

“‘Fear Itself’: Depression Life” (1984)¹

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To most Americans who escaped the ravages of the Depression, as to almost all Americans today, the unemployed of the 1930s were part of a faceless mass. Many pitied them, some despised them, most tried to ignore them. Few attempted to understand them. Such an understanding must begin with the realization that they were individuals, not statistics. They were a diverse lot, with cleavages along racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, occupational, age, regional, and other lines. Some were proud, others beaten. Some were optimistic, others had lost all hope. Some blamed themselves, others cursed businessmen, politicians, the “system,” or “the Interests.” They were, to be sure, victims, but they were not only victims. In most cases they had no part in the cause of their suffering, but the ways in which they reacted to their plight form a large—although poorly understood—portion of the history of the Depression.

Here I try to follow anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s prescription for cultural analysis. “A good interpretation of anything,” Geertz has said, “takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation.” “Mass unemployment,” Cabell Phillips has noted, “is both a statistic and an empty feeling in the stomach. To fully comprehend it, you have to both see the figures and feel the emptiness.” The principal goal is to go into the center of the Depression experience and attempt to feel the emptiness; in short, to blend social and intellectual history through an excursion into the minds of working-class Americans.

Undoubtedly the main reason that this topic has been so long neglected is the difficulty of approaching it. Working people are largely absent from the traditional types of historical documentation. Yet many sources do exist. The Depression and its effects upon its victims proved to be an irresistible subject for many sociologists and psychologists in the 1930s. The resulting contemporary investigations are also extremely valuable sources of information. The most important kinds of evidence are those that bring us into contact with individual working-class people of the Depression era. Several varieties of such personal sources are extant. Field investigators sent out by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and, later, the Works Progress Administration, to report back to Federal Relief Administrator Harry Hopkins on conditions and attitudes among the poor provide us with a wealth of information. The fact that we receive our impressions of working-class thought through the eyes and words of middle-class investigators should make us cautious. Even so, the reports add much to our understanding. Interviewers hired by the WPA Federal Writers’ Project collected thousands of personal histories from “ordinary” Americans in the late thirties. These, too, are a significant addition to our knowledge of working-class culture.

The most useful source of direct contact with the people of the thirties is the immense collection of letters that were addressed to public figures, especially to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. These communications bring us into direct contact with more than 15 million Depression-era Americans, a majority of them laborers, clerks, and farmers. By weaving together

¹ Robert S. McElvaine, “‘Fear Itself’: Depression Life,” Ch. 8 from *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 170-195.

the various types of evidence and using one kind as a check on the indications found in another, we can begin to understand the lives and values of American workers in the Great Depression. What follows is a composite of the Depression experience, using the words of Depression victims from all these sources.

For those workers who had enjoyed at least a taste of prosperity in the 1920s, the initial blow of the Depression was crushing. The twenties had seen the traditional middle-class American values, which taught that success and failure went to those who deserved them and which stressed acquisitive individualism, spread widely among workers. Such workers had been pleased to think that their modest accomplishments in the twenties were the result of their selection—whether by Calvin’s God or Darwin’s Nature depended upon one’s viewpoint—for success. Like the Republican party, which had taken credit for good times and hence found it difficult to escape blame for bad times, Americans who had claimed responsibility for personal gains found it difficult not to feel guilty when confronted with failure.

A widespread attitude of the unemployed early in the Depression was: “There must be something wrong with a fellow who can’t get a job.” *Sure, I’ve lost my job, but I’m still a worthy provider. Work will turn up soon.* Every morning up before dawn, washed, shaved, and dressed as neatly as possible. To the factory gates, only to find a hundred others already there, staring blankly at the sign: NO HELP WANTED. The search then became more feverish. One day in 1934 a man in Baltimore walked twenty miles in search of a job. “I just stopped every place,” he said, “but mostly they wouldn’t even talk to me.” *Perhaps an employment agency? A long wait, but it will be worth it to get a job. At last a chance.* The questions: name, age, experience. Yes, well, we’ll see what we can do, but there are already more than a hundred men in our files with similar backgrounds, and most of them are younger than you. Employers can be choosy, you know. It’s a buyer’s market. Why hire a man who is over forty, when there are plenty of unemployed men still in their twenties? Business has to be efficient, after all. “A man over forty might as well go out and shoot himself,” said a despairing Chicago resident in 1934.

Gradually those over forty, though fit physically, began to *feel* old and *look* and *act* poor. Keeping up the appearance necessary to secure employment, particularly of the white-collar variety, became increasingly difficult. As an Oklahoma woman put it in a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt in 1934, “The unemployed have been so long with out food-clothes-shoes-medical care-dental care etc-we look pretty bad-so when we ask for a job we don’t get it. And we look and feel a little worse each day—when we ask for food they call us bums—it Bent our fault...no we are not bums.” Yet, “with shabby suits, frayed collars, worn shoes and perhaps a couple of front teeth gone,” men looked like bums. “We do not dare to use even a little soap,” wrote a jobless Oregonian, “when it will pay for an extra egg a few more carrots for our children.”

As the days without finding a job became weeks, the weeks months, and the months years, it came to be more difficult even to look for work. “...You can get pretty discouraged and your soles can get pretty thin after you’ve been job hunting a couple of months,” a Minnesota Depression victim pointed out. First you came to accept the idea of taking a job of lower quality than you thought you deserved. Then you began to wonder just what you did deserve. It came finally, for some, to be a matter of begging: “For God’s sake, Mister, when are you going to give

us work?" "How," asked the daughter of a long-unemployed man, "can you go up and apply for a job without crying?"

