of the act failed to provide coverage for agricultural laborers and domestic workers.

To Karl, this limitation indicated a compromise that the Roosevelt administration made with Southern Democrats in order to win their support for the bill. Racism in the South and dependence on Black sharecroppers and domestic workers in the regional economy made it unlikely for Southern Democrats to be willing or able to provide Social Security benefits to them. Thus, in exchange for the support necessary to win the passage of the act, agricultural laborers and domestic workers were denied Social Security benefits.

According to Karl, Roosevelt’s reforms were “[d]esigned to meet regional or interest-group demands” and, as a result, “contained compromises that no scientific method could justify” (p. 127). With respect to the Social Security Act of 1935, Karl wrote that “politics remained the primary concern” and “Social Security had to have a beginning point, and this was it, minimal or not” (p. 141).

Although Leuchtenberg celebrated Roosevelt’s influence as president, Karl argued that historians should not overstate the impact of his power during the New Deal. He acknowledged that Roosevelt’s “personality made him a popular leader, but his power over Congress was always limited” (p. 128). According to Karl, politics and compromise were involved in the creation and passage of the Social Security Act, and they established the limits of other New Deal reforms.

4. The New Deal and the American People

The debate over what the New Deal did or did not accomplish, and Roosevelt’s role, continued into the late 20th century. In his 1999 book *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* which remains in use today, historian David Kennedy entered the debate by examining the New Deal’s effects on the American people.

According to Kennedy, the New Deal provided “security—security for vulnerable individuals, to be sure . . . but

[also] security for capitalists and consumers, for workers and employers, for corporations and farms and homeowners and bankers and builders as well. Job security, life-cycle security, financial security, market security—however it might be defined, achieving security was the leitmotif of virtually everything the New Deal attempted” (p. 365).

Like Leuchtenburg and Karl, Kennedy identifies the New Deal as a unique moment in American history. Unlike Karl—and like Leuchtenburg—he de-emphasized the limitations of the New Deal agenda and focused on its accomplishments. Kennedy wrote that it “constituted one of only a handful of episodes in American history when substantial and lasting social change has occurred—when the country was, in measurable degree, remade” (p. 377).

Kennedy emphasized the ways in which the New Deal provided security, through jobs and relief, to millions of Americans of all races and ethnicities. The Social Security Act, despite its limitations, provided support for the elderly and unemployed. Work relief programs like the **Civilian Conservation Corps** (CCC) paid a living wage to participants by putting them to work rehabilitating land and facilities and building infrastructure. The **Works Progress Administration** (WPA) supported the arts and humanities with programs that would not ordinarily have been implemented during an economic downturn.



TERMS TO KNOW

Civilian Conservation Corps

A public program that employed young, jobless men from relief families on conservation and land management projects around the country.

Works Progress Administration

A work relief program that provided jobs to over 8 million Americans between 1935 and 1943.

Kennedy summed up his conclusions about the New Deal as follows:

David Kennedy, Historian

“Above all, the New Deal gave to countless Americans who had never had much of it a sense of security, and with it a sense of having a stake in their country. And it did it all without shredding the American Constitution or sundering the American people.” (p. 379)



THINK ABOUT IT

Given Kennedy’s emphasis on the importance of “security” during the New Deal, do you think he believes the government can play a positive role in people’s lives? If so, how would he use his assessment of the New Deal to support his argument?



BRAINSTORM

Of the three historians cited in this tutorial, who had the most optimistic interpretation of the New Deal? Whose interpretation was the most pessimistic?

5. Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal

Prior to his reelection in 1936, President Roosevelt gave a speech at Madison Square Garden in New York

City in which he defended the New Deal. He emphasized the accomplishments of his first term and admitted that much work remained. While reading the following selection, think about how Leuchtenburg, Karl, and Kennedy would interpret it.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, Speech at Madison Square Garden, 1936

“What was our hope in 1932? Above all other things, the American people wanted peace. They wanted peace of mind instead of gnawing fear.

First, they sought escape from the personal terror which had stalked them for three years. They wanted the peace that comes from security in their homes: safety for their savings, permanence in their jobs, and a fair profit from their enterprise.

Next, they wanted peace in the community, the peace that springs from the ability to meet the needs of community life: schools, playgrounds, parks, sanitation, and highways—those things which are expected of solvent local government. They sought escape from disintegration and bankruptcy in local and state affairs.

They also sought peace within the Nation: protection of their currency, fairer wages, the ending of long hours of toil, the abolition of child labor, the elimination of wild-cat speculation, and the safety of their children from kidnappers

I submit to you a record of peace; and on that record a well-founded expectation for future peace—peace for the individual, peace for the community, peace for the Nation, and peace with the world.

Tonight I call the roll—the roll of honor of those who stood with us in 1932 and still stand with us today.

Written on it are the names of millions who never had a chance—men at starvation wages, women in sweatshops, children at looms.

Written on it are the names of those who despaired, young men and young women for whom opportunity had become a will-o'-the-wisp.

Written on it are the names of farmers whose acres yielded only bitterness, businessmen whose books were portents of disaster, homeowners who were faced with eviction, and frugal citizens whose savings were insecure

We still lead that army in 1936. They stood with us then because in 1932 they believed. They stand with us today because in 1936 they know. And with them stand millions of new recruits who have come to know.

Their hopes have become our record.

We have not come this far without a struggle and I assure you we cannot go further without a struggle.”



THINK ABOUT IT

1. In light of Leuchtenburg's evaluation of the New Deal and the presidency, how might he interpret President Roosevelt's "roll call" and "army" metaphors?
2. How might Barry Karl interpret this sentence: "We have not come this far without a struggle and I assure you we cannot go further without a struggle"?
3. In what ways are President Roosevelt's references to "peace of mind" similar to David Kennedy's interpretation of the New Deal?



SUMMARY

This tutorial provided you with three historical interpretations of the New Deal. They focused on how the New Deal transformed the powers of the presidency and provided security to citizens—and was the result of political dealmaking. Primary sources, like Roosevelt's 1936 speech, and informed opinion—regarding the proper role of government in people's lives and with respect to other issues—contribute to the variety of ways in which historians interpret the New Deal. The process of historical interpretation and the related debates continue today.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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Historiography

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Works Progress Administration

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**PEOPLE TO KNOW****Franklin Delano Roosevelt**

Democratic president who led the United States from 1933 to 1945 and navigated the country through the crisis of the Great Depression and World War II.