

The controversy that surrounded Roosevelt's years in the White House has almost been matched by the quantity and quality of books written about him by friends, associates, and enemies. Unlike other presidents whose careers were not chronicled until decades after their death, Roosevelt has already been the subject of literally hundreds of books and articles. Part of the reason for this situation undoubtedly lies in the fact that much of the source material left by Roosevelt and his associates was opened up to scholars within a surprisingly short time after his death in 1945. But part of the reason surely lies in the fascination with the New Deal and the changes that American society underwent during the years from 1933 to 1945. However the Roosevelt years are interpreted it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the United States was a very different nation in 1945 as compared with

1933.

It was the sheer magnitude of the New Deal innovations early in his presidential career that caused Roosevelt to become such a highly controversial figure. Although his victory in 1932 was relatively broad-based he soon alienated many businessmen as well as other powerful interest groups. As a result he came under increasingly harsh attacks as the 1930s progressed. Some accused him of subverting traditional American ideals of individualism and liberty by moving toward a welfare state that could end only in socialism and an omnipotent state. Such a staunch Democrat as Al Smith, for example, hotly argued during the presidential campaign of 1936 that Roosevelt was indeed taking the American people down the road to socialism. "It is all right with me if they [the Roosevelt administration] want to disguise themselves as Norman Thomas or Karl Marx, or Lenin, or any of the rest of that bunch," Smith shouted, "but what I won't stand for is allowing them to march under the banner of Jefferson, Jackson and Cleveland."

The attack on Roosevelt's New Deal from the right was echoed also by the critics of the left. There were many who felt that the traditional American attachment to individualistic values had been rendered obsolete by the nation's industrial and technological advances. Rexford G. Tugwell, a professor of economics and one of the early New Deal "brain trusters," was one such critic. He was convinced that America's competitive economy had never worked well; to attempt to reform it with minor changes would prove hopelessly inadequate. What

It has been estimated that Roosevelt's personal papers occupy more than 9,000 cubic feet at the Hyde Park Library; this figure does not include the papers of other important New Deal officials.

Quoted in William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* 1932-1940 (New York, 1963), p. 178.

✓ The New Deal

REVOLUTIONARY OR CONSERVATIVE?

☆ 7 ☆

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was perhaps the most controversial president ever to occupy the White House. For over twelve years he led the American people, first through the worst depression in their history and then through a war that encompassed virtually the entire globe. To his admirers he was an individual of heroic stature, a leader who firmly believed that it was possible to preserve free and democratic institutions by internal reforms without adopting authoritarian or totalitarian methods and overturning the basic structure of American society. To his enemies he was a misguided, even immoral, individual who mistakenly believed that he could save American democracy by taking the people down the road to the welfare state—a road that would eventually end in socialism and therefore the negation of individual freedom. Unlike some other presidents Roosevelt had the uncanny ability to arouse strong passions. He was a person who was either loved or hated; few remained neutral toward him or reacted blandly to his personality or accomplishments. The answer to why did Roosevelt arouse such strong passions? The answer to this ostensibly simple question is anything but simple. Certainly there was little in his background or his accomplishments prior to 1933 that would explain the controversial nature of his presidential tenure. Even those friends and associates who worked closely with Roosevelt during his dozen years in the White House were not always able to grasp his many-sided personality or understand why he acted as he did. Frances Perkins, his longtime secretary of labor, described him as "the most complicated human being I ever knew," a comment that was echoed by others such as Henry Morgenhan and Robert E. Sherwood.

was required, Tugwell concluded, was thorough and effective government planning for all aspects of the economic system, only in this way could the economy be stabilized and future depressions avoided. Much to his disappointment the New Deal seemed too pragmatic. Roosevelt, he finally concluded, was either unwilling or unable to plan in a rational and systematic manner. To the left of men like Tugwell stood the socialist and Communist groups in America. Their criticism was that the New Deal was too conservative; the only proper approach to the depression was a complete overhaul of America's social and economic system and the establishment of a socialist state.