Modern industrial society does not provide a place or position for a person; rather, it requires him to make his own place—and to strive to better it. This is taken to be the measure of one's individual worth. Americans had been brought up on the belief that meaningful work is the basis of life. Without such work, people felt they had no reason for being. "Drives a man crazy," said a seventy-five-year-old former knifemaker, "or drives him to drink, hangin' around." One must, as a St. Louis man said in 1933, "get the job to keep his mind and body whole."

Community attitudes toward the unemployed sometimes added to the feelings of guilt, shame, inferiority, fear, and insecurity. Many of those who remained employed made it plain that they believed that "something is wrong with a man who can't support his family." "Taxpayers" complained of paying for the upkeep of "thieves and lazy, immoral people," "no good for nothing loafers," "human parasites," and "pampered poverty rats."

Although some of the unemployed successfully resisted the psychological effects of such verbal attacks, others were likely to hear internal as well as external voices telling them that they were to blame for their plight. "I'm just no good, I guess," a Houston woman told a caseworker in 1934. "I've given up ever amounting to anything. It's no use." "I'd kinda like to think I could get a job and hold it," an Oklahoma WPA worker said at the end of the Depression.

As scant resources ran out, self-blame often grew into the shame of having to seek assistance. In some areas, people "would almost starve rather than ask for help." Indeed, some of their fellow citizens expected no less from them. "I have had too much self respect for my self and Family to beg anything," wrote a North Carolina man in 1933. "I would be only too glad to dig ditches to keep my family from going hungry." But there were no ditches to be dug. For many, there seemed "little to look forward to save charity," with all the stigma that implied. The loss of one's "good standing" was a matter of great concern. The thought of seeking charity was "very distasteful and humiliating."

Desperation began to take over. For many, nighttime was the worst. "What is going to become of us?" wondered an Arizona man. "I've lost twelve and a half pounds this last month, just thinking. You can't sleep, you know. You wake up about 2 A.M., and you lie and think." When you could sleep, bad dreams were likely. Worry and fear became dominant. Sometimes you would look at your children and wonder what would happen to them. Sheer terror would suddenly overcome you. Some say you appear to be shell-shocked; others tell you that you look like a frightened child. And well you should, because at times that's just the way you feel. Often you cry like a youngster; you try to do it privately, but you know the children hear you at night.

Of course you try to forget. For some, alcohol was a means of escape. It was not much help when you were hungry, though. "It's funny," a nineteen-year-old in Providence said. "A lot of times I get offered a drink. It seems like people don't want to drink alone. But no one ever offers me a meal. Most of the time when I take a drink it makes me sick. My stomach's too empty."

An alternative to drinking was withdrawal from social contacts. Convinced that you are a failure, you try to avoid your friends, fearing that they will look upon you with scorn or, what is sometimes worse, pity. Thus you are unlikely to find out that many of your friends have also

fallen victim to the Depression. In this small, hothouse world, self-blame, shame, and self-pity bloom magnificently.

As desperation grows worse the choices narrow. “My children have not got no shoes and clothing to go to school with,” a West Virginia man complained in 1935, “and we havent got enough bed clothes to keep us warm.” You resort to using old coats in lieu of blankets. *What can be done? What of the children? They are cold and hungry, but* “to do anything desperette now they would never live down the disgrace.” “What is a man to do?” You face “a complete nervous breakdown as a result of being idle....What is the next move for a desperate man? To commit some crime in this time of need?” When “all else has failed,” one must do something. Is it wrong to steal coal to keep your family warm? Survival becomes the goal, the justification. Much like the slaves of the Old South, some Depression victims developed a distinction between stealing (from a fellow sufferer) and what the slaves had called taking (what you need and can convince yourself is rightfully yours because its possessor has exploited you or others like you). To some, it was acceptable to get “busy” and bring “home some extra money,” as the wife of a Michigan WPA man put it. “I’d steal if I had the guts,” declared a Rhode Island boy.

If not crime, what? How long can I take it? Is there no hope? Perhaps the only thing left is to “end it all.” If no one will help, “than [sic] I will take my life away,” said a Detroit woman in 1935. Suicide at times “seemed the only solution.” “The Atlantic calls from our shores that there is plenty of room for us,” a Massachusetts woman proclaimed. Suicide would be the ultimate admission of defeat, but it might appear “as the best way out,” as it did to a New York woman who stated, “I am not a coward but good Lord it is awful to stand helpless when you need things.” “Can you be so kind as to advise me as to which would be the most human way to dispose of my self and family, as this is about the only thing that I see left to do,” a Pennsylvania man inquired in 1934. “No home, no work, no money. We cannot go along this way. They have shut the water supply from us. No means of sanitation. We can not keep the children clean and tidy as they should be.”

Relatively few, of course, actually took the fatal step, but many Depression victims appear to have considered it. An FERA investigator in New York City reported late in 1934 that “almost every one of her clients” had “talked of suicide at one time or another.” The programs of the New Deal may have persuaded some that life might still hold some hope. “You have saved my life,” a New Jersey woman wrote, referring to assistance she had received from the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation. “I would have killed myself If I would have lost my house.”

Sometimes the decision of whether to seek assistance was a question of socially determined sex roles. An Italian man in Massachusetts, for instance, threatened to kill himself, his wife, and children because he was about to lose his house. It was unacceptable for him to ask for help. His wife saved the day by appealing to a neighbor for a loan. The bulk of the help-seeking letters of the thirties were written by women to Eleanor Roosevelt. What was inappropriate behavior for most men——”begging”——was proper for women, either because women were believed to be naturally weak or because a mother seeking help was not showing weakness, but playing her accepted role.

