



By Jefferson Cowie

WE CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

Why the New Deal Won't Be Renewed

SPILED ACROSS THE TITLE PAGES OF PROGRESSIVE JOURNALS ARE DEMANDS FOR a new New Deal, a global New Deal, a New and Improved Deal, a reNewed Deal, and even New Deal 2.0. After Obama's election, political cartoons—most notably, but not exclusively, on the cover of *Time* magazine—featured a jubilant, toothy Barack Obama with a cigarette holder, posing confidently in an open

limousine *à la* FDR. Elsewhere, otherwise sober commentators began speaking of "Franklin Delano Obama." Even before the coming of the Great Recession, but accelerating ever since, the era of Roosevelt has become a metaphor, political principle, and guiding light for all that must be returned to American politics. Then, inevitably, comes the shock of reality: the new Gilded Age seems to have a lot more traction in American political culture than did the hope of a new New Deal.

For a historian (and social democrat) like myself, this puts me in a bind. I'd love to see a triumphal return of the New Deal. Many of the policies of the 1930s represented the

best of what the United States might be as a nation—caring, sharing, secure, and occasionally visionary—while few issues seem more important today than bringing the concerns of working people out of the shadows and into the political and economic light. But bad history makes for really bad political strategy, so we must face up to a key fact: the creation of the New Deal was pretty tenuous to begin with, and the decades following—often called "the New Deal order"—were pretty close to an aberration in American history.

Indeed, the political era between the inauguration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt through the administration of Richard Nixon, as my co-author Nick Salvatore and I have argued, marks a "long exception" in American political

history and culture.¹ During this period, the central government utilized its considerable resources in a systematic, if hardly consistent, fashion on behalf of non-elite Americans. One can visualize the outcome in the statistical graphs as an anomalous historical hump that rises in the forties and declines in the seventies: economic equality improves then tumbles, union density rockets upward and then slowly falls, working people's income goes up before dwindling, and the percentage of wealth possessed by the most affluent dips before roaring back with a vengeance. Even the minimum wage rises to a useful figure in the late sixties before fading.²

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While it is useful and hopeful that the United States can achieve such a politics again, we ought not be misled by freewheeling historical analogies. The catalyst for these developments was neither FDR's charismatic personality, the brilliance of his New Deal advisors, nor World War II. Rather, it was the *sui generis* circumstances of the Great Depression itself, particularly the ferocious impact it had on Americans over the three years and five months between its start in October 1929 and FDR's inauguration in March of 1933. It was this trauma—at once economic, political, and cultural—that propelled a more activist government intervention on behalf of everyday American citizens than the U.S. had ever seen before—or since. Even as partisan a champion of the New Deal as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. explained, the dawning of the New Deal was a

"unique episode" in the nation's history "which grew out of a unique crisis."³

Nothing emerges *de novo*, of course, and the New Dealers built upon a number of historical trends: the Progressive reform impulse, Theodore Roosevelt's demand for the regulation of big corporations, and—above all—the massive federal mobilization during World War I. Also, the new corporate paternalism of the 1920s, known as "welfare capitalism," raised expectations of what the employment relationship could and should offer, just before it all collapsed following the economic crash. All that said, and it is admittedly not a short list,

the New Deal was as clear a break with policy tradition as any in American history. Harry Hopkins, one of FDR's closest advisors, suggested the degree of departure when he described creating national relief on a blank drafting table "almost as if the Aztecs had been asked suddenly to build an aeroplane."⁴

The rupture with the past may have been real, but the legislative achievements were also more tenuous and brief than most tend to recognize.

What historians call the "first" New Deal basically turned the project of recovery over to business itself (along with some substantial relief interventions and dramatic efforts like the Tennessee Valley Authority). Those early reforms ended due to their internal contradictions or the Supreme Court—or both. With the notable exception of Glass-Steagall and other reforms of the financial sector, the first New Deal failed to have a lasting impact. After 1935, the true breakthroughs, known as the "second" New Deal, offered a more cohesive, proto-Keynesian vision for reform and the most substantive parts of Roosevelt's legacy: the National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, the Works Progress Administration, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the empowerment of the CIO, and—above all—the landslide 1936 election that created

the “Roosevelt coalition” out of a historically fragmented working class.