Thus during the depression years the New Deal was attacked from many points of view. To some it was too radical; to others it was too conservative or reactionary. Still others viewed Roosevelt's policies as a series of pragmatic and expedient moves in response to specific events and deplored the fact that the president never seemed to give much thought to the overall dimensions of the crisis facing the American people. To be sure, many of these critics were reflecting to a large extent the passions and emotions of the age in which they were living. Faced with the problem of coming to grips with the greatest depression the country had ever known, they did not have the perspective nor the dispassionate attitude required to view the issues at stake in a detached or objective manner. Their criticisms, nevertheless, helped to establish the framework of reference with which later writers were to approach the New Deal. In brief, the question usually raised by contemporary commentators and later historians revolved around the role of the New Deal in American life. Was the New Deal simply an extension of the Progressive tradition or did it involve a radical departure from the mainstream of American history?

For historians reared in the tradition of the Progressive school there was little doubt about the basic nature of the New Deal. Viewing America's past in terms of a conflict between liberalism and conservatism and the people versus the vested interests, they saw the New Deal as simply another phase in the struggle against monopoly, privilege, and special interests. To them the New Deal was related to earlier reform movements, including Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Democratic, populism, and progressivism, all of which had represented the people in their continuing struggle to achieve a greater measure of political, economic, and social equality. While they often referred to the revolutionary character of the New Deal, their use of the term "revolutionary" did not necessarily imply a sharp break with the past. Louis Hacker, although not squarely in the Progressive tradition, referred to the New Deal as the "Third American Revolution" in the mid-1940s. His description of the New Deal, however, was anything but revolutionary. Some of its policies, he wrote, were improvisations; some were

descended from populism and progressivism, but always "there existed the thought that the responsibility of public authority for the welfare of the people was clear and that the intervention of the state was justifiable."³ Hacker's last point, while by no means acceptable to all Americans, was hardly novel; reformers and intellectuals had been urging government-sponsored reforms since the mid-nineteenth century. To Henry Steele Commager, one of America's most distinguished historians, the relationship between the New Deal and earlier reform movements was obvious. Writing at the time of Roosevelt's death Commager explicitly denied the revolutionary character of the New Deal. What was simply a new deal of old cards appeared radical for two reasons: the rapidity with which the New Deal program was enacted into law; and the fact that the movement contrasted so sharply with the do-nothing attitude of the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover administration. If the New Deal was compared with the Progressive era rather than the 1920s, Commager maintained, "the contrast would have been less striking than the similarities. . . . [For] precedent for the major part of New Deal legislation was to be found in these earlier periods." The achievements of Roosevelt—the restoration of self-confidence, the reassertion of faith in democracy, and the rehabilitation of the nation's human and natural resources—all demonstrated the affinity of the New Deal to the earlier reform movements in American history.⁴

Perhaps the fullest and most eloquent argument favoring the idea that the New Deal was a continuation and extension of America's liberal past was advanced by the outstanding historian writing in the Progressive tradition, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. A former professor at Harvard University, Schlesinger has been the most persuasive and brilliant historian writing within and in defense of America's liberal tradition. He was, of course, much more than a historian. A leading intellectual, important member of the Kennedy administration, and shrewd commentator on current affairs, Schlesinger has been an activist as well as a scholar. As a historian Schlesinger since the close of World War II has championed a modified brand of American liberalism whose roots, he believed, go far back into the nation's history. Thus his Pulitzer Prize-winning study, *The Age of Jackson* (1945), argued that Jacksonian Democracy was a liberal political movement based on a coalition of urban workers and other democratic groups in American society. Schlesinger attempted also to rebuild the intellectual foundations of

³Louis M. Hacker, *The Shaping of the American Tradition* (New York, 1947), pp. 1125-1126.
⁴Henry Steele Commager, "Twelve Years of Roosevelt," *American Mercury* 40 (April 1945):391-401.

absolutes and the simplistic dichotomies posed in contemporary ideologies such as communism and fascism. To Schlesinger the New Deal was a practical, energetic, and pragmatic movement based on the assumption that a "managed and modified capitalist order achieved by piecemeal experiment could combine personal freedom and economic growth."

Schlesinger's approach to the New Deal was echoed by other historians. Frank Freidel, author of what appears to be the most definitive multivolume biography of Roosevelt, wrote in much the same historiographical tradition as that of Schlesinger. Freidel, however, posed the discussion in quite different terms. To him the New Deal was basically the work of a number of persons who had grown to maturity during the Progressive era and who still shared the moral fervor of that period. Like Roosevelt they were conservative men whose primary goal was to save rather than to destroy the free enterprise system. These humanitarian reformers were willing to use the machinery and authority of government to improve the lot of the common man. Taken as a whole the New Deal was based on "American objectives and experience in the Progressive Era and during the first World War." To put it another way Roosevelt's program was squarely within the American tradition; his goals were essentially to conserve the existing economic and social system by eliminating obvious defects rather than changing it by radical programs.