Thousands of the down-and-out, almost all of them women, wrote to Mrs. Roosevelt asking for old clothes. Americans facing adversity clung to their traditions and pride as long as

possible, but the Depression forced many to set aside the former and swallow the latter, lest they have nothing at all to swallow. Clothing was considered an area of female responsibility. “Please do not think this does not cause a great feeling of shame to me to have to ask for old clothing,” an Iowa woman wrote to the First Lady in 1936. “I am so badly in need of a summer coat and under things and dresses. oh don’t think that it is not with a effort I ask you to please send me anything you may have on hand in that line which you don’t care to wear yourself.” “I can sew and would only be too glad to take two old things and put them together and make a new one,” wrote a desperate Philadelphia woman. “I don’t care what it is, any thing from an old bunch of stockings to an old Sport Suit or an old afternoon dress, in fact. Any-thing a lady 40 years of age can wear.”

Although men were more plentiful among writers asking for direct financial assistance than among those seeking clothing, women appear to have outnumbered men in this category as well. Men might be as pleased as women to receive help, but their expected sex role made it more difficult for them to ask. To do so would be further admission of failure as a provider.

That so many wrote to the Roosevelts seeking help was indicative of the views most Depression-era workers had of the First Family. Such people often saw FDR in a fashion much like the European peasant who, as Oscar Handlin put it, thought “of the religious figure of the sanctified King as his distant protector who, if only he were told, would surely intercede for his devoted subjects.” Letters to Roosevelt echoed this attitude. “You honor sir and your royalty. Majesty,” began a 1935 letter to the President from an incapacitated black man in Georgia. When he heard Roosevelt speak over the radio in 1932, a Kansas man said, it seemed “as though some Moses had come to alleviated us of our sufferings.”

The special relationship between the Roosevelts and the downtrodden made it possible to think that asking for help from that source was somehow different from seeking charity. One might even convince oneself that a modicum of independence was being preserved if help came from one’s “personal friends” in the White House. Grasping at hope, a woman could ask Mrs. Roosevelt to intercede with the manager of a contest “and ask him kindly to give me a prize.”

When the hope for prizes and direct assistance from the “royal family” flickered out, little was left but to apply for the dreaded dole. Any savings you once had were either lost in bank failures or long since used up. You have asked friends and relatives for a little help more times than is likely to keep them friendly. The grocer has allowed your bill to go up, but now he has said that he can do no more. Pay some of it or go hungry. By now you have been hungry—*really* hungry—for several days. A twelve-year-old boy in Chicago summed it up in a letter: “We haven’t paid 4 months rent, Everyday the landlord rings the door bell, we don’t open the door for him. We are afraid that will be put out, been put out before, and don’t want to happen again. We haven’t paid the gas bill, and the electric bill, haven’t paid grocery bill for 3 months.”¹⁵ *Something* must be done. Survival being prerequisite to independence, the latter must be sacrificed, if only temporarily. So at last it is that painful walk to the local school, which houses the relief office.

You walk by a number of times, trying to get up the nerve to go in. What if your children—or their friends—see you? Finally, it can be delayed no longer. Why is that policeman there? Surely you have recently felt like breaking something; maybe others are also on the verge of destructive acts. Still, seeing that uniform and gun does not make you any more

comfortable. You tell the clerk what you are there for. You are mumbling. Speak up! he says, impatiently. (He is on relief, too, and has few qualifications and little training for the delicate position he holds.) You finally make yourself understood. (*What else would you have been there for? Why did he even have to ask?*) Take a seat. Your name will be called.

The “intake” room is crowded. You sit down, focusing your gaze on one of the holes in your shoes. After a while your eyes, thoughtlessly moving about, make contact with those of another applicant. He looks away as quickly as you do. *How can so many people be failures?...What’s taking them so long? Do they think I have all day?...Come to think of it, I guess I do. What a failure I am!...The stink in this place is awful!*

Two hours later you realize that your name is being called—for the second time. You rise slowly and go over to the desk. The questions bother you. *Yes, FOUR months since we paid the rent. Yes, we have been evicted before. No, we lost the car months ago. The radio? It’s paid for, and it isn’t worth enough to keep us fed for a week. Can’t we keep it? That’s all?* You can go home and wait. An investigator will visit you in a few days. More questions, more embarrassment, further degradation. Pauperization, that’s what it is. *How did this happen?* You have become “something anonymous who will presently be more or less fed.” *What’s that? It may be several weeks before we get any help? How do we eat in the meantime? If we had anything at all left, I wouldn’t be here now.*

The shame persists, but eventually it may give way to despair and, then, apathy, particularly among those on direct relief “Why the Hell should I get up in the morning, lady?” asked a youth of twenty. “What am I going to do with all these days?...I’ve been looking for a job for four years. I’ve had two. Five months in all. After a while you know it ain’t getting you anywhere. There’s nothing for us!” Many were bewildered. An FERA investigator described Americans in 1934 as being “terrifyingly patient.” “They are sick, mentally and physically,” a New York Home Relief Bureau supervisor had said of Depression victims a year earlier. “They have given up even trying to look for work. The majority have become so apathetic that they accept without questioning us whatever we give them, no matter how pitifully inadequate it is or how badly administered.”

Such dole recipients were variously characterized as listless, “sinking into indifference,” lethargic, and “too docile, too much licked to put up any fight.” One FERA investigator described providing relief for such people as “a kind of desperate job like getting the wounded off the battlefield so that they can die quietly at the base hospital.”

