very differently. He criticizes other historians for placing too much emphasis on Roosevelt's good intentions while soft-peddling the New Deal's ill effects. Folsom argues that the New Deal prolonged the Depression, gave too much power to unions, and created an intrusive federal bureaucracy. Which description of the president and his programs is most convincing? Did the New Deal rewrite government's contract with the people, or not?

FDR: Advocate for the American People

DAVID M. KENNEDY

Hoover brought a corporate executive's sensibility to the White House. Roosevelt brought a politician's. Hoover as president frequently dazzled visitors with his detailed knowledge and expert understanding of American business. "His was a mathematical brain," said his admiring secretary, Theodore Joslin. "Let banking officials, for instance, come into his office and he would rattle off the number of banks in the country, list their liabilities and assets, describe the trend of fiscal affairs, and go into the liquidity, or lack of it, of individual institutions, all from memory." Roosevelt, in contrast, impressed his visitors by asking them to draw a line across a map of the United States. He would then name, in order, every county through which the line passed, adding anecdotes about each locality's political particularities. Where Hoover had a Quaker's reserve about the perquisites of the presidency, Roosevelt savored them with gusto. By 1932 Hoover wore the mantle of office like a hair shirt that he could not wait to doff. Roosevelt confided to a journalist his conviction that "no man ever willingly gives up public life—no man who has ever tasted it." Almost preternaturally self-confident, he had no intimidating image of the presidential office to live up to, it was said, since his untroubled conception of the presidency consisted quite simply of the thought of himself in it.

Hoover's first elected office was the presidency. Roosevelt had been a professional politician all his life. He had spent years charting his course for the White House. To a remarkable degree, he had followed the career path blazed by his cousin Theodore Roosevelt—through the New York legislature and the office of assistant secretary of the navy to the governor's chair in Albany. In 1920 he had been the vice-presidential candidate on the losing Democratic ticket.

The following year, while vacationing at his family's summer estate on Campobello Island, in the Canadian province of New Brunswick, he had been stricken with poliomyelitis. He was thirty-nine years of age. He would never again be able to stand without heavy steel braces on his legs. Through grueling effort and sheer will power, he eventually trained himself to "walk" a few steps, an odd shuffle in which, leaning on the strong arm of a companion, he threw one hip, then the other, to move his steel-cased legs forward. His disability was
no secret, but he took care to conceal its extent. He never allowed himself to be photographed in his wheelchair or being carried.

Roosevelt’s long struggle with illness transformed him in spirit as well as body. Athletic and slim in his youth, he was now necessarily sedentary, and his upper body thickened. He developed, in the manner of many paraplegics, a wrestler’s torso and big, beefy arms. His biceps, he delighted in telling visitors, were bigger than those of the celebrated prizefighter Jack Dempsey. Like many disabled persons, too, he developed a talent for denial, a kind of forcefully willed optimism that refused to dwell on life’s difficulties. Sometimes this talent abetted his penchant for duplicity, as in the continuing love affair he carried on with Lucy Mercer, even after he told his wife in 1918 that the relationship was ended. At other times it endowed him with an aura of radiant indomitability, lending conviction and authority to what in other men’s mouths might have been banal platitudes, such as “all we have to fear is fear itself.” Many of Roosevelt’s acquaintances also believed that his grim companionship with paralysis gave to this shallow, supercilious youth the precious gift of a purposeful manhood....

Though Roosevelt was never a systematic thinker, the period of lonely reflection imposed by his convalescence allowed him to shape a fairly coherent social philosophy. By the time he was elected governor, the distillate of his upbringing, education, and experience had crystallized into a few simple but powerful political principles. [Raymond] Moley summarized them this way: “He believed that government not only could, but should, achieve the subordination of private interests to collective interests, substitute co-operation for the mad scramble to selfish individualism. He had a profound feeling for the underdog, a real sense of the critical imbalance of economic life, a very keen awareness that political democracy could not exist side by side with economic plutocracy.” As Roosevelt himself put it:

[O]ur civilization cannot endure unless we, as individuals, realize our responsibility to and dependence on the rest of the world. For it is literally true that the “self-supporting” man or woman has become as extinct as the man of the stone age. Without the help of thousands of others, any one of us would die, naked and starved. Consider the bread upon our table, the clothes upon our backs, the luxuries that make life pleasant; how many men worked in sunlit fields, in dark mines, in the fierce heat of molten metal, and among the looms and wheels of countless factories, in order to create them for our use and enjoyment.... In the final analysis, the progress of our civilization will be retarded if any large body of citizens falls behind.

Perhaps deep within himself Roosevelt trembled occasionally with the common human pailies of melancholy or doubt or fear, but the world saw none of it. On February 15, 1933, he gave a memorable demonstration of his powers of self-control. Alighting in Miami from an eleven-day cruise aboard Vincent Astor’s yacht Naumahal, FDR motored to Bay Front Park, where he made a few remarks to a large crowd. At the end of the brief speech, Mayor Anton J. Cermak of Chicago stepped up to the side of Roosevelt’s open touring car
and said a few words to the president-elect. Suddenly a pistol barked from the crowd. Cermak doubled over. Roosevelt ordered the Secret Service agents, who were reflexively accelerating his car away from the scene, to stop. He motioned to have Cermak, pale and pulseless, put into the seat beside him. “Tony, keep quiet—don’t move. It won’t hurt you if you keep quiet,” Roosevelt repeated as he cradled Cermak’s limp body while the car sped to the hospital.

Cermak had been mortally wounded. He died within weeks, the victim of a deranged assassin who had been aiming for Roosevelt. On the evening of February 15, after Cermak had been entrusted to the doctors, Moley accompanied Roosevelt back to the Nourmahal, poured him a stiff drink, and prepared for the letdown now that Roosevelt was alone among his intimates. He had just been spared by inches from a killer’s bullet and had held a dying man in his arms. But there was nothing—“not so much as the twitching of a muscle, the mopping of a brow, or even the hint of a false gaiety—to indicate that it wasn’t any other evening in any other place. Roosevelt was simply himself—easy, confident, poised, to all appearances unmoved.” The episode contributed to Moley’s eventual conclusion “that Roosevelt had no nerves at all.” He was, said Frances Perkins, “the most complicated human being I ever knew.”...