As much as Roosevelt famously wagged his finger at the “economic royalists,” however, he did so only briefly. The window of opportunity for substantive collective economic policies opened in 1935, but it also slammed shut less than three years later. What followed were the forgotten years of the Roosevelt administration: the 1938-1939 years of defeat and retreat, the return of hard times, and the possibility that the 1936-1937 strike wave would be just another failure like 1919 or 1934. As the historian Nelson Lichtenstein argues in the case of the labor movement, “industrial unionism’s moment of unrivaled triumph proved exceedingly brief.” He notes that it was only a matter of weeks after the CIO’s famous victories at General Motors and U.S. Steel in 1937 before “the radical challenge posed by mass unions generated furious opposition: from corporate adversaries, Southern Bourbons, craft unionists, and many elements of the New Deal coalition itself.”⁵ Maury Maverick, outspoken Democratic representative from Texas, was one of the few to openly declare the exhaustion of New Deal efforts. “Now we Democrats have to admit that we are floundering,” he told the House. “We have pulled all the rabbits out of the hat, and there are no more rabbits . . . We are a confused, bewildered group of people, and we are not delivering the goods.”⁶

It took the Second World War to consolidate existing achievements—especially union strength—while simultaneously marking what the historian Alan Brinkley calls “the end of reform.” As macroeconomic planning for mass consumption and “full” employment trumped the disparate inventiveness of the Progressives and the New Dealers (almost completely ending the Democrats’ anti-monopoly tradition), the nation ended up with a postwar politics that Brinkley calls “less challenging to the existing structure of corporate capitalism than some of the ideas it supplanted.”⁷ Yet

even the path to a trimmed vision required a twelve-year-long depression, a false start, surviving a strongly-organized counter-attack, and a World War before it reached its modern form—a truly extraordinary gauntlet of historical circumstances.

How best, then, to think about the New Deal as it shaped the postwar era? After the war, New Deal alliances seemed like an all-powerful force capable of implementing liberal policy, regardless of conservative opposition. Yet when challenged, this same juggernaut shattered, its central contradictions revealed in its own negotiations with the very real complexities of American history and politics. The divisiveness of race, ethnicity, immigration, and religion (all bound up tightly with one of the thorniest problems in American politics—individualism) was temporarily mitigated, though hardly terminated, during the New Deal era.

Black-white race relations were certainly the most salient example of how important—and thin—the New Deal veneer was. While African-American voters switched their allegiances from the party of Lincoln to the Roosevelt coalition for good reasons, the price of almost every piece of New Deal legislation was the exclusion of black people. And, while the CIO devoted itself to organizing without regard to race, its project remained hamstrung on the racism of the white rank-and-file and the political power of the “Solid South.” When the Democrats dared to introduce a civil rights plank in 1948, or when they passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the entire coalitional edifice shook as the white South bolted from the Democratic Party and the urban North cleaved along racial lines.

The absence of immigration was another decisive factor in both the formation and continuation of the New Deal order. The “culture of unity”—a term used by historian Lizabeth Cohen to describe the shared sense of fate

produced by the homogenizing forces of large-scale industry, welfare capitalism and mass culture—was based largely on the suspension of immigration after 1924. As a result, when the crash hit, nativism was largely at bay and the workers living in this country were here to stay. When immigration resurfaced slowly in the generation after the 1965 immigration reforms, so did the neo-Know Nothings and militant nativism of today, returning “the” working class to historical patterns of internecine hostilities and political divisions reminiscent of the pre-New Deal era.

Like immigration, the divisiveness of religion in American politics also had a reprieve that allowed the New Deal to cohere. Evangelical Christianity, mocked into irrelevance after the 1925 Scopes monkey trial, largely went underground in the thirties and forties, offering limited “culture war” challenges to the rise of the New Deal (aside from those of Father Charles Coughlin and other populist dissenters). Garry Wills calls the postwar era a “Great Religious Truce,” an “interfaith Amity” in which a vague Judeo-Christian faith was enough to define Cold War Americanism.⁸ That consensus would finally fall apart in the 1970s, as people of faith questioned rendering unto Caesar what was Caesar’s when the state was busy intervening in cultural questions like abortion, busing, prayer in school, pornography, and birth control—issues that re-politicized religion’s place in American life and undermined the New Deal coalition, in the 1970s and beyond.

