



The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time

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“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself,” said incoming President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, as he pledged in March 1933 to lead the U.S. federal government in “action – and action now” to meet crises of global upheaval and economic collapse. Subsequent New Deal reforms have been lionized by analysts. But what were the pervasive fears to which Roosevelt pointed, the fears that shaped and informed transformations in U.S. policy and politics in the mid-twentieth century?

Just before his death in 2007, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., noted that his magisterial *Age of Roosevelt* had been “conditioned by the passions of my era” and observed that “when new urgencies arise in our own times and lives, the historian’s spotlight shifts, probing ...into the shadows, throwing into sharp relief things that were always there but that earlier historians had carelessly excised from collective memory.” Taking this insight to heart, my new book *Fear Itself* reexamines the New Deal from a perspective informed by the urgencies of the early twenty-first century – with its economic volatility, global religious zealotry, and military insecurity.

Beyond the collapse of capitalism in the Great Depression, the United States from the 1930s through the 1950s confronted grave crises marked by four acute sources of fear: the disintegration and decay of liberal democratic politics in Europe, East Asia, and Latin America; the exponential growth of sophisticated lethal weaponry before and after World War II; Cold War suspicions about disloyalty; and, throughout, the racial oppressions and animosities of the Jim Crow South. All four sources of widespread fear deeply affected political understandings and actions. As America struggled out of the Great Depression and showed that its institutions could enable a new governing order at home and abroad, the rumble of deep uncertainty and a sense of proceeding without a map remained relentless throughout. The anxieties of our time are perhaps not of the same magnitude, yet we have much to learn from how the New Deal dealt with fear-inducing threats decades ago.

A Longer Trajectory

Many previous accounts of the “New Deal order” have cut the story short at the start of World War II, but I extend the period under consideration through the Truman Administration, so we can better understand how various fear-inducing trends reinforced one another as the postwar U.S. national state emerged. That new national state had two distinctive faces. One might be called procedural government, as the federal government established new rules of access that enabled interest groups to clash. The public interest was not identified in advance, but arrived at through shifting interest struggles. The U.S. state’s other face was that of global crusader, symbolized by an immense Pentagon that became a permanent fixture after starting out as a temporary wartime headquarters. The global face of U.S. power was deployed in myriad ways, through widespread military outposts, clandestine subversion, and efforts at cultural education.

New Deal Governance in International Perspective

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The politics of America's New Deal cries out to be situated in global context. Contemporary European dictatorships in Rome, Berlin, and Moscow offered their own answers to the era's economic, social, and military challenges. Fascist and Communist regimes did not have to navigate entrenched parliamentary procedures influenced by party divisions, ideological polarization, or the influence of money in politics. In the United States between the election of November 1932 and Roosevelt's inauguration the following March, a jarring debate waged about the need for comparable emergency powers. The country's leading journalist, Walter Lippmann, called for "strong medicine" and proposed extra-Constitutional measures to bolster the president's authority and "suspend temporarily the rule of both houses" of Congress.

But such a suppression of normal politics did not happen. Although President Roosevelt pushed Congress to act quickly on emergency economic measures and ultimately claimed broad executive powers to wage war, America met the crises of the era with a reinvigorated model of constitutionalism and law. Of the New Deal's many accomplishments, none was more important than the demonstration that a liberal democracy with a legislature at its heart could govern effectively in the face of great danger. Congress not only kept but increasingly asserted its prerogatives.

The Centrality of Congress and Southern Democrats

Indeed, shifting away from the usual focus on the president and executive branch, I focus closely on Congress and probe the ironically pivotal role played by southern legislators in shaping the New Deal order in ways that preserved their region's system of white supremacy. Selected by electorates restricted mostly to whites, and with seniority rules and the Senate filibuster at their disposal, southern representatives had outsized leverage in Congress, where they dominated the committee system and the leadership of the House and Senate. Controlling Congress's lawmaking switchboard put southerners in a position to shape key legislation, which they did with great skill and determination across issues ranging from social welfare and labor policy to military affairs and civil liberties.

The main instrument that enabled southerners in Congress was the mid-twentieth-century national Democratic Party, which confederated two radically disparate regional polities. One key part of the Democratic Party base was northern and western – primarily rooted in urban political machines, Catholic and Jewish immigrant populations, wage-workers and growing labor unions. The other key part was southern and predominately rural, native, Protestant, anti-labor, and exclusively white. For both legislative and electoral reasons, the New Deal's accomplishments and limits rested on repeatedly negotiated deals between these strange bedfellows.

As *Fear Itself* shows, the reshaping of U.S. governance under Roosevelt and Truman depended on harnessing the Jim Crow South into the majority coalition of the Democratic Party, in the process giving white segregationists outsized capacities to shape and veto core domestic and foreign policies. Early twenty-first-century Americans continue to live with the results – in a country quite different from what the United States might have become without the exercise of racially inflected southern power. Properly understood in its entirety, the New Deal thus continues to profoundly influence the fears and challenges we face in our own time.

Read more in Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (Liveright/W.W. Norton, 2013).