CHAPTER 32

The Great Depression and the New Deal, 1933–1939

# focus questions

. What were the differences between Hoover and Roosevelt, both personally and politically?

. What were Roosevelt’s goals of relief, recovery, and reform to help America get out of the Great Depression?

. What were the main criticism, from both the left and the right, of Roosevelt’s New Deal program?

. How did Roosevelt deal with the business community and what gains did labor make under his administration?

. What were the long- and short-term benefits to Roosevelt’s New Deal?

# Chapter Theme

**Theme:** Roosevelt’s New Deal tackled the Great Depression with massive federal programs designed to bring about relief, recovery, and reform.

chapter summary

Confident, aristocratic Roosevelt swept into office with an urgent mandate to cope with the depression emergency. His bank holiday and frantic Hundred Days lifted spirits and created a host of new agencies to provide for relief to the unemployed, economic recovery, and permanent reform of the economic system.

Roosevelt’s programs put millions of the unemployed back on the job through federal action. As popular demagogues such as Huey Long and Father Charles Coughlin increased their appeal to the suffering population, Roosevelt developed sweeping programs to reorganize and reform labor and agriculture. The TVA, Social Security, and the Wagner Act brought far-reaching changes that especially benefited the economically disadvantaged.

Conservatives furiously denounced the New Deal, but Roosevelt formed a powerful coalition of urbanites, labor, new immigrants, blacks, and the South that swept him to victory in 1936.

A decade after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, women began to exercise their rights, both politically and intellectually.

Roosevelt’s Court-packing plan failed, but the Court finally began approving New Deal legislation. The later New Deal encountered mounting conservative opposition and the stubborn persistence of unemployment. Although the New Deal was highly controversial, it saved America from extreme right-wing or left-wing dictatorship.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Describe the impact of Roosevelt and the New Deal on deeply depressed ordinary Americans, perhaps focusing on how Roosevelt revived spirits and restored faith in the system, even for those who did not agree with all his programs. Include the experiences of ordinary men and women in the 1930s.

REFERENCES: Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (1970); Ann Banks, *First Person America* (1991)*.*

* Examine the goals and activities of the major New Deal programs. The relief-recovery-reform distinction is useful for sorting out the alphabet agencies, as is the distinction between the early NRA-AAA approach and the later TVA–Social Security–Wagner Act reforms. A unifying theme for the whole New Deal is the search to provide greater security against the storms and uncertainties of unregulated capitalism.

REFERENCE: David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* (1999).

* Explain the various challenges to Roosevelt from both the popular demagogues and the conservatives. Show how he skillfully “stole the thunder” from the former and used the latter as political whipping boys.

REFERENCES: Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (1982); Richard Polenberg, *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt: 1933–1945: A Brief History with Documents* (2000).

* Consider the experience of women in the depression and in the making of the New Deal. Look at ordinary women in urban and rural areas, as well as more prominent reformers and government figures.

REFERENCES: Lois Scharf, *To Work and to Wed: Female Employment, Feminism, and the Great Depression* (1980); Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (1981).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Compare and contrast the images and activities of FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt. Show how he pursued realistic political goals, while she took up the cause of the most disadvantaged citizens. (See boxed quotes on pages 743, 745, 750, and 764.)
* Discuss the particular impact of the depression on women, families, and children. (See boxed quote on page 748.)
* Use Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (and perhaps the film) to discuss the plight of Dust Bowl farmers in the depression. Point out that, for most, the problem was not dust but impossibly low prices. (See boxed quote on page 755.)
* Discuss the long-term, continuing impact of the New Deal today. Consider the controversies in the 1980s and after over the legacy of big government programs started by the New Deal.
* Conduct a class debate on topics such as Self-Help Is the Best Response to Unemployment, America Needs a New Deal, The New Deal Is a Momentous Achievement, and Social Security Will Harm America. Primary source readings will come from the following book: *Opposing Viewpoints in American History—Volume II: From Reconstruction to the Present*, San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, 1996. Another good source of debate topics is Larry Madaras and James M. SoRelle, *Taking Sides—Clashing Views on Controversial Issues in American History, Volume II: Reconstruction to the Present*, Connecticut: McGraw-Hill, 2000.
* Show students the following video: *The Century—America’s Time* (ABC Video in association with The History Channel), *Volume II: 1929–1936: Stormy Weather*. “The stock market crashes, plunging the nation into the economic depths of The Great Depression. For the first time, the country reflects on a sobering question: Is there a limit to ‘The American Dream’?”
* Have the students read Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1947). A story about the rise and fall of Willie Talos, a Southern politician, the story was based on the life of Huey Long and made into a movie in 1949.
* Show the students Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936). Discuss the imagery and symbolism in the movie—what was Chaplin’s purpose of satirizing the Great Depression? Was it effective? Why was the movie so popular?
* Have the students read Sidney Hook’s “Communism Without Dogmas” (1934) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Have the students read Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939) in David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper’s (Editors), *The American Intellectual Tradition: Volume II—1865 to the Present*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
* Have the students read FDR’s fireside chats. The complete fireside chats, along with other documents from FDR (and all the presidents), can be read at The American Presidency Project, *Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Fireside Chat* (http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/fireside.php, last accessed September 2014).

