
BACKGROUND BOOKS

THE NEW DEAL

The term "New Deal" is convenient shorthand for various things: an era, a series of programs, a philosophy, a cluster of personalities, a collage of national memories and myths. If it is difficult to analyze the New Deal, it is even harder to fathom the complicated man who brought it to pass. The more one learns, the more one yearns to know.

Thus, it has taken four volumes—**The Apprenticeship, The Ordeal, The Triumph, and Launching the New Deal**, (Little, Brown, 1952, 1954, 1956, & 1973, respectively)—for historian Frank Freidel, in what is doubtless the definitive biography, to move from Roosevelt's childhood to the end of his First Hundred Days in office.

Roosevelt's patrician character was formed early. When young Franklin's mother reprimanded him for being high-handed with his playmates, Freidel writes, Roosevelt replied, "Mummie, if I didn't give the orders, nothing would happen."

As a young man, Roosevelt was strongly influenced by his distant cousin, Theodore, a vigorous leader who told Franklin during one of his infrequent visits to the White House that "men of good background and education owed their country public service."

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked that FDR had a "second-rate intellect but a first-rate temperament." James MacGregor Burns reaches the same conclusion in his highly readable, two-volume biography, **Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox** (Harcourt, 1956, cloth; 1963, paper) and **Roosevelt: Soldier of**

Freedom (Harcourt, 1970, cloth; 1973, paper). Burns describes the 32nd President as a man of "no fixed convictions about methods and policies" whose chief tenet was "Improvise."

Even so, writes historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Roosevelt never wavered in his efforts to create a society "as good as human ingenuity can devise and fit for the children of God."

Schlesinger's three-volume **The Age of Roosevelt—The Crisis of the Old Order**, (Houghton, 1957, cloth & paper); **The Coming of the New Deal** (Houghton, 1959, cloth & paper); **The Politics of Upheaval** (Houghton, 1960, cloth; 1967, paper)—is the most comprehensive history of domestic affairs during Roosevelt's first term. It suffers, however, from Schlesinger's chronic tendency to view himself as one of FDR's intellectual apostles.

FDR steals less of the show (and gets a mixed review) in William E. Leuchtenburg's **Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal** (Harper, 1963, cloth; 1975, paper). Leuchtenburg considers the achievements of the New Deal a "halfway revolution." He concludes nevertheless that, despite its failure to solve many inherited problems, and its propensity for creating new ones, the New Deal probably changed America for the better.

Above all, Leuchtenburg argues, Roosevelt proved that democratic governments were disposed to respond, and could respond with at least partial effectiveness, to traumatic economic and social crises. This was no small accomplishment

“at a time when democracy was under attack elsewhere in the world”—notably in Germany and Italy.

As a key member of the “Brains Trust” that advised President Roosevelt, Raymond Moley was in the thick of things from the start. But as he makes clear in **After Seven Years** (Harper, 1939; Da Capo, 1972), he soon became disillusioned with the “unskillful combinations of Gothic, Byzantine, and Le Corbusier” that comprised the social architecture of the New Deal.

Moley had at first deemed Roosevelt’s freedom from dogma a virtue, but the “auto-intoxification of the intelligence” that lured FDR into contradictory policies ultimately drove him away. Moley felt that the New Deal sputtered ingloriously to a halt because Roosevelt tried to accomplish too much too quickly.

Roosevelt’s quixotic nature was the despair of all who worked closely with him—and an endless source of fascination. “I cannot come to grips with him,” complained the irascible Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, no easy person to get along with himself. The almost daily entries in Ickes’s three-volume **Secret Diary** (Simon & Schuster, 1953–54; Da Capo, 1974) provide a sometimes narrow but always penetrating view of the political struggles, great and small, within the administration.

The man who may have understood FDR best was Harry Hopkins, the “minister of relief” who presided over the Works Progress Administration and Federal Emergency Relief Administration. During the war years, he served as Roosevelt’s personal emissary to Churchill, Stalin, and other heads of state. His career is exhaustively chronicled in Robert E. Sherwood’s **Roosevelt and Hopkins**

(Grosset, 1950).

During the 1930s, Hopkins employed journalist Lorena Hickock as his confidential “eyes and ears” in the field to keep him apprised of the progress of New Deal relief programs. Her vivid dispatches have been collected in **One Third of a Nation** (Univ. of Ill., 1981), edited by Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley.

In June 1934, Hickock prepared an optimistic report on the Tennessee Valley Authority, then employing some 10,000 men:

Thousands of them are residents of the valley, working five and a half hours a day, five days a week, for a really LIVING wage. Houses are going up for them to live in . . . And in their leisure time they are studying—farming, trades, the arts of living, preparing themselves for the fuller lives they are to lead in that Promised Land. You are probably saying, “Oh, come down to earth!” But that’s the way the Tennessee Valley affects one these days.

Roosevelt’s critics were numerous. On one flank were the disillusioned progressives—among them, journalist Walter Lippman and California’s Senator Hiram Johnson—who make up the cast of Otis L. Graham, Jr.’s **An Encore for Reform** (Oxford, 1967). Most of them supported the New Deal at the outset but broke with FDR for carrying his reforms too far.