Apathy, too, was a stage, one beyond which many of the unemployed moved after the New Deal had taken root. Sooner or later those sets of eyes in the relief office would meet. One would see “that there were other fellows who didn’t look such a bad sort or low mentality in the same fix he was.” It made you feel a little better. “Bit by bit,” an FERA investigator reported from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, late in 1934, “these men discovered that it was bolstering their morale to swap experiences and reactions and to realize that their situation was the result of a social condition, not a personal failure.” And if the government had accepted responsibility for providing relief, the problem must not be the fault of the individual.

For such people, resentment began to displace self-blame and apathy. If it is not your fault, why should you suffer the indignities of the relief system? Relief “clients” began to object to the young college women who often served as caseworkers. (Not always without reason. One

in California visited “her clients in a very elegant riding costume—breeches, top boots, crop, and all!” “We get work from the Relief as the little young folks thinks we need it,” complained a Georgia woman. “They have always been used to plenty. Don’t know how hard it is for folks like us.”

Among the common criticisms of relief was that recipients were treated as children: given food orders instead of cash, instructed by nutrition experts, investigated by “busybodies,” and generally “regimented.” “Why should it be ‘dished’ out to us like we were *little children*, and tell us exactly what every cent should be spent for?” asked a Californian. People who had “always managed to raise their children and feed them without advice from the outside” were unenthusiastic about such lectures. They wanted to be on their own, to have cash to buy what and where they chose, to spend it on beer every now and then, if they so desired. Although relief recipients had already become far more dependent than most of them wished to be, they wanted to retain as much independence as possible, even within the relief system.

What gave relief “clients” the chance to reassert their independence was the opportunity for work relief, first with the CWA and later with the WPA. Self-respect could finally begin to return. When a New York relief investigator told a man who had been receiving grocery orders that there was a CWA job for him, she related, “He grabbed me, swung me right up off the floor, and hugged me.” When he went to work, the man left an hour earlier than necessary.

People on WPA jobs spoke with heartfelt conviction about their preference for this type of assistance. “My pride took an awful beating when I had to apply for relief,” a fifty-one-year-old Minneapolis man recalled in 1940, “but I feel different about this [WPA]. Here I am working for what I’m getting.” “It means,” a woman said of the WPA, “that I can look people in the eye because I’m not on a dole...it isn’t like relief. Being on relief just breaks you all up.” Another man spoke of the WPA enabling him “to sleep nights instead of lying awake thinking of desperate things I might do.”

By 1935 the attitude of many Depression victims toward relief had changed. Complaints increased. Shame over being on public assistance was replaced in some by anger at the smallness of payments and at relief administrators. A Muncie, Indiana, housewife expressed the latter view when she wrote, “Those in charge of relief have never lain awake at night worrying about unpaid rent, or how to make a few groceries do for the seemingly endless seven days....” “It is always,” she continued, “the people with full stomachs who tell us poor people to keep happy.”

In the mid-thirties many of the unemployed concluded that relief simply amounted to Depression victims getting what was rightfully theirs. Social workers were reporting as early as 1934 that some people seemed to think “that the Government actually owes it [relief] to them.” Lorena Hickok called such recipients “gimmies.” Some, an Iowa relief administrator wrote, had “adopted a more demanding attitude” and were “willing for the government to see them through.” People on public assistance in Salt Lake City developed a slang of their own. Significantly, they referred to the FERA as “Santa Claus.” In many places, groups of angry unemployed people gathered at relief offices and harassed the administrators with their demands for better treatment.²⁰ Within the context of a basically dependent situation, relief recipients were finding means by which to express their independence.

Whatever the changes in attitudes toward relief and dependence as the Depression continued, the psychological problems for the unemployed remained devastating. For many Americans who avoided the ravages of the Depression, it became an article of faith that relief recipients irresponsibly had children for whom they could not provide. Some conservatives charged that relief women had babies in order to qualify for higher payments. Even FERA investigators were not above accepting such notions. "On the relief rolls," wrote Martha Gellhorn in 1934, "it is an accepted fact that the more incapable and unequipped (physically, mentally, materially) the parents, the more offspring they produce." "Apparently," she concluded in another report, "the instinct of self-preservation' is not very well developed in the working class American."

For the victims, however, the problem was far more complex. Some social workers excused poverty-ridden, hopeless young women who had illegitimate children, because "their lives are so empty that they fall a prey to anything which offers momentary escape from the horror of their lives." Although this view was not without some validity, the problem was more complicated. For many "forgotten women" of the thirties, the questions of intercourse, birth control, and having children were among the most gnawing of the Depression years. The wife of a Massachusetts WPA worker (and mother of his eleven children) voiced one aspect of the difficulty: "Ya know down at the Catholic Charities they tell ya your not supposed ta have children if you're on the W.P.A. An' in the church they tell ya you're not supposed ta do anything about it. An' they say you're supposed ta live with your man. Now what's a woman gonna do?"

Even for women without religious qualms about birth control sexual questions caused anguish. A woman in the San Joaquin Valley haltingly told Lorena Hickok of something "that had nearly driven her crazy" and that "she knew was one of the worst problems of women whose husbands are out of work." Almost no one in such circumstances *wanted* to have babies, but "here you are, surrounded by young ones you can't support and never knowing when there's going to be another. You don't have any money to buy anything at the drugstore. All you have is a grocery order. I've known women to try to sell some of their groceries to get a little money to buy the things needed."

This still did not describe the depth of the problem, however. "I suppose," the woman continued, "you can say the easiest way would be not to do it. But it wouldn't be. You don't know what it's like when your husband's out of work. He's gloomy and unhappy all the time. Life is terrible. You must try all the time to keep him from going crazy. And many times—that's the only way."