Roosevelt began inaugural day by attending a brief service at St. John’s Episcopal Church. His old Groton School headmaster, Endicott Peabody, prayed the Lord to “bless Thy servant, Franklin, chosen to be president of the United States.” After a quick stop at the Mayflower Hotel to confer urgently with his advisers on the still-worsening banking crisis, Roosevelt donned his formal attire and motored to the White House. There he joined a haggard and cheerless Hoover for the ride down Pennsylvania Avenue to the inaugural platform on the east side of the Capitol.

Braced on his son’s arm, Roosevelt walked his few lumbering steps to the rostrum. Breaking precedent, he recited the entire oath of office, rather than merely repeating “I do” to the chief justice’s interrogation. Then he began his inaugural address, speaking firmly in his rich tenor voice. Frankly acknowledging the crippled condition of the ship of state he was now to captain, he began by reassuring his counymen that “this great nation will endure as it had endured, will revive and will prosper.... The only thing we have to fear,” he intoned, “is fear itself.” The nation’s distress, he declared, owed to “no failure of substance.” Rather, “rulers of the exchange of mankind’s goods have failed through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence, have admitted their failure, and have abdicated.... The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths.” The greatest task, he went on, “is to put people to work,” and he hinted at “direct recruiting by the Government” on public works projects as the means to do it....

Just weeks before his inaugural, while on his way to board the Nourmahal in Florida, Roosevelt had spoken restlessly of the need for “action, action.” President at last, he now proceeded to act with spectacular vigor.

The first and desperately urgent item of business was the banking crisis. Even as he left the Mayflower Hotel to deliver his inaugural condemnation of the
“money changers,” he approved a recommendation originating with the outgoing treasury secretary, Ogden Mills, to convene an emergency meeting of bankers from the leading financial centers. The next day, Sunday, March 5, Roosevelt issued two proclamations, one calling Congress into special session on March 9, the other invoking the Trading with the Enemy Act to halt all transactions in gold and declare a four-day national banking holiday—both of them measures that Hoover had vainly urged him to endorse in the preceding weeks. Hoover’s men and Roosevelt’s now began an intense eighty hours of collaboration to hammer out the details of an emergency banking measure that could be presented to the special session of Congress. Haunting the corridors of the Treasury Department day and night, private bankers and government officials both old and new toiled frantically to rescue the moribund corpse of American finance. In that hectic week, none led normal lives, Moley remembered. “Confusion, haste, the dread of making mistakes, the consciousness of responsibility for the economic well-being of millions of people, made mortal inroads on the health of some of us ... and left the rest of us ready to snap at our images in the mirror. Only Roosevelt,” Moley observed, preserved the air of a man who’d found a happy way of life.

Roosevelt’s and Hoover’s minions “had forgotten to be Republicans or Democrats,” Moley commented. “We were just a bunch of men trying to save the banking system.” William Woodin, the new treasury secretary, and Ogden Mills, his predecessor, simply shifted places on either side of the secretary’s desk in the Treasury Building. Otherwise, nothing changed in the room. The kind of bipartisan collaboration for which Hoover had long pleaded was now happening, but under Roosevelt’s aegis, not Hoover’s—and not, all these men hoped, too late. When the special session of Congress convened at noon on March 9, they had a bill ready—barely.

The bill was read to the House at 1:00 P.M., while some new representatives were still trying to locate their seats. Printed copies were not ready for the members. A rolled-up newspaper symbolically served. After thirty-eight minutes of “debate,” the chamber passed the bill, sight unseen, with a unanimous shout. The Senate approved the bill with only seven dissenting votes—all from agrarian states historically suspicious of Wall Street. The president signed the legislation into law at 8:36 in the evening. “Capitalism,” concluded Moley, “was saved in eight days.”...

On Monday the thirteenth the banks reopened, and the results of Roosevelt’s magic with the Congress and the people were immediately apparent. Deposits and gold began to flow back into the banking system. The prolonged banking crisis, acute since at least 1930, with roots reaching back through the 1920s and even into the days of Andrew Jackson, was at last over. And Roosevelt, taking full credit, was a hero. William Randolph Hearst told him: “I guess at your next election we will make it unanimous.” Even Henry Stimson, who so recently had thought FDR a “peanut,” sent his “heartiest congratulations.”

The common people of the country sent their congratulations as well—and their good wishes and suggestions and special requests. Some 450,000 Americans wrote to their new president in his first week in office. Thereafter mail routinely
poured in at a rate of four to seven thousand letters per day. The White House
mail-room, staffed by a single employee in Hoover’s day, had to hire seventy
people to handle the flood of correspondence. Roosevelt had touched the hearts
and imaginations of his countrymen like no predecessor in memory....

Meanwhile, the steady legislative drumbeat of the Hundred Days continued.
Relishing power and wielding it with gusto, Roosevelt next sent to Congress,
on March 21, a request for legislation aimed at unemployment relief. Here he
departed most dramatically from Hoover’s pettifogging timidity, and here he
harvested the greatest political rewards. He proposed a Civilian Conservation
Corps (CCC) to employ a quarter of a million men on forestry, flood control,
and beautification projects. Over the next decade, the CCC became one of the
most popular of all the New Deal’s innovations. By the time it expired in 1942,
it had put more than three million idle youngsters to work at a wage of thirty
dollars a month, twenty-five of which they were required to send home to their
families. CCC workers built firebreaks and lookouts in the national forests and
bridges, campgrounds, trails, and museums in the national parks. Roosevelt also
called for a new agency, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA),
to coordinate and eventually increase direct federal unemployment assistance to
the states. And he served notice, a bit halfheartedly that he would soon be making
recommendations about a “broad public works labor-creating program.”

The first two of these measures—CCC and FERA—constituted important
steps along the road to direct federal involvement in unemployment relief, some-
thing that Hoover had consistently and self-punishingly resisted. Roosevelt
showed no such squeamishness, just as he had not hesitated as governor of New
York to embrace relief as a “social duty” of government in the face of evident
human suffering. As yet, Roosevelt did not think of relief payments or public
works employment as means of significantly increasing purchasing power. He
proposed them for charitable reasons, and for political purposes as well, but not
principally for economic ones....

