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# Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal: A Product of Many Minds

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## Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal: A Product of Many Minds

### Abstract

Franklin Delano Roosevelt looms large in American history as the man who led his country through the Great Depression and a World War. His dominance of the presidency and in American citizens' hearts and minds before and after he died make his personal and political impact in the Great Depression seem perhaps greater than they were. Certainly, he held great sway over the American people and can claim major responsibility for the New Deal and its policies but he was not the sole contributor, and certainly not to the values of the time. While Roosevelt may have instigated many of the governmental policies during the Great Depression, many other people contributed to the New Deal in response to a set of values that had begun to change even before Roosevelt took office.

# Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal: A Product of Many Minds

*Emma Florio*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt looms large in American history as the man who led his country through the Great Depression and a World War. His dominance of the presidency and in American citizens' hearts and minds before and after he died make his personal and political impact in the Great Depression seem perhaps greater than they were. Certainly, he held great sway over the American people and can claim major responsibility for the New Deal and its policies but he was not the sole contributor, and certainly not to the values of the time. While Roosevelt may have instigated many of the governmental policies during the Great Depression, many other people contributed to the New Deal in response to a set of values that had begun to change even before Roosevelt took office.

Three years of the Great Depression had passed by the time Franklin Roosevelt became president. When he came into office, many Americans had already suffered through these years and their values had changed significantly since the 1920s. By the election of 1932, many of those affected by the Depression had left behind the "self-centered" values of the 1920s in favor of the Depression-era values of "compassion, justice, and equality."<sup>1</sup> These shifts in values may be more attributable to the administration of Herbert Hoover, whose handling of the situation in the first years of the 1930s left many people disheartened and disillusioned with their government. Even in this case, though, these values appear to have existed before Hoover put his plans into action. Throughout his presidency, Hoover remained adamantly morally opposed to direct federal assistance to the poor and unemployed, and his government instead proposed taxes that people railed against, even though they had little effect on poorer Americans.<sup>2</sup> The fact that many American's disliked Hoover's policies demonstrated that their seemingly new value system was already in place before Hoover implemented any policies. These people expected certain things from Hoover and, when he did not deliver, they lost confidence in him and voted for a man who they thought could help them: Franklin Roosevelt.

These emerging values of compassion and social justice of the Great Depression were by no means new to Hoover's administration, not even to the twentieth century. People affected by economic downturns in the nineteenth century had also demanded help from the federal government.<sup>3</sup> These values had been a part of American culture from the beginning. American history runs in

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1. Robert McElvaine, *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2009), 88.

2. *Ibid.*, 87.

3. *Ibid.*, 7.

cycles of prosperity and depression, alongside periods of sweeping liberal reform and conservative reaction.<sup>4</sup> Although the Great Depression and New Deal were an anomaly, a period of reform happening at the same time as a depression, rather than during a time of prosperity, the values that arose did not come solely from this Depression. Unselfish individualism and a belief that all men's rights should be respected had been hallmarks of American working-class society since the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> A need for cooperation, compassion, and social justice could never be linked to one man at a certain point in time. The American people had a long history of displaying these values.

One value shift, however, *can* be attributed to Roosevelt and his New Deal programs: a renewed faith in the government. During the Hoover years, people had lost any hope that their president would be able to help them. Pop culture provides evidence of the American people's sense of despair and lack of faith in their leaders during Hoover's administration. The starkest example of this comes in *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* from 1932. While some of the emerging positive Depression-era values are shown, such as the downtrodden men of the chain gang's willingness to work together and help the main character James Allen escape, the overall feeling of the movie is one of hopelessness. No matter what these men do, no matter how much they try to cooperate and achieve a sense of social justice, those in power will treat them cruelly and unfairly until circumstances force them into something desperate. As James Allen says in the final line of the movie, when asked how he lives: "I steal."<sup>6</sup> This line reflects the reality of many Americans who, having been upright citizens previously, were forced into criminality to survive.<sup>7</sup> Cruel and unfair may not have accurately described Hoover's actions, as he sincerely did want to help people in his own rigidly idealistic way, but people perceived his policies that way. Gangster films like *Little Caesar* (1930) also demonstrated Americans' contempt for ruthless, greedy mobsters, representing businessmen and other higher-ups, who sneer at the growing Depression-era values of compassion and justice.<sup>8</sup>

Films also show the new mood at the beginning of Roosevelt's administration. Roosevelt gave people hope simply by being elected. As the first year of Roosevelt's presidency and of the New Deal, 1933 was "*the year of the musical*."<sup>9</sup> While these movies mainly acted as escapist entertainment for Americans suffering through hard times, they also clearly displayed the new optimism Roosevelt brought with him into office, an optimism and faith in the man himself that never faded, even when his programs began to lose their effect or did not seem have as much of an effect as was hoped for. Roosevelt may not have been

4. Ibid., 6.

5. Ibid, 199.

6. *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*. Melvyn LeRoy, director (Warner Bros., 1931, DVD).

7. Robert McElvaine, *The Depression and New Deal: A History in Documents* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2000), 151.