Pleasure in the Depression was, to be sure, often limited to such inexpensive pastimes. In many places, meat and fruit were rarities. One woman bought a dozen oranges with part of her husband's first CWA check. "I hadn't tasted any for so long," she explained, "that I had forgotten what they were like!" People were gloomy. "I know a party that has got a radio + spends some of his money for beer," a Vermont woman wrote to President Roosevelt. Her family was not so fortunate: "We don't have no pleasure of any kind."

The absence of pleasure sometimes produced family problems. "What about the children who's parents can't give their children the little things in life such as a cone of cream or a 1 *cts* piece of candy or a soft drink once a week," asked a Kentuckian. "Who will get the blame for

this neglect The father of course....Do you think it is right that we poor never have the pleasure of a show or a trip back home. Just stay at home and watch others have all the fun good eats fine automobiles town houses, country homes....” Other family problems grew out of the quest for pleasure on empty pocketbooks. “Half the men you have Put to work taken their maney When they get Paid an spends it for whiskey,” a Nashville woman complained to FDR. “If my husband new that I wrote this he would kill me,” she added in a postscript.

The lack of money, work, and self-esteem caused even greater family troubles. Unemployment upset the traditional roles of father, mother, and children. Since the father’s position was based upon his occupation and his role as provider, the loss of his job was likely to mean a decline in his status within the family. The man who was without a position was, well, without a position. It was he who was supposed to provide independence for the family. Having little to do, unemployed men hung around home much of the time. In doing so, they infringed upon the sphere of the wife. If the husband blamed himself for his loss of income, the wife might try to encourage him. At first most did. But as hardships grew, and as the man sitting by the kitchen stove began to irritate his wife, the latter was increasingly likely to see, and point out, faults in her mate. And as his resentment and guilt expanded, he was apt to find more in his wife’s actions that displeased him. Quarrels became more numerous.

Being “on relief” stigmatized an entire family, but most especially the father. Male dominance was endangered in the Depression. It asserted itself in odd ways. In some cases, most family resources were devoted to obtaining clothes for the man. “The women,” it was concluded, “can stay inside and keep warm, and the children can stay home from school.” There were cases, however, where a father was obliged to share his son’s clothes. “They’re all we’ve got now,” said a North Dakota farmer. “We take turns wearing ‘em.” The symbolism for the breadwinner must have been apparent.

The traditional role of the mother is far less dependent than that of the father on the family’s status in the outside world. The Depression was, accordingly, less harmful to mothers’ positions inside their families. John Steinbeck said it well in *The Grapes of Wrath*: “‘Woman can change better’n a man,’ Ma said soothingly. ‘Woman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head.’” Some women simply took over for their unemployed husbands. In one case, a man first learned of his wife’s decision to rent another house “when he came home to find the furniture had been moved.” But mothers’ roles were also upset by the economic breakdown. Distribution of relief commodities, Chicago social workers pointed out, “deprived the housewife of the privilege of shopping and in a sense destroyed their responsibility as housewives.” Nor was it easy for “a mother to hear her hungry babe whimpering in the night and growing children tossing in their sleep because of gnawing plain HUNGER,” as an Oregon woman put it. “I have laid many a night & cried my self to sleep when I think of what I have to work with,” wrote a Pennsylvania mother.

People did their best to maintain traditional roles. If a woman must work for her family to survive, so be it. The reemergence of a family economy of pooled resources was one means of maintaining family independence. “But soon’s the men get goin’ the wife’s through,” a Portuguese fisherman in Massachusetts said. “She stays home then. Yes ma’am, we like our wives to be home.” Of course spouses who continued to cooperate during the Depression helped each other make it through with a minimum of upheaval. “We got enough ta get along on, and

we got each other. That should be enough to make any body happy,” declared a shoe machinery worker. For all the problems, in fact, available evidence indicates that the families of many unemployed men continued to operate under the direction of the traditional head, with little apparent change in internal status. The principal effect of the Depression on internal family relationships, in fact, was to exaggerate the qualities and tendencies already present. The additional strain was often too much for weak families to withstand, but strong relationships usually weathered the hard times successfully.

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Discrimination against women in employment became worse with the Depression. It was easy to assert that women were taking jobs that otherwise would go to male heads of households. Norman Cousins stated this argument in its most simplistic form in 1939: “There are approximately 10,000,000 people out of work in the United States today; there are also 10,000,000 or more women, married and single, who are jobholders. Simply fire the women, who shouldn’t be working anyway, and hire the men. Presto! No unemployment. No relief rolls. No depression.” Those who made such statements usually had little interest in facts, but most women who worked outside the home during the Depression clearly did so out of necessity. They supported themselves and their families just as did male “breadwinners.” Such was the case not only with single women, but also with most working married women, whose husbands were either unemployed or paid too little to provide for their families. Nonetheless, campaigns against hiring married women were common in the 1930s. Fully 77 percent of the school districts in the United States would not hire married women to teach; 50 percent of them had a policy of firing women who married.

Despite the prejudice against women—especially married women—working, their numbers in the work force actually increased, both absolutely and as a percentage of all workers, during the Depression. In 1930, women had represented 24.3 percent of all workers; in 1940, 25.1 percent of the work force was female. Similarly, the proportion of women workers who were married increased in the face of Depression-era discrimination, from 28.8 percent at the beginning of the decade to 35 percent at its end. This seemingly remarkable development resulted from several causes.