These first modest steps at a direct federal role in welfare services also
carried into prominence another of Roosevelt’s associates from New York,
Harry Hopkins, whom Roosevelt would soon name as federal relief administrator.
A chain-smoking, hollow-eyed, pauper-thin social worker, a tough-talking, big-
hearted blend of the sardonic and sentimental, Hopkins represented an impor-
tant and durable component of what might be called the emerging political
culture of the New Deal. In common with Brain Truster Adolf Berle, future
treasury secretary Henry Morgenthau Jr., and Labor Secretary Frances Perkins,
Hopkins was steeped in the Social Gospel tradition. Ernest, high-minded, and
sometimes condescending, the Social Gospelers were middle-class missionaries
to America’s industrial proletariat. Inspired originally by late nineteenth-
century Protestant clergymen like Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington
Gladden, they were committed to the moral and material uplift of the poor,
and they had both the courage and the prejudices of their convictions. Berle
and Morgenthau had worked for a time at Lillian Wald’s Henry Street settle-
ment house in New York, Perkins at Jane Addams’s Hull House in Chicago,
and Hopkins himself at New York’s Christsdora House. Amid the din and
squalor of thronged immigrant neighborhoods, they had all learned at first hand that poverty could be an ephelid way of life, that the idea of "opportunity" was often a mockery in the precarious, threadbare existence of the working class. Together with Franklin Roosevelt, they meant to do something about it....

"What I want you to do," said Harry Hopkins to Lorena Hickok in July 1933, "is to go out around the country and look this thing over. I don't want statistics from you. I don't want the social-worker angle. I just want your own reaction, as an ordinary citizen.

"Go talk with preachers and teachers, businessmen, workers, farmers. Go talk with the unemployed, those who are on relief and those who aren't. And when you talk with them don't ever forget that but for the grace of God you, I, any of our friends might be in their shoes. Tell me what you see and hear. All of it. Don't ever pull your punches."

The Depression was now in its fourth year. In the neighborhoods and hamlets of a stricken nation millions of men and women languished in sullen gloom and looked to Washington with guarded hope. Still they struggled to comprehend the nature of the calamity that had engulfed them. Across Hopkins's desk at the newly created Federal Emergency Relief Administration flowed rivers of data that measured the Depression's impact in cool numbers. But Hopkins wanted more—to touch the human face of the catastrophe, taste in his mouth the metallic smack of the fear and hunger of the unemployed, as he had when he worked among the immigrant poor at New York's Christodora settlement house in 1912. Tied to his desk in Washington, he dispatched Lorena Hickok in his stead. In her he chose a uniquely gutsy and perceptive observer who could be counted on to see without illusion and to report with candor, insight, and moxie....

From the charts and tables accumulating on his desk even before Hickok's letters began to arrive, Hopkins could already sketch the grim outlines of that history. Stockholders, his figures confirmed, had watched as three-quarters of the value of their assets had simply evaporated since 1929, a colossal financial meltdown that blighted not only the notoriously idle rich but struggling neighborhood banks, hard-earned retirement nest eggs, and college and university endowments as well. The more than five thousand bank failures between the Crash and the New Deal's rescue operation in March 1933 wiped out some $7 billion in depositors' money. Accelerating foreclosures on defaulted home mortgages—150,000 homeowners lost their property in 1930, 200,000 in 1931, 250,000 in 1932—stripped millions of people of both shelter and life savings at a single stroke and menaced the balance sheets of thousands of surviving banks. Several states and some thirteen hundred municipalities, crushed by sinking real estate prices and consequently shrinking tax revenues, defaulted on their obligations to creditors, pinched their already scant social services, cut payrolls, and slashed paychecks. Chicago was reduced to paying its teachers in tax warrants and then, in the winter of 1932–33, to paying them nothing at all.

Gross national product had fallen by 1933 to half its 1929 level. Spending for new plants and equipment had ground to a virtual standstill. Businesses invested only $3 billion in 1933, compared with $24 billion in 1929.... Residential and
learned at first hand a of "opportunity" of the working class. I was about it... Lenna Hickok in July; over. I don't want just want your own

workers, farmers. Go those who aren't. And grace of God you, I, I see and hear. All of

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industrial construction shivered to less than one-fifth of its pre-Depression volume, a wrenching contraction that spread through lumber camps, steel mills, and appliance factories, disemploying thousands of loggers, mill hands, sheet-metal workers, engineers, architects, carpenters, plumbers, roofers, plasterers, painters, and electricians. Mute shoals of jobless men drifted through the streets of every American city in 1933.

Nowhere did the Depression strike more savagely than in the American countryside. On America's farms, income had plummeted from $6 billion in what for farmers was the already lean year of 1929 to $2 billion in 1932. The net receipts from the wheat harvest in one Oklahoma county went from $1.2 million in 1931 to just $7,000 in 1933. Mississippi's pathetic $239 per capita income in 1929 sank to $117 in 1933.

Unemployment and its close companion, reduced wages, were the most obvious and the most wounding of all the Depression's effects. The government's data showed that 25 percent of the work force, some thirteen million workers, including nearly four hundred thousand women, stood idle in 1933....

Hickok set out in quest of the human reality of the Depression. She found that and much more besides. In dingy working-class neighborhoods in Philadel- phia and New York, in unpainted clapboard farmhouses in North Dakota, on the ravaged cotton farms of Georgia, on the dusty mesas of Colorado, Hickok uncovered not just the effects of the economic crisis that had begun in 1929. She found herself face to face as well with the human wreckage of a century of pen-mell, buccaneering, no-holds-barred, free-market industrial and agricultural capitalism. As her travels progressed, she gradually came to acknowledge the sobering reality that for many Americans the Great Depression brought times only a little harder than usual. She discovered, in short, what historian James Paterson has called the "old poverty" that was endemic in America well before the Depression hit. By his estimate, even in the midst of the storied prosperity of the 1920s some forty million Americans, including virtually all nonwhites, most of the elderly, and much of the rural population, were eking out unrelievedly precarious lives that were scarcely visible and practically unimaginable to their more financially secure countrymen. "The researches we have made into standards of living of the American family," Hopkins wrote, "have uncovered for the public gaze a volume of chronic poverty, unsuspected except by a few students and by those who have always experienced it." From this perspective, the Depression was not just a passing crisis but an episode that revealed deeply rooted structural inequities in American society.