Historians such as Commager, Schlesinger, and Freidel were all favorably disposed to the New Deal because they identified themselves with the American liberal or Progressive tradition. This is not to imply that they were uncritical toward Roosevelt and the New Deal; in many instances they found much that was inadequate, wrong, or misleading about the goals, program, and administration of many New Deal experiments. Generally speaking, however, they wrote with approval of Roosevelt's pragmatism, his faith in American democracy, and his obvious distaste for totalitarian methods. The alternative to the New

"Frank Freidel, *The New Deal in Historical Perspective* (2 ed., Washington, D.C., 1965), p. 6. To date Freidel has published four volumes of his study of Roosevelt: *Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Apprenticeship* (Boston, 1952), *The Ordeal* (Boston, 1954), *The Triumph* (Boston, 1956), and *Launching the New Deal* (Boston, 1973). In a recent study of Hoover, Roosevelt, the "Brain Trust," and the origins of the New Deal, Elliot A. Rosen argued that Roosevelt's domestic and diplomatic objectives were shaped in 1932 by a small group of advisers who gave the domestic economy priority. "A better distribution of income, achievement of the social minima, and federal intervention where necessary for social and economic purposes became part of our permanent past. This has remained the legacy of Roosevelt and the Brains Trust," Elliot A. Rosen, Hoover, Roosevelt, and the Brain Trust: *From Depression to New Deal* (New York, 1977), p. 380.

the liberal ideology in his writings. In *The Vital Center* (1948) he incorporated Niebuhrian theology into the corpus of American liberalism so as to give the latter a more realistic and viable character. Taking cognizance of the reaction against liberal ideas since the 1940s, Schlesinger borrowed Reinhold Niebuhr's emphasis on original sin and reinterpreted the liberal ideology in order to purge that ideology of the charge that its utopian optimism had been unrealistic and its adherents had been incapable of meeting the challenge of totalitarianism since the 1930s.

All of American history, according to Schlesinger, was characterized by a cyclical movement which saw periods of liberal reform followed by alternate periods of conservative consolidation. In his eyes Jacksonian Democracy followed the decline of Jeffersonian Democracy, the Progressive era followed the age of the robber barons, and the New Deal came after the sterile conservatism of the 1920s. Indeed, Schlesinger argued, the New Frontier of John F. Kennedy and the Great Society of Lyndon B. Johnson were themselves reactions to the inaction of the Eisenhower years. The generative force behind this cycle was social conflict—conflict which arose from a constant accumulation of disquietude and discontent within American society. Schlesinger spelled out his thesis in a series of books and articles, one of which was *The Age of Roosevelt*, a multivolume study of the New Deal.

In the first selection in this chapter, Schlesinger discusses the origins of the New Deal. To him the New Deal represented much more than a mere response to the depression. On the contrary, the New Deal was an integral part of the history of American liberalism; it was another phase of the liberal-conservative cycle in American history. By the 1920s, Schlesinger claimed, the nation had tired of the Progressive crusade. National disinterest in politics meant that power gravitated increasingly toward powerful economic interests, and government intervention came under the control and influence of the business community. As a result of this shift in power there was a progressive alienation of various groups from American society, including the farmers, workers, minority ethnic groups, and disenfranchised intellectuals. Even without a depression, Schlesinger suggested, the New Deal was bound to have happened in one form or another. What the depression did was to give the New Deal its particular character—a political movement responding to the immediate problem of an impending economic

Schlesinger has to date published three volumes of this study: *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933* (Boston, 1957), *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston, 1958), and *The Politics of Uplift* (Boston, 1960).

to come to grips with the fundamental issues of the day. In *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.*, he insisted that the New Deal could not under any circumstances be interpreted as a continuation of the liberal-progressive tradition. The section in his book devoted to the New Deal was appropriately entitled "The New Departure."

To Hofstadter the New Deal was markedly different from any other indigenous American political movement. Past reform movements, Hofstadter noted, had generally operated under the assumption that their purpose was to clear the way for new enterprises and new men—to smash established privilege and monopoly and to provide all Americans with an equal opportunity in life. Within this context the national government was considered to be either negative in its nature or an obstacle in the way of success. Earlier reform movements had taken it for granted that American society was essentially healthy but one that needed further democratization to reach its full potential.