Most women who sought employment, before as well as during the Depression, did so because the economic realities of American life obliged them to work. Most families in this country have aspired to an “American standard of living,” which has always been ill defined, but is something clearly above mere subsistence. Early in the present century it was not possible for working-class families to reach that level on the wages of one adult male. The income of the father was often supplemented by the wages of children. As child labor declined, wives filled the resulting gap in family income. The living standards of most families improved in the 1920s. When the Depression hit, even those families that did not *need* the wife’s extra income in an absolute sense, needed it if they were to stay close to the standard that they had enjoyed during prosperity. As husbands lost their jobs, had their wages cut, or became increasingly fearful that they might become unemployed, wives who had not previously worked outside the home sought jobs. Here was a distinct—and often overlooked—irony of the Depression: as jobs became

much more difficult to find, far more people began looking for work. One estimate held that 2.5 million more people were in the work force in 1937 than there would have been had there been no depression. Most of these new workers were women, so one reason that more women found jobs in the thirties was simply that more sought them.

This might seem to support the claim that women were displacing men from jobs, but another reason for the increase in female workers refutes that argument. Women lost proportionately fewer jobs than men precisely because their types of employment were not considered interchangeable. There existed many positions that were identified as “women’s work”: domestic service, primary education, many clerical and social service jobs. Such situations remained available to women regardless of how many men were out of work. The Depression itself placed women in a relatively better position for obtaining work—poorly paid, of course—than men. “[I]deas that once had consigned women to inferior places in the labor force,” historian Alice Kessler-Harris has pointed out, “now preserved for them jobs that menfolk could not get.” The economic collapse hit hardest just those sectors of the economy (especially heavy industry) that had barred women workers. The fields in which women were most likely to be employed suffered a lesser decline and, in the case of clerical work (in the new government agencies), social services, and education, actually grew under the impact of the New Deal. A 1940 study found that in the five most depressed industries women represented only 2 percent of the employees. In the employment categories with the smallest drop in employment, on the other hand, women held 30 percent of the jobs. In a strange sense, women might be said to have benefited from past employment discrimination against them.

Before we become too envious of women workers during the Depression, though, it is well to remember what sort of jobs were reserved for them and what they were paid. At the end of the decade fully one-fifth of all women who worked for wages were employed as domestic servants. Live-in maids in the mid-thirties earned less than \$8 per week in New York City, the highest-paying locality in the country. Other women workers were better paid, but not by much. One-fourth of the NRA codes permitted lower rates of pay for women than men. The federal government not only allowed discrimination, it practiced it. Men on WPA projects were paid \$5 per day; women received only \$3.

Women workers during the Depression also had to face increased psychological pressures. Antagonism from male workers and from wives who remained at home was intensified by the generally mistaken belief that women were taking jobs from men. And at a time when their traditional nurturing role seemed especially needed in the home, women who were obliged to work for wages carried a particularly heavy burden of guilt. One study placed the blame for “truancy, incorrigibility, robbery, teenage tantrums, and difficulty in managing children” on the “mother’s absence at her job.”

Given all the obstacles working wives faced during the Depression, it is not surprising that many people came to associate employment of women outside the home with harsh, undesirable economic conditions. In the thirties an ideal came to be formed among many Americans—women as well as men—of what American family life ought to be like. It was summed up in the answer the vice president of a United Auto Workers local made to a 1939 complaint a union member’s wife had made about married women working. “Some day, Dear Sister, I hope we will reach that economic ideal where the married woman will find her place in

the home caring for children, which is God's greatest gift to women and her natural birthright," Mike Mannini wrote. Here was an example of a very important part of the origins of what Betty Friedan later called "the feminine mystique." The return of the wife and mother to her "natural" sphere came during the Great Depression to be a goal, the achievement of which would be a sign of the return of "good times."

In those families where there was turmoil during the Depression, the children often suffered. Fathers (and mothers) might take out their frustrations on the children. As the effects of unemployment, shame, and worry became noticeable in parents, children grew more anxious. "The children all seem to be so excitable and high-strung these days," said a New York settlement house kindergarten teacher. "I can't help thinking it's due to the distress at home."

Why do we live like this, a child would wonder. Things used to be better. We're not even clean anymore. Mama says the relief doesn't give enough for soap. And the bedbugs. In our old house we never had anything like that! What's wrong with Daddy? Times are hard, they say, but "all the other little girls are getting Easter dresses." "Our friends have skates and we are not able to buy them." Surely it's not Daddy's fault; he's the greatest. Why, he's been on relief longer than the other kids' fathers—that's something.

How can you go to school when the other kids know your family has been evicted before and people are saying your father's not paying the rent now? *Why should I be the one who has "to put a piece of cardboard in the sole of my shoe to go to school"?* All the questions in a young mind. "My father he staying home. All the time he's crying because he can't find work. I told him why are you crying daddy, and daddy said why shouldn't I cry when there is nothing in the house. I feel sorry for him. That night I couldn't sleep."

The special times that usually bring joy to children and parents were often the hardest to bear during the Depression. Christmas could be particularly painful. "My little children talking about Santa Claus," a Texas father wrote to the President in 1934, "and I hate to see Xmas come this time because I know it will be one of the duller Xmas they ever witnessed." A Virginia mother described a similar problem. "My little boy was speaking of Santa Claus 'He says why is it most children gets pretty toys and so many seems like they are rich and we so poor' This made tears come in my eyes," she said. "Then I told him if we are ever lucky enough to get work we will try to get him something pretty. I have to tell him of some happy day which may come."

While many adults compared Franklin Roosevelt to Lincoln, Moses, or Jesus, for some children the President was Santa Claus. Two Rhode Island boys, for instance, wrote their annual Christmas letter in 1935, but mailed it to Washington rather than the North Pole. They wanted bicycles or microscope-chemistry sets. Other children who sought gifts from the jolly man in the White House were more practical. "We have no one to give us a Christmas presents," wrote a ten-year-old Ohio girl, "and if you want to buy a Christmas present please buy us a stove to do our cooking and to make good bread." Such were the holiday thoughts of some children in 1935.