The ideology, though hardly the reality, of individualism wound around all of these other issues like vines in a political jungle. Roosevelt, despite being the architect of the regulatory state, never quite offered a clear alternative to the individualist ethos so deeply embedded in himself or America’s public culture. In fact, so persuasive were

FDR’s evocations of that American ideology that brain truster Rexford Tugwell believed that even when Roosevelt tried to construct a new vision of individualism suitable for modern corporate society, his efforts had “not been immune to our national myths.” “Like all of us,” Tugwell continued, FDR “had a weakness for what was familiar and trusted which led him to overestimate [the myths’] sufficiency and underestimate their irrelevant antiquity.” Even the Great Society and many of the new social movements of the sixties were based more on expanding long-denied individual rights rather than securing the type of collective economic rights promised by the New Deal. Less about redistributing the economic pie, post-sixties liberalism was more about providing people with the skills to compete for a decent slice.

So, if mining the political veins of the New Deal for our historical analogies proves futile, where should we turn? Perhaps the Progressive Era might prove more helpful. Gilded Age corporate power raised unavoidable issues for Progressives. The political hodgepodge of the first decades of the twentieth century,

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however, contained often chaotic and contradictory claims with regard to community, social harmony, voluntary association, radicalism, and—when necessary—the state. While the pragmatic approach to reform, diffuse leadership, mixed-class alliances, and the lack of a clear left and right dichotomy have been

criticized as the era's failures, perhaps they are its virtues. At their best, the progressive reformers appreciated the power of individualism in American political culture, affirmed a vision of democratic life across class (if decidedly not racial) lines, and sought a bridge between that individualism and a common good.

Had it not been for the Great Depression, it is probable that American liberalism would not have taken its modern form; we would have been left with the chaotic brilliance of progressivism without a cohesive liberal creed. Even the term "liberalism," in its modern definition, arose during the New Deal to distinguish the new politics from the versions of reform that had been discussed a couple of decades before. Today, with both liberalism and its precepts close to bankruptcy, perhaps the tumultuous cross-class fray of the Progressive Era may

prove more promising for thinking about the future than the political rigidities of the postwar era.

The late Tony Judt—in his eloquent defense of social democracy, *Ill Fares the Land*—explains that today's progressives “must take onboard the sheer contingency of politics: neither the rise of the welfare states nor their subsequent fall from grace should be treated as a gift from History. The social democratic ‘moment’—or its American counterpart from the New Deal to the Great Society—was the product of a very particular combination of circumstances unlikely to repeat themselves.”⁹ Historical analogies can empower, but they can also limit. If a path out of our own time is to be charted, and this is the most urgent of projects, it must be done afresh—without stale political metaphors resting on extraordinary historical circumstances.

Notes

1. Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, "The Long Exception: Rethinking the New Deal in American History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (2008): 3-32, with commentaries by Kevin Boyle, Michael Kazin, Jennifer Klein, Nancy MacLean, David Montgomery, and—as a response—Cowie and Salvatore, "History, Complexity, and Politics: Further Thoughts." Much of the argument and some of the terms from that article are used here.

2. There is a vast literature on inequality, but a useful starting point is available at www.extremeinequality.org.

3. Quoted in Anthony J. Badger, *FDR: The First Hundred Days* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), xv.

4. June Hopkins, *Harry Hopkins: Sudan Hero, Brash Reformer* (New York: St. Martin's, 1999), 167.

5. Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 52-53; Melvyn Dubofsky, *The State and Labor in Modern America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 138.

6. Quoted in Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Random House, 1995), 30.

7. Brinkley, *The End of Reform*, 4.

8. Garry Wills, *Head and Heart: American Christianities* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 451-453.

9. Tony Judt, *Ill Fares the Land* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 151-152.

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