The New Deal, according to Hofstadter, was based on entirely different premises. Instead of viewing American society as healthy New Deal reformers saw it as a sick society in need of changes that could only be instituted through federal action. Thus the New Deal accepted the idea of federal responsibility for the relief of the unemployed, supported legislation for social security, unemployment insurance, wages and hours, and public housing, and did not fear massive expenditures that resulted in deficit spending. Many of the traditional aims of past reform movements—to restore government to the people and to destroy big business and monopolies—were simply bypassed or ignored by Roosevelt. Considering the nature and magnitude of New Deal programs, Hofstadter concluded, the movement had to be considered a new departure in American life. "The New Deal, and the thinking it engendered," wrote Hofstadter, "represented the triumph of economic emergency and human needs over inherited notions and inhibitions.

At the core of the New Deal, then, was not a philosophy (F.D.R. could identify himself philosophically only as a Christian and democrat), but an attitude, suitable for practical politicians, administrators, and technicians, but uncongenial to the moralism that the Progressives had for the most part shared with their opponents."

The New Deal, Hofstadter pointed out with an ironic touch, represented a change of the usual ideological roles of American conservatives and reformers. The conservatives had traditionally prided themselves on their sense of realism, their distrust of abstract plans for remaking society, and their belief in the necessity for institutional con-

Deal, they hinted, might very well have been a dictatorship of the right or left if the nation had continued to drift along as it had under Hoover. While such historians who identified themselves in the Progressive tradition were interpreting the New Deal in a favorable light, others, particularly those adhering to a conservative ideology, were writing in quite a different vein. Conceiving of individual freedom and competition in almost absolutist terms, they saw the New Deal as a violent departure from traditional American values. To them the New Deal was anything but a continuation of America's political tradition; it represented rather an outright rejection of everything that was good and desirable within that tradition. During the decade of the thirties, many critics, especially spokesmen of conservative social groups and businessmen, took this position on the New Deal. Former President Hoover, for example, sounded a note of warning in 1934 when he condemned the expansion of the federal government's role and the subsequent regimentation of American life. "It is a vast shift," he wrote, "from the American concept of human rights which even the government may not infringe to those social philosophies where men are wholly subjective to the state. It is a vast casualty to Liberty if it shall be continued."

Hoover's hostility was matched by other writers like John T. Flynn, a former liberal who had become progressively disillusioned by America's liberal tradition. The author of several books on Roosevelt Flynn's antagonism against the New Deal reached a peak in his *The Roosevelt Myth*. Specifically denying the achievements that liberal historians had credited to the New Deal, he argued that Roosevelt had substituted for the free enterprise system one that operated upon "permanent crises and an armament economy." "In the process of implementing New Deal programs the vigor of state governments had been sapped, the authority of Congress had been eroded, and unprecedented power had been concentrated in the hands of the president. One result of Roosevelt's New Deal policies was the appearance of a staggering federal debt; a debt that can never be paid and which can be taken off our shoulders only by a great and devastating inflation."

The charge by conservative writers that the New Deal represented a break with the past, interestingly enough, was echoed by some Progressive historians. One of these was Richard Hofstadter who, although writing within a liberal framework, was among the severest critics of America's liberal tradition. American liberalism, Hofstadter argued, had failed because of its moralizing tendencies and its inability

tinuity. Reformers, on the other hand, had invariably appealed to moral sentiments, denounced existing injustices, and aroused the indignation of the community. By the 1930s, however, the traditional roles of the two had become reversed. Reformers appealed not to moral abstractions, but to concrete grievances of specific groups—farmers without markets, unemployed men without bread, laborers seeking to organize in unions of their own choosing, and to those groups concerned with the soundness of banks, investment markets, and manufacturing enterprises. Conservatives were now in the position of moral critics—they denounced the New Deal precisely because of its violation of traditional rules, its abandonment of the nation's moral heritage, its departure from sound principles, and its imposition of a federal tyranny upon the American people.

Oddly enough Hofstadter was unhappy with the efforts of both conservatives and reformers. The reformers from the New Deal on, according to him, had refused to think in terms of rational planning and remained content to respond in a pragmatic way to individual pressures and situations as they arose. The criticisms of the conservatives, on the other hand, were "hollow and cliché-ridden," the complaints of a class increasingly cut off from the world of reality. But all that Hofstadter could do—at least in his role as historian and contemporary critic—was to hope that a better understanding of America's past political tradition might help future politicians to formulate a more realistic philosophy.