Although the children of the thirties lived through the same economic hardship as their parents did, it meant different things to the new generation. For one thing, children were largely free from the self-blame and shame that were so common among their elders. Obviously economic problems were not the fault of a child. He could rest assured that he had not failed. Adults might have botched things up; perhaps Dad was a failure, but few children felt any

personal guilt. The Depression's most significant psychological problem was generally absent in the young.

The hardships many families faced in the thirties led children to assume greater responsibilities at an earlier age than has been customary in the years since World War II. It has been said with accuracy that there were no working-class "teenagers" in the 1930s. The generation had no time for an irresponsible, prolonged adolescence. Challenges had to be met. Often children (especially boys) were called upon to supplement meager family incomes by working after school (or in place of school). When mothers found it necessary—and possible—to get jobs, older children (especially girls) were given the responsibility of looking after their younger brothers and sisters.

Although the loss of any appreciable portion of one's childhood is tragic, there were some compensations for the youth of the thirties. The work thrust upon children in the Depression was likely to instill in them what industrial society commonly considers to be virtues: dependability, self-reliance, order, awareness of the needs of others, and practice in managing money. To the extent that the Depression furthered the development of such qualities in the young, it had a strikingly different effect on the children than on their elders. Ironically, the same family hardship that might weaken the self-reliance of a father could strengthen that quality in his child.

If being a child in the thirties was difficult, but at least on occasion rewarding, being a young adult presented problems with few compensations. Americans have always been future-oriented. If things were not quite perfect at the moment, just wait for tomorrow or next year. This attitude has been especially associated with the young.

In this as in so much else, however, the 1930s were different. Not that optimism did not survive, at least below the surface. Throughout the Depression, the slightest good news was sufficient to activate the latent hopefulness in some Americans. The creation of the CWA and the implementation of the corn loans brightened the outlook in Iowa to the point that an Irish man shouted, "In another 20 days we'll be out of the depression!" In the late spring of 1934, Lorena Hickok temporarily convinced herself that "people are in a pretty contented, optimistic frame of mind. They just aren't thinking about the Depression any more," she said, displaying at least as much optimism as she thought she detected in others. Speaking of the reaction of drought stricken Colorado ranchers to two cloudbursts, she said, "Funny how people will cheer up if given half a chance!" "If only they will be patient, circumstances will work themselves out, and every-thing will be O.K.," a Wisconsin woman wrote in 1935. Even after a full decade of depression, WPA workers could be found in 1940 expressing faith in the future. "My idea," said an Oklahoma laborer, "is that all this is just a temporary thing, but it'll give us a chance to get another start if jobs will just pick up."

Despite the persistence of such attitudes in some quarters, though, the future looked bleak to many in the thirties. When asked "what his hope for the future was," an ex-truck driver gave a typical answer in 1934: "I just don't know." In the same year, Oklahoma relief recipients were said to "no longer have the 'chin up' attitude." Rather, they "lived in constant fear of what the next day or next week would bring." Young people simply had "nothing to look forward to." Many of the young—at just the stage in life in which the future often appears limitless—were nearly without hope during the Depression years. Older people, FERA investigator Martha Gellhorn pointed out, could "remember an easier life, a less stringent world." They refused "to

believe that the end had inevitably come.” “But,” Gellhorn declared, “these young people have grown up against a shut door.”

What hope could the future hold for the young adult of the thirties? Marriage and raising a family appeared out of the question. The CCC was all right for a while, but it was hardly a career. Work relief meant survival, but it offered no chance for advancement and no training for a “real” job. How could you get interested in it? Horatio Alger stories were fine in the old days, but what now? The traditional formula was work, save, succeed; but now you could not even reach step one. It appeared that “we shall never have good times again,” we were “permanently licked.” It was hard to disagree with the sobering conclusion that “it would be a cinch to run a war these days, with a good many of the world’s young men having nothing better to do anyhow than get shot, and at least fed for a bit beforehand, and busy....”

For most, of course, unemployment had to end sometime. The offer of a “real job” often brought tears of joy. “This will be our last week on relief,” wept the wife of a skilled worker in Joplin, Missouri, after her husband obtained employment. “Next week we shall be able to take care of ourselves again.” Unfortunately, such joy was often short-lived. Long unemployment had taken its physical and psychological toll. People became “nervous, muscularly soft and unconfident of their ability to do the work they formerly did.” On a new job, they were so fearful of “making mistakes that they make mistakes and are promptly fired,” reported a Chicago settlement official in 1934.

The Great Depression was, of course, an economic disaster for most Americans, but black people suffered a disproportionate share of the burden. The old and true saying that blacks are the last hired and the first fired cut both ways during the Depression. Unemployment in the “prosperity decade” had been much higher among blacks than whites. “The Negro was born in depression,” Clifford Burke told Studs Terkel. “It only became official when it hit the white man.”