The "old poor" were among the Depression's most ravaged victims, but it was not the Depression that had impoverished them. They were the "one-third of a nation" that Franklin Roosevelt would describe in 1937 as chronically "ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished." By suddenly threatening to push millions of other Americans into their wretched condition, the Depression pried open a narrow window of political opportunity to do something at last on behalf of that long-suffering one-third, and in the process to redefine the very character of America....

... The Emergency Relief Appropriation Act addressed only the most immediate of his [FDR's] goals. Most of the agencies it spawned were destined to survive
less than a decade. The longer-term features of Roosevelt's grand design—unemployment insurance and old-age pensions—were incorporated in a separate piece of legislation, a landmark measure whose legacy endured and reshaped the texture of American life: the Social Security Act.

No other New Deal measure proved more lastingly consequential or more emblematic of the very meaning of the New Deal. Nor did any other better reveal the tangled skein of human needs, economic calculations, idealistic visions, political pressures, partisan maneuverings, actuarial projections, and constitutional constraints out of which Roosevelt was obliged to weave his reform program. Tortuously threading each of those filaments through the needle of the legislative process, Roosevelt began with the Social Security Act to knit the fabric of the modern welfare state. It would in the end be a peculiar garment, one that could have been fashioned only in America and perhaps only in the circumstances of the Depression era.

No one knew better the singular possibilities of that place and time than Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins. To her the president in mid-1934 assigned the task of chairing a cabinet committee to prepare the social security legislation for submission to Congress. (Its other members were Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Attorney General Homer Cummings, Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace, and Relief Administrator Harry Hopkins.) "[T]his was the time, above all times," Perkins wrote, "to be foresighted about future problems of unemployment and unprotected old age." The president shared this sense of urgency—and opportunity. Now is the time, he said to Perkins in 1934, when "we have to get it started, or it will never start."...

At the outset the president entertained extravagantly far-reaching ideas about the welfare system he envisioned. "[T]here is no reason why everybody in the United States should not be covered," he mused to Perkins on one occasion. "I see no reason why every child, from the day he is born, shouldn't be a member of the social security system. When he begins to grow up, he should know he will have old-age benefits direct from the insurance system to which he will belong all his life. If he is out of work, he gets a benefit. If he is sick or crippled, he gets a benefit.... And there is no reason why just the industrial workers should get the benefit of this," Roosevelt went on. "Everybody ought to be in on it—the farmer and his wife and his family. I don't see why not." Roosevelt persisted, as Perkins shook her head at this presidential woolgathering. "I don't see why not. Cradle to the grave—from the cradle to the grave they ought to be in a social insurance system."

That may have been the president's ideal outcome, but he knew as well as anyone that he would have to temper that vision in the forge of political and fiscal reality. Much of the country, not least the southern Democrats who were essential to his party's congressional majority, remained suspicious about all forms of social insurance. So Perkins, with dour Yankee prudence, went to work in a more practical vein. In the summer of 1934 she convened the Committee on Economic Security (CES), an advisory body of technical experts who would hammer out the precise terms of the social security legislation. She instructed the CES in words that spoke eloquently about her sensitivity to the nobelies
and difficulties of what they were about to undertake. "I recall emphasizing," she later wrote, "that the President was already in favor of a program of social insurance, but that it remained for them to make it practicable. We expected them," she recollected, in a passage that says volumes about her shrewd assessment of American political culture in the 1930s, "to remember that this was the United States in the years 1934–35. We hoped they would make recommendations based upon a practical knowledge of the needs of our country, the prejudices of our people, and our legislative habits."

The needs of the country were plain enough. But what of those prejudices and habits? What, in particular, of that phrase "under state laws" in the Democratic platform? Few items more deeply vexed the CES planners. Given the mobility of American workers and the manifest desirability of uniformity in national laws, most of the CES experts insisted that a centralized, federally administered system of social insurance would be the most equitable and the easiest to manage. They deemed a miscellany of state systems to be utterly impractical. Yet deeply ingrained traditions of states' rights challenged that commonsense approach, as did pervasive doubts about the federal government's constitutional power to act in this area.

Thomas Eliot, the young, Harvard-educated general counsel to the CES who played a major role in drafting the final bill, worried above all about "the omnipresent question of constitutionality." The lower federal courts, Eliot knew, had already handed down hundreds of injunctions against other New Deal measures. Constitutional tests of NRA and AAA were working their way to the Supreme Court. There, four justices—the "Battalion of Death" that included Justices McReynolds, Butler, VanDevanter, and Sutherland—were notoriously hostile to virtually any expansion of federal power over industry and commerce, not to mention the far bolder innovation of federal initiatives respecting employment and old age. Eliot brooded that "I could not honestly assure the committee that a national plan ... would be upheld by the Supreme Court."...

Against their better judgment, the CES experts therefore resigned themselves to settling for a mixed federal-state system. Perkins took what comfort she could from the reflection that if the Supreme Court should declare the federal aspects of the law to be unconstitutional, at least the state laws would remain. Though they would not be uniform, they would be better than nothing....

The pattern of economic reforms that the New Deal wove arose out of concrete historical circumstances. It also had a more coherent intellectual underpinning than is customarily recognized. Its cardinal aim was not to destroy capitalism but to devolatilize it, and at the same time to distribute its benefits more evenly....

... And ever after, Americans assumed that the federal government had not merely a role, but a major responsibility, in ensuring the health of the economy and the welfare of citizens. That simple but momentous shift in perception was the newest thing in all the New Deal, and the most consequential too.

Humankind, of course, does not live by bread alone. Any assessment of what the New Deal did would be incomplete if it rested with an appraisal of New Deal economic policies and failed to acknowledge the remarkable array of social innovations nourished by Roosevelt's expansive temperament....
For all his alleged inscrutability, Franklin Roosevelt’s social vision was clear enough. “We are going to make a country,” he once said to Frances Perkins, “in which no one is left out.” In that unadorned sentence Roosevelt spoke volumes about the New Deal’s lasting historical meaning. Like his rambling, comfortable, and unpretentious old home on the bluff above the Hudson River, Roosevelt’s New Deal was a welcoming mansion of many rooms, a place where millions of his fellow citizens could find at last a measure of the security that the patrician Roosevelts enjoyed as their birthright.