A similar criticism was voiced by Rexford G. Tugwell, a Columbia University professor who had joined Roosevelt's administration in the early 1930s as a strong advocate of governmental economic planning. The old faith in a self-regulating market, he maintained, had never been justified; it was part of the American mythology of a free enterprise system. Distrustful of business and businessmen Tugwell felt that only the federal government was in a position to control the economy in such a way as to make it run smoothly and efficiently.

After leaving government service to return to the academic world, Tugwell set out to write a biography of Roosevelt, which was finally published in 1957, although parts had appeared in a series of long articles somewhat earlier. The picture Tugwell drew of Roosevelt and the New Deal was a friendly one, but one also marked with a sense of disappointment. According to Tugwell the productive capacity of the American economy by the late 1920s had far outrun purchasing power, creating a rise to a fundamental maladjustment which resulted in the depression. The Republicans under Hoover initially denied that the situation was serious. Later they adopted halfway measures and tried to avoid private rather than public relief. When Roosevelt came to power he was faced with a grave emergency but one which gave him

an unprecedented opportunity such as no other president had had. Although he was a master improviser and politician, Roosevelt never conceived of New Deal measures in terms of rational planning. Many of the New Deal innovations, indeed, resulted from careful balancing between the claims of various competing pressure groups. Roosevelt, Tugwell concluded, was a political pragmatist with a progressive bent. Despite his essential greatness he was unable or unwilling to seize the opportunity and institute far-reaching reform measures. Whether future historians would continue to look upon the New Deal in this manner, Tugwell admitted, was an open question.¹⁰

Both Hofstadter and Tugwell were critical of Roosevelt because of his political opportunism and his pragmatic approach to serious problems. Implicit in their writings was the belief that the New Deal could not be interpreted as a part of America's liberal tradition. Oddly enough they were in agreement with recent neoconservative historians who had also rejected the thesis that American history could be understood in terms of class and ideological conflict. In the eyes of these more recent historians American history had been marked not by conflict and divisions, but by stability and unity. Domestic struggles in the United States, they maintained, were over means, never over ends. To look upon the politics of the 1930s as an expression of fundamental divisions among the American people, they concluded, was a mistake. But if the New Deal did not reflect fundamental class and ideological divisions, what did it reflect? To Heinz Eulau, a political scientist at Stanford University writing in essentially a neoconservative vein, the New Deal defied ideological classification. It is true, he admitted, that many individuals associated with Roosevelt had their own particular blueprints for the reconstruction of American society. Taken as a whole, however, the New Deal had many sides, and for this reason was not the product of a cohesive and rational ideology. Nor did the New Deal articulate a faith in a better tomorrow; it did not call upon people to join a crusade to remake their society or to experiment with new and untried schemes. But if the New Deal was not an ideology, a faith, a crusade, an experiment, a revolt, or a utopia, what was it? To Eulau the answer to this question was clear. The New Deal, he suggested, was "both a symbol and evidence of the nation's political maturity"; it represented an effort to solve problems "through politics rather than through ideology or violence." In Eulau's eyes a mature politics involves adjustment, compromise, and integration. By this

¹⁰Rexford G. Tugwell, "The New Deal in Retrospect," *Western Political Quarterly* 1 (December 1948):373-385. See also Tugwell's full-length study of Roosevelt, *The Democratic Roosevelt* (New York, 1957).

standard the New Deal symbolized a mature politics because it was seeking solutions to problems rather than imposing preconceived solutions on problems.¹¹

By implication Eulau was agreeing with those neoconservative historians who rejected class and ideological interpretations of American history in favor of an approach that emphasized the stability of American institutions and the pragmatism of American culture. The distinguishing characteristic of American history, therefore, was a rejection of the unrealistic intellectual and ideological characteristics of European thought and the substitution in their place of common sense. To writers like Eulau the New Deal must be understood as part of the basic commonsense approach of most Americans and their rejection of the world of ideology. In this sense the New Deal was not comparable to earlier liberal movements; the New Deal was simply an attempt to cope with unique problems in a simple and sensible manner. During the 1960s the stature of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal again began to change as younger scholars asked some searching questions: If the New Deal had modified and humanized American society, why did poverty and racism continue to exist? If the New Deal had truly reformed an unbridled capitalism and made it more responsive to the needs of people, why were so many different groups—blacks, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, and middle-class youths—alienated from their society? If the New Deal had led to a change for the better in terms of America's role in world affairs, how had the nation become involved first in the Korean War and then in the Vietnam conflict? Given the tensions and crises of the 1960s it was perhaps inevitable that the historical image of the New Deal would once again change.