On the populist side, FDR’s chief foe was Huey P. Long, the Louisiana Senator assassinated in 1935. A one-time Roosevelt supporter, Long was embittered by the President’s reluctance to embrace more sweeping reforms, such as a drastic redistribution of wealth.

In the end, argues T. Harry Williams in **Huey Long** (Knopf, 1969, cloth; Random, 1981, paper), the

"Kingfish" was corrupted by his own quest for ever more power to accomplish ever more good. But Williams believes that the Senator's goals and the President's were remarkably similar, differing only in degree.

New Left historian Howard Zinn echoes many of Huey Long's complaints in his introduction to **New Deal Thought** (Bobbs-Merrill, 1966, paper only), a useful collection of speeches and essays from the 1930s by New Dealers and their critics on both the Left and the Right.

Zinn finds much to praise in the free-wheeling intellectual debate of the New Deal years. But he faults Roosevelt for failing to bring lasting help to the "permanent army of the unemployed; the poverty-ridden people blocked from public view by the huge prosperous and fervently consuming middle class."

In **A New Deal for Blacks** (Oxford, 1978, cloth; 1981, paper), Harvey Sitkoff agrees—up to a point. While FDR did not attempt to end racial discrimination, he did extend the benefits of such New Deal programs as the WPA to blacks. Ultimately, Sitkoff contends, the New Deal's most important contributions lay in creating a tradition of reform and in making explicit as never before "the federal government's recognition of and responsibility for the plight of Afro-Americans."

A New Deal experiment more notable for its aspirations than its achievements was the "back to the land" movement, promoted by several federal agencies. In **Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program** (Cornell, 1959), Paul K. Conkin writes that the movement reflected both a tradition of agrarian romanticism and the utopian thinking of social theorists. Approximately 100 newly created com-

munities, mostly in the South and Southwest, brought "more tangible enduring achievements" than most other relief expenditures of the time, Conkin concludes, even though no more than 10,000 families were involved. One forgotten legacy of the programs: the impetus they gave to latter-day urban planning.

Another of Roosevelt's reforms, more Machiavellian than utopian, was his oft-forgotten reorganization of the executive branch. In 1939, at FDR's prompting, Congress authorized the creation of an Executive Office of the President, placing the Bureau of the Budget, the National Resources Planning Board, and a host of other agencies more firmly within the President's grasp.

As Barry D. Karl argues in **Executive Reorganization and Reform in the New Deal** (Harvard, 1963), the reform did not alter the balance of power among the three branches of government, but it did allow future Presidents to control potential in-house critics and, paradoxically, to isolate themselves.

While the White House was consolidating its power within Washington, the federal government was extending its authority over the states. James T. Patterson argues in **The New Deal and the States** (Princeton, 1969) that the ebbing of the states' power was due more to their inability to meet a crisis of national proportions than to any conscious decisions in Washington.

Harry Truman inherited the New Deal's legacy of federal activism but not the Depression-era sense of crisis that legitimized it. His challenge, during a period of both prosperity and inflation, was to translate the "emergency" measures of the 1930s into an enduring liberal program.

In **Beyond the New Deal** (Colum-

bia, 1973, cloth & paper), Alonzo L. Hamby maintains that Truman succeeded in this task. By combining Keynesian economics and "Fair Deal" social programs at home and adopting a firm anti-communist stance abroad, Truman established a postwar liberal consensus that helped keep the Democratic Party at the "vital center" of American politics.

But America's liberal reformers had to wait almost 20 years after Franklin Roosevelt's death to see anything comparable to the New Deal. Some of the thrill returned in 1964 when Lyndon Johnson embarked on the ambitious program of economic and social renewal he called the Great Society even as he intervened militarily in Vietnam. The most comprehensive assessment is **The Great Society** (Basic, 1974, cloth & paper), edited by Eli Ginzberg and Robert M. Solow. Its contributors focus on LBJ's initiatives in specific areas—health, education, welfare, income redistribution, housing and urban renewal, manpower training, black poverty. "The record of the Great Society," the editors conclude, "is one of successes mixed with failures . . . as any sensible person should have expected."

Some programs, such as Medicare

and remedial education, worked fairly well. The "War on Poverty" initiatives—e.g., the Community Action Program, the Model Cities program—did not: "The promises were extreme; the specific remedial actions were untried and untested; the finances were grossly inadequate; the political structure was . . . vulnerable."

What of the New Deal that LBJ hoped to outshine?

A generation is still alive that remembers Roosevelt and holds him in high esteem; younger generations have grown up taking his achievements for granted. Franklin Roosevelt's programmatic legacy—Social Security, welfare, unemployment insurance, broad regulation of business—remains largely intact, and despite the new conservatism in Washington, no politician dares renounce it.

Among scholars, the debate continues over whether the promise of the New Deal was really fulfilled. Some believe that FDR ignored or overlooked opportunities for reform and failed to deliver the fruits of the New Deal to all Americans. It is a useful debate, and I think Roosevelt, were he alive today, might be pleased to learn that he is still the subject of controversy.

—Linda J. Lear

EDITOR'S NOTE: Ms. Lear, adjunct associate professor of history at George Washington University, is working on a biography of Harold Ickes.