Perhaps the New Deal’s greatest achievement was its accommodation of the maturing immigrant communities that had milled uneasily on the margins of American society for a generation and more before the 1930s. In bringing them into the Democratic Party and closer to the mainstream of national life, the New Deal, even without fully intending to do so, also made room for an almost wholly new institution, the industrial union. To tens of millions of rural Americans, the New Deal offered the modern comforts of electricity, schools, and roads, as well as unaccustomed financial stability. To the elderly and the unemployed it extended the promise of income security, and the salvaged dignity that went with it.

To black Americans the New Deal offered jobs with CCC, WPA, and PWA and, perhaps as important, the compliment of respect from at least some federal officials. The time had not come for direct federal action to challenge Jim Crow and put right at last the crimes of slavery and discrimination, but more than a few New Dealers made clear where their sympathies lay and quietly prepared for a better future. Urged on by Eleanor Roosevelt, the president brought African-Americans into the government in small but unprecedented numbers. By the mid-1930s they gathered periodically as an informal “black cabinet,” guided often by the redoubtable Mary McLeod Bethune. Roosevelt also appointed the first black federal judge, William Hastie. Several New Deal Departments and agencies, including especially Ickes’s Interior Department and Aubrey Williams’s National Youth Administration, placed advisers for “Negro affairs” on their staffs....

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. At a time when despair and alienation were prostrating other peoples under the heel of dictatorship, that was no small accomplishment.

**FDR: Architect of Ineffectual Big Government**

**BURTON FOLSOM**

On May 9, 1939, Henry Morgenthau, Jr., the secretary of the treasury and one of the most powerful men in America, had a startling confession to make....

We have tried spending money. We are spending more than we have ever spent before and it does not work. And I have just one interest,
and if I am wrong ... somebody else can have my job. I want to see this country prosperous. I want to see people get a job. I want to see people get enough to eat. We have never made good on our promises.... I say after eight years of this Administration we have just as much unemployment as when we started.... And an enormous debt to boot!

In these words, Morgenthau summarized a decade of disaster, especially during the years Roosevelt was in power. Indeed, average unemployment for the whole year in 1939 would be higher than that in 1931, the year before Roosevelt captured the presidency from Herbert Hoover. Fully 17.2 percent of Americans, or $9,480,000, remained unemployed in 1939, up from 16.3 percent, or $8,020,000 in 1931. On the positive side, 1939 was better than 1932 and 1933, when the Great Depression was at its nadir, but 1939 was still worse than 1931, which at that time was almost the worst unemployment year in U.S. history. No depression, or recession, had ever lasted even half this long....

High unemployment was just one of many tragic areas that made the 1930s a decade of disaster. The Historical Statistics of the United States, compiled by the Census Bureau, fills out the rest of the grim picture. The stock market, which picked up in the mid-1930s, had a collapse later in the decade. The value of all stocks dropped almost in half from 1937 to 1939. Car sales plummeted one-third in those same years, and were lower in 1939 than in any of the last seven years of the 1920s. Business failures jumped 50 percent from 1937 to 1939; patent applications for inventions were lower in 1939 than for any year of the 1920s. Real estate foreclosures, which did decrease steadily during the 1930s, were still higher in 1939 than in any year during the next two decades....

Did the New Deal, rather than helping to cure the Great Depression, actually help prolong it? That is an important question to ask and ponder. Almost all historians of the New Deal rank Roosevelt as a very good to great president and the New Deal programs as a step in the right direction. With only a few exceptions, historians lavish praise on Roosevelt as an effective innovator, and on the New Deal as a set of programs desperately needed and very helpful to the depressed nation.

An example of this adulation is the appraisal by Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris, two of the most distinguished American historians of the twentieth century. Commager, during a remarkable career at Columbia University and Amherst College, wrote over forty books and became perhaps the bestselling historian of the century. From the first year of Roosevelt’s presidency, Commager lectured and wrote articles in defense of the New Deal.

Richard Morris, his junior partner at Columbia, was a prolific author and president of the American Historical Association....

Commager and Morris’s assessment highlights four main points of defense for Roosevelt and the New Deal that have been adopted by most historians for the last seventy years: first, the 1920s were an economic disaster; second, the New Deal programs were a corrective to the 1920s, and a step in the right direction; third, Roosevelt (and the New Deal) were very popular; and fourth, Roosevelt was a good administrator and moral leader.
These four points constitute what many historians call "the Roosevelt legend." Since the works of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and William Leuchtenburg have been essential in shaping and fleshing out this view of Roosevelt, I will quote from them liberally....

First, as Commager and Morris state, "The character of the Republican ascendancy of the twenties had been pervasively negative: the character of the New Deal was overwhelmingly positive." In other words, the 1920s was an economic disaster that helped lead to the Great Depression, from which Roosevelt with his New Deal provided useful tools of relief, partial recovery, and reform for the American economy.

To promote this view, both Schlesinger and Leuchtenburg support the underconsumption thesis, which states that the Great Depression was accelerated because workers did not have adequate purchasing power during the 1920s to buy the products of industrial America. According to Schlesinger, "Management's disposition [in the 1920s] to maintain prices ... meant that workers and farmers were denied the benefits of increased in their own productivity. The consequence was the relative decline of mass purchasing power." President Calvin Coolidge and his treasury secretary, Andrew Mellon, contributed to great income disparities by enacting tax cuts for the rich. "The Mellon tax policy," Schlesinger says, "placing its emphasis on relief for millionaires rather than for consumers, made the maldistribution of income and oversaving even worse." Along similar lines, Leuchtenburg argues, "Insofar as one accepts the theory that underconsumption explains the Depression, and I do, then one can say that the Presidents of the 1920's are to blame...."