Perhaps the sharpest critique—though by no means the only one—came from the pens of historians identified with the New Left. Many of these scholars were committed to radical changes in the structure of American society and they saw history as a discipline that would illuminate the present by a searching examination of the past. We have "sought explicitly," wrote the editor of a book of essays representing in part New Left scholarship, "to make the past speak to the present, to ask questions that have a deep-rooted moral and political relevance. In moving occasionally beyond description and causal analysis to judge significance, we have, by necessity, moved beyond objective history in the realm of values."¹²

¹¹Helen Eulau, "Neither Ideology Nor Utopia: The New Deal in Retrospect," *Anchor Review*, 19 (Winter 1959-1960):523-537.

¹²Barton J. Bernstein, ed., *Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History* (New York, 1968), p. xiii.

Given their own values and commitment to social change it was natural that radical historians would see the New Deal in an unfavorable light. In an essay discussing the place of the New Deal in American history, for example, Barton J. Bernstein argued that the liberal reforms of the 1930s had not transformed the American system, rather they conserved and protected corporate capitalism. Nor had the New Deal significantly redistributed power in any way, or granted any meaningful recognition to unorganized peoples. Even its bolder programs had not extended the beneficence of government beyond affluent groups or used the wealth of the few for the needs of the many. The New Deal followed essentially conservative goals, for it was intended to maintain the American system intact. "The New Deal," Bernstein concluded, "failed to solve the problem of depression, it failed to raise the impoverished, it failed to redistribute income, it failed to extend equality and generally countenanced racial discrimination and segregation. It failed generally to make business more responsible to the social welfare or to threaten business's pre-eminent political power. . . . In acting to protect the institution of private property and in advancing the interests of corporate capitalism, the New Deal assisted the middle and upper sectors of society; it protected them, sometimes, even at the cost of injuring the lower sectors. Seldom did it bestow much of substance upon the lower classes."¹³

From the vantage point of the political left, therefore, the New Deal was a failure. Committed to capitalism it could not offer the lower classes anything but rhetoric and psychological comfort. So wrote even Paul K. Conkin in a penetrating analysis of Roosevelt and the New Deal. Judging the New Deal more from the perspective of a social democrat rather than a partisan of the New Left, he expressed considerable admiration for Roosevelt's political astuteness and charismatic qualities. Yet Conkin denied that Roosevelt was even a pragmatist, for his thought was too shallow and superficial and concerned largely with immediate issues. "For the historian," noted Conkin in his critical but compassionate summation, "every judgment, every evaluation of the past has to be tinged with a pinch of compassion, a sense of the beauty and nobility present when honest hopes and humane ideals are frustrated. He sees that the thirties could have brought so much more, but also so much worse, than the New Deal. The limiting context has to be understood—the safeguards and impediments of our political system, Roosevelt's intellectual limitations, and most of all the appalling economic ignorance and philosophic immaturity of the American electorate. . . . The New Deal solved a few problems, ameliorated a few

¹³Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in *ibid.*, pp. 264 and 281-282.

more, obscured many, and created new ones. This is about all our political system can generate, even in crisis."¹⁴

Much of the historiography of the New Deal, therefore, reflected to some degree personal ideological commitments. To Progressive scholars Roosevelt was a hero; to conservatives he was too radical; and to radicals he was too conservative, if not reactionary. Each group, of course, judged Roosevelt in terms of the direction they felt America *should* have taken.