8. Ibid., 150.

9. *The Great Depression*, 213.

responsible for everything the government did in the Depression, but the American people saw it that way, at least when things worked out well. Roosevelt's charming personality made him so popular with many people that anything positive was attributed to him while anything negative had to be the work of someone else.<sup>10</sup> Thus, even if all government policies could not be attributed to Roosevelt, most Americans certainly perceived it that way, as Roosevelt personalized the presidency and sought to control everything himself.<sup>11</sup>

American's values continued to change during Roosevelt's administration. The success of the men associated with the "Thunder on the Left" in 1934-35 demonstrated that many Americans felt that Roosevelt and the government had not done enough in the years of the First New Deal. In states all over the country, other men were appearing on the political scene who held great influence over the hearts and minds of the American people. The Progressive party and LaFollette family of Wisconsin won enormous victories with their increasingly radical rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> In Minnesota, the Farm-Labor party under Governor Floyd Olson caught up with the sentiment of Minnesotans and adopted a seemingly socialist platform.<sup>13</sup> Upton Sinclair's plan of production-for-use and End Poverty In California gained considerable momentum and support in the state.<sup>14</sup> While these men may have only influenced the values of citizens of their states, three other men gathered national followings. Father Charles Coughlin, Dr. Francis Townsend, and Senator Huey Long all attacked the current state of American economic practices and called for more liberal policies that included social justice, old age social security, and wealth redistribution, respectively. All of these various movements were never able to join together and create any change, but the ideas that emerged spurred president Roosevelt and legislators in Congress to implement the Second New Deal in 1935, responding to America's move toward the political left.<sup>15</sup> In this way, both the values and the policies cannot be attributed to Roosevelt; he responded to one (values which already existed) by creating the other (policies which had already been laid out by other men).

Throughout his book, McElvaine uses words that characterize Roosevelt as easily swayed by the ideas and opinions of his advisors, especially later in his administration, during the Second New Deal. By this time, Roosevelt was caught in a struggle between the interests of big business and those people who supported the New Deal. McElvaine describes him as "unsure" of and "unclear" on his economic policy on whether to increase or cut back spending.<sup>16</sup> He explains that Roosevelt was "egged on" by certain advisors to attack wealthy

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10. Ibid., 112-113.

11. Ibid., 326.

12. Ibid., 230-231.

13. Ibid., 232-233.

14. Ibid., 234-235.

15. Ibid., 248-249.

16. Ibid., 299-300.

bankers, businessmen, and industrialists and that Harry Hopkins “persuaded” him to choose spending as the only solution.<sup>17</sup> In this view, many policies can ultimately be attributed to Roosevelt’s advisors who convinced him to enact certain legislation or change his ideologies. Just like any other president, Roosevelt had his team of advisors whose input surely swayed his decisions.

This group of advisors included Roosevelt’s Brains Trust and the group of young “New Dealers” who came to Washington in the thirties. It was Roosevelt’s inner circle and those in Congress who wrote New Deal legislation and the younger New Dealers who tried to implement it.<sup>18</sup> Surely Roosevelt had some part in both processes, but he certainly was not the only one. He may have had a hand in New Deal legislation but, as president, Roosevelt could not personally look after every New Deal administration and program, controlling what they ultimately became. For example, Roosevelt put Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes and Harry Hopkins, one of Roosevelt’s closest advisors, in charge of the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration, respectively—two of the largest agencies of the New Deal. Hopkins had previously “prodded” Roosevelt to create the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which he also administered, again demonstrating the heavy involvement of Roosevelt’s advisors in the creation of New Deal agencies.<sup>19</sup> The creation and implementation of the PWA is especially telling as to Roosevelt’s responsibility for New Deal policies. McElvaine describes the National Industrial Recovery Act, under which the PWA was created, as having “mixed parentage” with several men producing the legislation.<sup>20</sup> And once it was created, Ickes took the PWA its own way, emphasizing the fact that Roosevelt may have had influence over the creation of New Deal policies but had less to do with them once they were put into action, especially because he delegated control to other men, as any president would do.<sup>21</sup>

Despite all of this, Roosevelt’s beliefs and personality had a great deal to do with the creation of New Deal legislation and policies. His upbringing and subsequent state of mind, as painted by McElvaine, give some indication of this. Born into an aristocratic New York family, he strongly felt the sense of stewardship that obliged those of the upper classes to help those less fortunate than them.<sup>22</sup> Coupled with his personal battle with polio, Roosevelt’s paternalist nature made him a man who wanted to help the poor and downtrodden during the Depression, since he felt he understood their suffering. While Roosevelt’s New Deal policies may be more attributable to his reactions to value shifts and his opportunist nature, taking advantage of the public mood caused by the Thunder on the Left, the fact that he knew how to respond and had the desire to do so makes

17. *Ibid.*, 299.

18. *Ibid.*, 145.

19. *Ibid.*, 151.

20. *Ibid.*, 157.

21. *Ibid.*, 152.

22. *Ibid.*, 98.

the government's policies during the Depression at least partly attributable to him. He wanted to please and help the American people and thus supported and helped to enact policies for which they had been calling for years.

Although Roosevelt may not have been solely responsible for the changes in values and the new governmental policies of the Great Depression, he was ultimately the president and responsibility was placed on him, whether it was warranted or not. The New Deal is associated principally with him because it occurred during his presidency, under his authority, and he knew how to use his power to accommodate the American people's current wants and needs. The changes in Americans' values can be attributed to a legacy of cooperation and calls for government assistance in the country and a struggle through three years of the Depression before Roosevelt entered office. The policies of the New Deal were in part attributable to Roosevelt but a number of other people were involved, as was Roosevelt's desire to do what the American people called for. All in all, Roosevelt had a great influence over what happened in America during the Great Depression, whether or not he held all responsibility. While other men in his position may have reacted similarly, Franklin Roosevelt's distinctive history, personality, political suaveness, and willingness to acquiesce to the popular mood makes his situation unique. He may simply have been in the right place at the right time, but he also knew how to respond in the right way.