Second, "the character of the New Deal was overwhelmingly positive." Its intentions were excellent, and its results tended to be positive. Historians cite statistics to support this point: unemployment was 25 percent in 1933, Roosevelt's first year in office, and dropped steadily to about 15 percent by the end of his term in early 1937. The New Deal, then, did not solve the Great Depression, but it was a move in the right direction. William Leuchtenburg writes, "The New Deal achieved a more just society by recognizing groups which had been largely unrepresented—staple farmers, industrial workers, particular ethnic groups, and the new intellectual-administrative class." Samuel Eliot Morison, longtime professor at Harvard University, echoed this view: "The New Deal was just what the term implied—a new deal of old cards, no longer stacked against the common man." Textbook writers often pick up this theme. Historian Joseph Conlin concludes, "The greatest positive accomplishment of the New Deal was to ease the economic hardships suffered by millions of Americans...."

Third, Roosevelt was a popular and beloved president. He received unprecedented amounts of fan mail and he won reelection by a smashing 523 to 8 landslide in the electoral college—and then won two more terms after that. His fireside chats on the radio uplifted Americans and mobilized them behind his New Deal. "He came through to people," Schlesinger wrote, "because they felt—correctly—that he liked them and cared about them...."

Fourth, Roosevelt was an admirable executive and a good moral leader. Schlesinger, like all historians, concedes that Roosevelt "made mistakes both in
call "the Roosevelt William Leuchtenburg / of esvelt, I will er of the Republican ; the character of the the 1920s was an econ- from which Roosevelt recovery, and reform htenburg support the sion was accelerated r during the 1920s to chlesinger, "Manage- eant that workers and wn productivity. The g power." President r contributed to great e Mellon tax policy," mares rather than for taving even worse." e accepts the theory o, then one can say elmingly positive." Its e positive. Historians 25 percent in 1933, but ercent by the l no...ve the Great William Leuchtenburg nizing groups which orkers, particular eth- amuel Eliot Morison, "The New Deal was er stacked against the me. Historian Joseph of the New Deal was icans...."
He received unprec- a smashing 523 to 8 terms after that. His ed them behind his wrote, "because they ... good moral leader. ade mistakes both in policy and in politics," but he was a great president nonetheless. "Roosevelt had superb qualities of leadership, superb instincts for the crucial problems of his age, superb ability to select and manage vigorous subordinates, enormous skill as a public educator, and enormous ability to lift the spirits of the republic and to mobilize national energies."...
These four parts of the Roosevelt legend have a strong cumulative effect and historians regularly place Roosevelt among the top three presidents in U.S. history. In fact, the most recent Schlesinger poll (1996) ranks Roosevelt and Lincoln as the greatest president in the U.S. history....
Of course, historians are often niggles and all students of Roosevelt and his presidency have some complaints. What's interesting is that most of these complaints are that Roosevelt should have done more than he did, not less. "The havoc that had been done before Roosevelt took office," Leuchtenburg argues, "was so great that even the unprecedented measures of the New Deal did not suffice to repair the damage."....
Some New Deal historians of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s—loosely called the "constraints school"—argue that the New Deal did promote many needed changes, but that Roosevelt was constrained in what he could accomplish and therefore he did as much reform as circumstances would permit....
Two examples will help illustrate this point. David Kennedy and George McJimsey, both of whom loosely fit in the "constraints school," have written recent books on the Roosevelt presidency. Kennedy's book won the Pulitzer Prize in history and McJimsey's is part of the distinguished American Presidency Series. Kennedy praises "the remarkable generation of scholars" who did "pioneering work on the New Deal era." He cites Leuchtenburg, Schlesinger, and four other similar historians and writes, "Though I sometimes disagree with their emphases and evaluations, they laid the foundation on which all subsequent study of that period has built, including my own." Kennedy, like these predecessors, concludes, "Roosevelt's New Deal was a welcoming mansion of many rooms, a place where million of his fellow citizens could find at last a measure of ... security...." McJimsey, also like his predecessors, praises Roosevelt: "No president in our history has faced such critical problems with the courage, vision, and stamina that Roosevelt displayed." McJimsey concludes that "one of Roosevelt's major achievements was to create an institutional structure for the modern welfare state.... Subsequent presidents," McJimsey notes approvingly, "were freer than ever to use government in creative ways."...
As historian Ray Allen Billington noted, the New Deal "established for all time the principle of positive government action to rehabilitate and preserve the human resources of the nation." Yet, as we have seen, there is that nagging observation in 1939 by Henry Morgenthau, the secretary of the treasury, the friend of Roosevelt's and the man in the center of the storm....
The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), which was Roosevelt's plan for farmers, also passed Congress in 1933 with expectations almost as high as those for the NRA [National Recovery Act]. "I tell you frankly," Roosevelt said of the AAA, "that it is a new and untrod path...." During the president's busy first
hundred days in office in 1933, that was his opening salvo in restructuring the whole American farm program.

The AAA was very complicated, but in a nutshell here is how it worked. First, some farmers would be paid not to produce on part of their land; second, farm prices would be pegged to the purchasing power of farm prices in 1910; third, millers and processors would pay for much of the cost of the program. What’s more, power would be centralized through the secretary of agriculture, who would set the processing taxes, target the price of many commodities, and tell farmers how much land to remove.

Why would Congress pass such a strange law in the first place? The origin was in the severe farm crisis after World War I: over-production of crops and the low prices received for those crops. Of course, in a sense that was the perennial problem of the American farmer. In 1790, about 80 percent of Americans made their living as farmers. In the 1800s and 1900s, mechanization of crops (especially the major crops of wheat, corn, and cotton), improved seeds, and improved fertilizers meant that each farmer could feed more and more people. The economics of supply and demand typically worked against the farmer. The more he produced, the lower his price was, and, therefore, the more that farmers moved to the city and took up jobs there in the expanding factories and businesses.

By the 1930s, urbanization was well under way. Only 30 percent of Americans made their living as farmers in 1933. But selling the farm and moving to the city—the traditional response to low prices and overproduction—did not happen in the 1930s, and for three reasons. First, because the Great Depression was nationwide, few businesses were expanding and few jobs, therefore, were available in the city. Second, the Smoot-Hawley tariff, the highest tariff in U.S. history, created retaliatory tariffs. Few Europeans were buying American farm exports and thus foreign markets—the traditional outlet for overproduction—were shut off. Third, both Hoover and Roosevelt were more willing to experiment with government solutions to farm problems, even though the Constitution made no provision for direct farm relief.