In a major study of New Deal economic policy, however, Ellis W. Hawley approached the problem quite differently. Americans, he noted, shared a commitment to two value systems that were not wholly compatible. On the one hand they cherished liberty and freedom, which implied a competitive economic and social order. On the other hand they valued order, rationality, and collective organization, and associated large business units and economic organizations generally with abundance, progress, and a rising standard of living. Yet the latter value posed a potential threat to the former; monopoly negated, at least in theory, freedom and competition. Much of twentieth-century American history, Hawley observed, revolved around the search for a solution "that would preserve the industrial order, necessarily based upon a high degree of collective organization, and yet would preserve America's democratic heritage at the same time." New Deal economic policy mirrored this basic ambivalence; it vacillated between rational planning and antimonopoly, neither of which was completely compatible. Hawley's conclusion offered little support to any of the competing ideologies that underlay many of the historical interpretations of Roosevelt and the New Deal. "If the experiences of the nineteen thirties have any relevance at all," he wrote, "it is in illustrating the limitations of logical analysis, the pitfalls inherent in broad theoretical approaches, the difficulty of agreeing on policy goals, and the necessity of making due allowances for the intellectual heritage, current trends of opinion, and the realities of pressure-group politics."¹⁵

In the second selection in this chapter, Hawley analyzes the nature of business-government relationships in the New Deal era. Rejecting either the glorification or denigration of the mixed economy created during the 1930s Hawley emphasizes instead the tensions between organizational capitalism and the liberal-democratic ethos, as well as Franklin Delano Roosevelt's tendency to resist ideological systems. Nor does he accept the claim that business groups dominated policy making during the depression. What emerged from the New Deal, he

¹⁴Paul K. Conkin, *The New Deal* (New York, 1967).

¹⁵Ellis W. Hawley, *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence* (Princeton, 1966), p. 493.

concludes, "was the creation not of an omnipotent corporate elite but of a complex interaction between conflicting interest groups, resurgent liberal ideals, and the champions of competing reform models, all of which, after all, contemplated the salvation and stabilizing of corporate capitalism as well as the democratizing of it."

In recent years historians have begun to occupy a middle ground as the political passions of the 1930s faded. In his political analysis, for example, Albert U. Romasco argued that Roosevelt wanted to cooperate with the business community, thereby stimulating investment and productivity. If Roosevelt was hostile to business he nevertheless confronted the business community with a little stick and a big carrot. Similarly Nancy Weiss has exploded the myth that Roosevelt was overly concerned with the plight of black Americans during the Great Depression. On racial issues the New Deal offered little; Roosevelt was reluctant to support antilynching legislation for fear of alienating Southern Democrats. Insofar as economic issues were concerned blacks benefited only because they were not excluded from those broad New Deal programs designed to assist the poor and the unemployed as a whole. Consequently blacks embraced the Democratic party and abandoned the Republican party even though Roosevelt did not directly woo black support.¹⁶

Considering, then, the many ways historians have written about the New Deal, is it possible to come to any sort of definitive conclusions about its essential nature? Can Roosevelt and the New Deal be positioned precisely in terms of their place within the American political tradition? In dealing with this question it should be emphasized that many of the apparent differences among students writing about the New Deal are partly semantical in nature. When describing the operation of specific New Deal programs, for example, the differences of opinion between historians tend to narrow sharply. Thus what the WPA, NRA, and other federal agencies *did* is often not a subject of dispute. The issue that invariably leads to conflict is the intent of the participants involved. The controversy involves not the relief activities of the 1930s, to cite one instance, but whether or not the concept of federal relief undermined the cherished American ideals of individualism and liberty.

The semantic difficulty may be seen in the various ways historians have used the word pragmatic. When Roosevelt was described as a "pragmatic leader," what did this mean? Actually the term was used in at least three different ways. Edgar E. Robinson, for example, has

¹⁶Albert U. Romasco, *The Politics of Recovery: Roosevelt's New Deal* (New York 1983), and Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, 1983).

described Roosevelt's personal leadership as "pragmatic—an individual playing by ear." What Robinson meant by his characterization was that Roosevelt, in order to gain an immediate political advantage, never considered the long-range effects of his policies. "Roosevelt's failure," Robinson concluded, "lay in his unsuccessful attempt to justify the means or establish the ends he had in view." Underlying Robinson's thesis was the criticism that the New Deal resulted in an almost fatal concentration of power in the hands of the executive—a "power that could destroy the world or build it in the image of an entirely new scientific perspective."¹⁷

A second use of the term "pragmatic," as we have already seen in Tugwell's case, involved the criticism that Roosevelt never even understood the need for long-range economic planning. Roosevelt limited himself to immediate problems and tended to neglect more fundamental issues. Consequently he never took advantage of the unparalleled opportunity for reform that arose out of the greatest single economic crisis that the American people had ever faced. While New Deal measures were important in giving status and material benefits to groups in American society that had been hitherto neglected, relatively speaking, these reforms fell short of their real potential. This view of Roosevelt, which has been echoed by many writers, is based on the underlying assumption that New Deal pragmatism and rational governmental planning were incompatible.