# character sketches

## Franklin Roosevelt (1882–1945)

Roosevelt came from a wealthy patrician family, and his advocacy on behalf of the common person in the depression led him to be called a “traitor to his class.”

Thoroughly indulged as an only child, Roosevelt was taught primarily by private tutors. His mother, Sara Delano, was a strong-willed woman who exercised a dominant influence on him even during his adult life.

Roosevelt had been very athletic before being struck with polio in 1921. It took him several years of constant effort to regain his strength; after he discovered the therapeutic waters at Warm Springs, Georgia, he again participated in swimming, fishing, and sailing. Roosevelt was almost never photographed in a wheelchair, so many Americans did not know that the wheelchair was his normal means of getting around.

Roosevelt enjoyed political maneuvering and often pitted his advisers against one another. He once told two officials with contradictory proposals to “go in a room and weave them together.”

**Quote:** “In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that support and understanding of the people themselves which is essential to victory.… The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization.… This nation asks for action, and action now.” (Inaugural address, 1933)

REFERENCE: Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Rendezvous with Destiny* (1990).

## Eleanor Roosevelt (1884–1962)

Besides her role as Franklin Roosevelt’s wife and adviser, Eleanor Roosevelt became an influential reformer and political leader in her own right, both before and after FDR’s death.

Eleanor Roosevelt did not change names when she married her distant cousin. Her father, Elliott Roosevelt, was Theodore Roosevelt’s younger brother and a troubled alcoholic who separated from his family when Eleanor was young. Her mother died when Eleanor was eight, and she was raised by a grandmother who made her feel unattractive and unwanted.

Her discovery of her husband’s unfaithfulness led to a crisis in their marriage and her determination to create a political identity and career on her own. Her newspaper column, “My Day,” became a highly popular feature in the 1930s and 1940s. She grew to be a skilled political operator and helped to engineer the nomination of Adlai Stevenson for president in 1952 and 1956.

**Quote:** “As time went by, I found that people no longer considered me a mouthpiece for my husband but realized that I had a point of view of my own with which he might not at all agree. Then I felt freer to state my views.” (Autobiography, 1949)

REFERENCE: Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life* (1992).

## Huey Long (1893–1935)

Long was the colorful “Kingfish” whose populist politics dominated Louisiana and who eventually challenged Roosevelt’s leadership during the depression.

Originally from rural north Louisiana, Long always had a strong following among poor farmers. He was elected state railroad commissioner at age twenty-five, and used the office flamboyantly to attack monopolistic utilities. As governor and senator he ruled Louisiana with near-absolute control; every police officer, firefighter, and teacher in the state owed his or her job directly to Long.

Long spent lavishly for public works, roads, and schools, especially for the redneck areas. He also built up Louisiana State University, with particular emphasis on the football team and the band, and was known for leading the band on the sidelines during games.

Long would often hold court in hotel rooms in his pajamas, with reporters and advisers and citizens listening to his clever, humorous, obscene monologues. Long’s plan was to run as an independent presidential candidate in 1936, building a base of support so he could win the White House in 1940.

**Quote:** “Why weep or slumber, America,

Land of brave and true?

With castles, and clothing, and food for all

All belongs to you.

Every Man a King! Every Man a King!” (Radio address, 1935)

REFERENCE: William Hair, *The Kingfish and His Realm: The Life and Times of Huey P. Long* (1991).

# questions for class discussion

. Which of Roosevelt’s measures were most effective in fighting the depression? Why?

. How did Roosevelt alter the role of the federal government in American life? Was this necessary for American survival?

. How did ordinary workers and farmers effect social change in the 1930s? (See boxed quote on page 759.)

. What were the positive and negative effects of the New Deal’s use of the federal government as an agency of social reform?

# CONTENDING VOICES: FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT VS. HERBERT HOOVER

# Questions for Class Discussion

1. In his bid for re-election in 1936, how did Frankin Roosevelt describe his first term efforts?

2. Contrast FDR’s view of his first term with the appraisal offered by former President Hoover?

# varying viewpoints

# Expanding the View

* Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (1959).

A view of the New Deal as a radical transformation:

“By bringing to Washington a government determined to govern, Roosevelt unlocked new energies in a people who had lost faith, not just in government’s ability to meet the economic crisis, but almost in the ability of anyone to do anything. The feeling of movement was irresistible.… A despairing land had a vision of America as it might some day be.… ‘It’s more than a New Deal,’ said Harold Ickes. ‘It’s a new world. People feel free again. They can breathe naturally. It’s like quitting a morgue for the open woods.’ ‘We have had our revolution,’ said Collier’s, ‘and we like it.’”

* William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (1963).

A view of the New Deal as a halfway revolution:

“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. Yet this was still a halfway revolution. It swelled the ranks of the bourgeoisie but left many Americans—sharecroppers, slum dwellers, most Negroes—outside the new equilibrium.… The New Dealers perceived that they had done more in those years than had been done in any comparable period of American history, but they also saw that there was much still to be done, much, too, that continued to baffle them.”

# Questions for Class Discussion

. What does each of these historians regard as the fundamental achievement of the New Deal?

. What weaknesses does Leuchtenberg see in the New Deal?

. How might each of these historians interpret such programs as the AAA, Social Security, and the Wagner Act?