The Federal Farm Board was Hoover’s futile effort at intervention. He picked two major crops, wheat and cotton, both of which had strong political constituencies. He pegged the price of wheat at 80 cents/bushel and cotton at 20 cents/pound. Those were price floors, minimum prices. The government promised these prices for every bushel of wheat and every pound of cotton that American farmers produced. That way, two large groups of farmers would be protected from falling prices. Disaster quickly resulted. Wheat and cotton farmers, with prices guaranteed, expanded acreage and grew as much as possible. Farmers of other crops shifted to wheat and cotton, where their prices could then be guaranteed. Soon Hoover’s Farm Board was building grain elevators to store wheat, and warehouses to store surplus cotton. After about two years of wild overproduction, the government had spent the $500 million allocated to the Farm Board. They stopped the programs and gave away or sold at huge losses about 250 million bushels of wheat and 10 million bales of cotton.

To many Americans, the Farm Board showed the damage created when government interfered with supply and demand. If more farmers would have
moved to the city, which was an expanding job market before the 1930s, less would have been produced and prices would have risen for the more efficient farmers who remained on the farm. But few of the 30 percent of Americans who remained as farmers wanted to leave the land. The Farm Board gave them a precedent for government intervention and the high tariff gave them a reason to complain that others were getting help from the government. Why not farmers as well? Since farmers were a potentially strong political group in many states, politicians emerged to argue for more intervention. Hence Roosevelt and others made the case for the AAA, paying farmers not to produce....

**Labor Relations**

Employer–employee arrangements drastically changed during the New Deal. Before the Great Depression, “liberty of contract” tended to be the rule. “Whatever may be the advantages of ‘collective bargaining,’ it is not bargaining at all, in any just sense, unless it is voluntary on both sides,” wrote Justice Mahlon Pitney of the Supreme Court in 1917. “The same liberty which enables men to form unions, and through the union to enter into agreements with employers willing to agree, entitles other men to remain independent of the union and other employers to employ no man who owes any allegiance or obligation to the union.”

President Roosevelt wanted to tilt the balance of power more in favor of unions. The year he was elected president he had help from two of his friends, Senator George Norris of Nebraska and Representative Fiorello La Guardia of New York. Their Norris–La Guardia Anti-Injunction Act, passed in 1932, made it harder for employers to stop union organizing. Yellow–dog contracts, which required employees to agree not to join a union, were made unenforceable by law, and federal courts could issue no injunctions in labor disputes except in cases of fraud or violence.

When Roosevelt became president, his NRA gave further help to union organizing. According to the NRA, in the writing of industrial codes, workers had “the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from interference, restraint, or coercion of employers of labor.” Workers were free to have a variety of unions, including company unions, represent them. The NRA did not require a “closed shop,” that is, a single union mandated as the bargaining representative for all workers in an industry.

Even before the NRA was struck down by the Supreme Court, Senator Robert Wagner of New York, with Roosevelt’s later tacit approval, began formulating a law that would strengthen the power of unions. The National Labor Relations Act, or the Wagner Act as it was sometimes called, proposed to sharply alter the industrial workforce. The key part of the bill had a list of “unfair labor practices.” Employers were not allowed to stop any union from organizing. They could not fire anyone because he or she was a union member, and they had to agree to bargain collectively with union representatives. If 30 percent of employees in an industry wanted a union, they could have a vote and whichever union they might select would represent all workers....
The Wagner Act certainly weighted the scales toward labor. The United States had thousands of strikes and work stoppages as unionization proceeded rapidly in the 1930s and 1940s. Wages, of course, increased for many workers in the newly unionized industries. But from a standpoint of the Great Depression and overall employment, the new labor relations had problems as well. Since much higher wages were the cost of doing business for many corporations, they hired fewer workers and trimmed down their labor forces when possible—especially by mechanization, which occurred rapidly in the coal industry, for example. Unions often discriminated against blacks, so they rarely benefited from new labor laws. And American exports were sometimes less competitive on world markets. That also diminished sales and new hiring, which prolonged the Great Depression....

If the evidence suggests that the New Deal failed, that raises a legitimate question: What should Roosevelt have done about the Great Depression? Put another way, what better path might Roosevelt have taken to achieve economic recovery?

Such a question is, of course, speculative and counterfactual. No one can be sure what alternatives would have produced a stronger economy and less unemployment. The Great Depression was a complicated, worldwide crisis and difficult to handle. It’s easy many decades later to see errors in policy. Also, Roosevelt and other leaders were constrained politically and economically. They did not have the hindsight we have today. For example, few politicians of the 1920s and 1930s saw the damage done by the Federal Reserve, and not just in the higher interest rates, but in its demand that banks change their reserve ratios. Few saw at the time how the declining money supply, a by-product of Fed actions, damaged the economy and hindered recovery. In any case, however, because the Fed is independent, no one can really fault Hoover or Roosevelt for problems created by the new federal banking system.

Given the constraints on Roosevelt, then, and the confusion created by this unique depression, what could Roosevelt have done to achieve better recovery for the economy and more employment? Some comparisons might help. In the Panic of 1893, U.S. unemployment briefly hit what was then the all-time high of 18.4 percent, but the panic was over in a little more than five years. In the mini-recession of 1921, unemployment reached 11.7 percent, but hard times lasted less than two years. In both of these economic downturns, Presidents Cleveland and Harding cut federal expenses and, in the case of Harding, cut the income tax rate as well. Soon investments in business became attractive again, capital slowly flowed back into the American economy, and it bounced back. In recessions before 1893 and 1921, presidents followed roughly the same plan and the crises were short-lived.

In 1929, however, after the stock market crash, President Hoover did the opposite of Cleveland and Harding. Hoover increased federal spending—through the Federal Farm Board, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, and public works. Then in 1932 he agreed to sharply increase both income and excise taxes to help pay for his costly programs. With the top income tax rate hiked to 63 percent, and with almost all Americans paying some excise taxes
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for the first time in U.S. history, private investment did not bounce back and
unemployment reached 25 percent. Thus Roosevelt had an especially difficult
task when he entered the White House. Some of his emergency measures—the
banking holiday and taking the United States off the gold standard (to stop the
outflow of gold)—may have been in order. His New Deal, however, is another
story because there he applied ideas from underconsumption theory.