The term "pragmatic" has been used in a third way to describe a mental attitude and frame of mind that rejected the dogmatic thinking of the 1930s and remained open and receptive to new ideas. William E. Leuchtenburg, a Columbia University historian, has argued that the pragmatism of the New Deal seemed striking only because the period as a whole was characterized by rigid ideological thinking. The New Deal was pragmatic, Leuchtenburg maintained, "only in contrast to the rigidity of Hoover and of the Left." Moreover the movement was pragmatic in the sense that reformers themselves remained skeptical about final utopias and ultimate solutions and were always open to experimentation. To Leuchtenburg the New Deal was more than a movement to experiment or to improvise; it was a movement led by men who were committed to the proposition that it was possible to make human life more tolerable, that depressions were by no means inevitable events, and that human affairs were not necessarily guided by inexorable deterministic laws.¹⁸

¹⁷Edgar Eugene Robinson, *The Roosevelt Leadership 1933-1945* (Philadelphia, 1955), pp. 383, 397, and 408.

¹⁸William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal 1932-1940* (New York, 1963), pp. 344-345.

Because of the preoccupation with the New Deal as a national phenomenon historians have generally not dealt with its actual impact on the lives of individuals. In a recent study of Boston during the 1930s, Charles H. Trout observed that the "New Deal's manifestations were treated piecemeal and were perceived by individuals and groups according to their particular needs." Indeed, many federal programs involving social and economic change were resisted by Bostonians precisely because of the weight of tradition and history; the concept "of a national or even a municipal communality of interest was seldom grasped."¹⁹ From a local perspective, therefore, the accomplishments of the New Deal were limited and more remote.

The problem of understanding and assessing the achievements of the New Deal and its place in American history, therefore, is one whose answer will largely be determined by a series of prior assumptions about the nature of the American past and the nation's ideals in both the present and future. To those historians whose view is that America is founded upon an atomistic philosophy—that the nation's greatness arose from the achievements of talented and ambitious individuals and was not always related to the activities of government—the New Deal will always appear as a movement alien and hostile to traditional values. In this context the New Deal represents a new departure in American history that will end perhaps in a collectivistic and authoritarian government. On the other hand, to those scholars who adhere to a corporate philosophy—that society is more than a mere aggregate of private individuals and that a modern complex industrial economy requires a certain amount of public regulation as well as government-sponsored reform—the New Deal becomes a political movement inspired by proper ideals. Instead of being an aberration in terms of the American political tradition the New Deal was a movement consonant with previous struggles for justice and equality. Finally, to those historians who maintain that only a radical restructuring of American society could eliminate poverty, racism, war, and inequality, the New Deal appears as a palliative or sham designed to gloss over fundamental defects.

The problem of judging the nature and accomplishments of the New Deal is, then, a difficult one, for it involves the entire fabric of the American past. Indeed, to avoid any broad judgments is in effect to render a judgment, albeit on an unconscious level. In the final analysis, therefore, historians will continue to grapple with the place of the New Deal in American life. Was the New Deal a continuation of America's liberal tradition or was it a repudiation of that tradition?

¹⁹Charles H. Trout, *Boston, The Great Depression, and the New Deal* (New York, 1977), pp. 321-322.

Did the New Deal reflect an attempt by corporate capitalism to maintain its power intact by forging a partnership with the federal government, with the latter in a subordinate position? Or did the New Deal give a significant voice to minority groups that in the past had been powerless? Can the New Deal even be understood in ideological terms or should it be viewed as a political movement characterized by an underlying pragmatism? Or were the alleged inconsistencies of the New Deal a reflection of the underlying commitment of Americans to the values of order and freedom, which in turn gave rise to ambivalent policies? These are only some of the broad questions that must be answered in order to assess the nature and significance of the New Deal.²⁰

²⁰For a penetrating analysis of the historical literature on the New Deal, see Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., "Was There Really a Man Named Roosevelt?," in *American History: Retrospect and Prospect*, George A. Billias and Gerald N. Grob, eds. (New York, 1971), pp. 232-270.