What if, instead of expanding Hoover’s programs and starting many new
ones of his own, Roosevelt had kept his campaign promises to cut spending,
reduce taxes, and lower the Smoot-Hawley tariff immediately? In the Democrat
Party platform, and in speech after speech during the campaign, Roosevelt
promised these three things....

If Roosevelt’s New Deal programs did not break the Great Depression, then
what did? Most historians have argued that America’s entry into World War II
was the key event that ended it. Federal spending drastically increased as twelve
million U.S. soldiers went to war, and millions more mobilized in the factories
to make war materiel. As a result, unemployment plummeted and, so the argu-
ment goes, the Great Depression receded.

William Leuchtenburg, who has written the standard book on the New
Deal, claims, “The real impetus to recovery was to come from rapid, large-
scale spending.” Roosevelt, according to Leuchtenburg, was reluctant to take
this step. When, at last, Pearl Harbor was bombed, “The war proved that mass-
ive spending under the right conditions produced full employment.”

Recently, David M. Kennedy, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book on
Roosevelt, echoed Leuchtenburg’s argument. “Roosevelt,” Kennedy insisted,
“remained reluctant to the end of the 1930s to engage in the scale of compensa-
tory spending adequate to restore the economy to pre-Depression levels, let
alone expand it.” At the end of his book, Kennedy concluded, “It was a war
that had brought [Americans] as far as imagination could reach, and beyond,
from the ordeal of the Great Depression....” More specifically, “The huge
expenditures for weaponry clinched the Keynesian doctrine that government
spending could underwrite prosperity....”

Economists, Keynes notwithstanding, have always been less willing to
believe this theory than historians. F.A. Hayek, who won the Nobel Prize in
economics, argued against this view in 1944 in *The Road to Serfdom*. Economist
Henry Hazlitt, who wrote for the *New York Times* during the Roosevelt years,
observed, “No man burns down his own house on the theory that the need to
rebuild it will stimulate his energies.” And yet, as historians and others viewed
World War II, “they see almost endless benefits in enormous acts of destruction.
They tell us how much better off economically we all are in war than in peace.
They see ‘miracles of production’ which it requires a war to achieve.” Thus, in
Hazlitt’s argument, the United States merely shifted capital from private markets,
where it could have made consumer goods, to armament factories, where it
made tanks, bombs, and planes for temporary use during war....

In retrospect, we can see that Roosevelt’s special-interest spending created
insatiable demands by almost all groups of voters for special subsidies. That,
in itself, created regime uncertainty. Under the RFC [Reconstruction Finance
Corporation], for example, the federal government made special loans to banks
and railroads; then the AAA had price supports for farmers; soon the operators of
silver mines were demanding special high prices for their product. At one level,
as we have seen, Roosevelt used these subsidies as political tools to reward
friends and punish enemies. But beyond that, where would the line be
drawn? Who would get special taxpayer subsidies and who would not? As
Walter Waters, who led the veterans’ march on Washington in 1932, observed,
“I noticed, too, that the highly organized lobbies in Washington for special
industries were producing results: loans were being granted to their special
interests and these lobbies seemed to justify their existence. Personal lobbying paid,
regardless of the justice or injustice of their demand.”...

Why would so many historians heap so much praise on Roosevelt? Most
historians are, along with Roosevelt, influenced by the “progressive view of his-
tory” that began to dominate American life during the presidency of Woodrow
Wilson. Before the early 1900s, the constitutional views of the Founders domi-
nated American political thought. In writing the Declaration of Independence
and Constitution, the Founders emphasized natural rights—the process of ensur-
ing God-given rights to life, liberty, and property to every American. “If men
were angels, no government would be necessary,” Madison wrote. But men
were not angels, so to protect natural rights, the Constitution was written with
power widely dispersed to prevent a strong president or legislature from increas-
ing its authority and gradually turning the United States into a tyranny.

In crafting the Constitution, the Founders emphasized process, not results. If
we follow the Constitution, we won’t have a perfect society, which is unattain-
able by imperfect humans. But we will provide opportunity for people to use
their natural rights to pursue the acquisition of property and their personal
happiness. The results may yield sharp inequalities of income, but the process
will guarantee chances for almost everyone....

Woodrow Wilson—both as a Ph.D. in history and as a two-term president—
represented a break with the Constitution and its constrained view of history.
Government, in Wilson’s progressive view, did not exist merely to protect rights.
“We are not,” Wilson insisted, “bound to adhere to the doctrines held by the
signers of the Declaration of Independence.” The limited government enshrined
in both the Declaration and the Constitution may have been an advance for the
Founders, Wilson conceded, but society had evolved since then. Separation of
powers was inefficient and hindered modern government from promoting pro-
gress. “The only fruit of dividing power,” Wilson asserted, “was to make it
irresponsible.” A strong executive was needed, Wilson believed, to translate the
interests of the people into public policy....

Roosevelt served in the Wilson administration and believed deeply in
Wilson’s progressive view of the Constitution. When Chief Justice Charles Evans
Hughes was swearing in Roosevelt for his second term, he apparently read with
great emphasis the words “promise to support the Constitution of the United
States.” Roosevelt met Hughes’s challenge and repeated these words with force.
Later the president said he wanted to shout, “Yes, but it’s the Constitution as I
understand it....” In a fireside chat on Court packing, Roosevelt dropped his
argument for judicial efficiency and called the Constitution "a system of living law." He added, "We must have judges who will bring to the courts a present-day sense of the Constitution."...

In the progressive view, intentions and sincerity are among the noblest virtues a president can possess. According to Schlesinger, "In the welter of confusion and ignorance [during the Great Depression], experiment corrected by compassion was the best answer." Experiment is valued by Schlesinger more than experience, and compassion, not results, is described as "the best answer." Leuchtenburg follows a similar line and notes, "many workingmen, poor farmers, and others who felt themselves to have been neglected in the past regarded Roosevelt as their friend. They sensed that his was a humane administration, that the President cared what happened to them." Historians seem to focus on "caring" and "compassion" more than on the unprecedented lack of recovery for the eleven years from 1929 to 1940....

The constitutional view of the Founders gives little weight to intentions. Good intentions assume that the leader, or leaders, know what is best for society. All they need is the authority to implement their ideas and reconstruct society. People with good intentions, however, can be busybodies who use the power of government to do more harm than good....

**FURTHER READING**