As layoffs began in late 1929 and accelerated in the following years, blacks were often the first to get pink slips. By 1932 black unemployment reached approximately 50 percent nationwide. As with women, some undesirable jobs had long been reserved for blacks. But such jobs became less undesirable when no other work was to be found. Although women’s work generally remained just that in the Depression, the same was not the case with some traditionally “Negro occupations.” Whites demanded that blacks be discharged as domestic servants, garbage collectors, elevator operators, waiters, bellhops, and street cleaners. A group of whites in Atlanta adopted the slogan “No Jobs for Niggers Until Every White Man Has a Job.” A poorly educated Georgia woman spoke for many whites when she wrote to the President in 1935: “negroes being worked ever where instead of white men it dont look like that is rite.” A year earlier a white clerk in Marianna, Florida, said in the wake of a lynch mob attack on a store that employed blacks, “A nigger hasn’t got no right to have a job when there are white men who can do the work and are out of work.” The number of lynchings in the United States rose from eight in 1932 to twenty-eight, fifteen, and twenty in the three succeeding years. A Depression-era study showed a positive correlation between the number of lynchings in the Deep South and economic distress. “Dust had been blown from the shotgun, the whip, and the noose,” a *New Republic* article reported in 1931,

“and Ku Klux practices were being resumed in the certainty that dead men not only tell no tales but create vacancies.”

Those blacks who were able to keep their jobs suffered great hardship as well. A 1935 investigation in Harlem indicated that skilled workers there had experienced a drop of nearly 50 percent in their wages since the onset of the Depression. The lack of employment opportunities in northern cities cut down the extraordinary rate of black migration from the rural South, but more than 400,000 blacks did make the journey in the Depression decade. If jobs were not available in the North, at least there was not as much discrimination in the administration of relief as in the South. The continuing heavy migration of blacks into cities where they could vote, in states with large representation in the electoral college, was a political fact of growing importance.

The political influence of blacks had been minuscule since the end of Reconstruction. They voted in overwhelming majorities for the Republican party, which had come to take the “Negro vote” for granted. The Grand Old Party offered blacks little more by 1930 than the grand old platitudes of Abraham Lincoln, Thaddeus Stevens, and Charles Sumner. The Democrats, however, offered still less. The Democrats had never seated a single black delegate at any national convention prior to the New Deal. A few blacks were selected as alternates in 1924, but at the 1928 Democratic National Convention in Houston, the black alternates were seated in an area separated by chicken wire from the white delegates and alternates. Here was a perfect symbol of the racial attitudes of the party.

If there was little cause for blacks to hope for much from the Democratic party, there was not much more reason for optimism about the party’s candidate in 1932. Like most northern Democrats, Franklin D. Roosevelt had never said anything about race that might upset southern party leaders. He went along without complaint when President Wilson ordered the institution of a complete Jim Crow system in the Navy. In 1929, FDR issued a public denial that he had eaten lunch with blacks. Both Roosevelt’s administration in Albany and his 1932 campaign staff were devoid of blacks. Despite their suffering from the Depression, blacks voted for Hoover by greater majorities against Roosevelt in 1932 than they had against Smith four years before.

Yet a decade later Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal wrote in his classic study of American race relations, *An American Dilemma*, that Roosevelt’s presidency had “changed the whole configuration of the Negro problem.” Few today would disagree with this assessment. The civil rights revolution that reached fruition in the 1960s had its origins in the Depression years. A number of factors converged to bring about this remarkable result.

In the early New Deal no direct steps were taken toward easing the plight of black Americans. To advocates of legislation to improve race relations, Roosevelt argued, with considerable justification, that pushing such bills would destroy the support of southerners in Congress needed to pass recovery legislation vital to all Americans, black as well as white. “First things come first, and I can’t alienate certain votes I need for measures that are more important at the moment by pushing any measures that would entail a fight,” Roosevelt said in 1933. “I’ve got to get legislation passed by Congress to save America,” FDR explained to Walter White, the national secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. “The Southerners by reason of the seniority rule in Congress are chairmen or occupy strategic places on most of the Senate and House committees. If I come out for the anti-lynching bill now, they

will block every bill I ask Congress to pass to keep America from collapsing. I just can't take that risk."

Thus the legislation of the First Hundred Days concentrated on the immediate economic crisis, leaving the specific concerns of blacks unaddressed. The National Recovery Administration's effects on blacks were symptomatic of the impact of the early New Deal on that segment of the population. More than a hundred NRA codes established regional wage differentials under which southern workers (which in many instances meant blacks, because of the job classifications) were paid less than people doing the same work elsewhere. The Blue Eagle did not even cover the occupations in which most blacks were employed: farm labor and domestic service. Eighteen NRA codes included what one NAACP official called the "grandfather clause of the NRA. " It established wage scales for types of labor based upon what wages had been at a certain date in the past. Obviously this perpetuated pay discrimination based on racial distinctions in job classifications. And in those instances where NRA codes did enforce equal pay for workers of either race, the result was often that blacks lost their "advantage" of working for less and were replaced by whites. Black newspapers had their own versions of what NRA stood for, including "Negro Run Around" and "Negroes Rarely Allowed."

For blacks, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration served mainly to reduce their incomes (which they could stand much less than could their large landholding white neighbors), and force black landowners into tenancy, tenants into sharecropping, and many blacks off the land entirely. These effects were extremely significant. Some 40 percent of all black workers in the United States during the Depression years were farm laborers or tenants. A 1934 investigation estimated the average annual income of black cotton farmers of all types at under \$200. The AAA was not the cause of such deplorable conditions, but it continued them without improvement and in some cases made the problems worse.

Most early New Deal programs included the ideal of decentralized administration or "grass-roots democracy." (No one in the thirties, as far as I am aware, used the term "New Federalism.") Much could be said for the concept in the abstract. In practice, however, it meant that local elites controlled the federal programs in their areas. "[T]he relief officials here," a black resident of Reidsville, Georgia, wrote to President Roosevelt in 1935, "...give us black folks, each one, nothing but a few cans of pickle meet and to the white folks they give blankets, bolts of cloth and things like that." A Georgia official confirmed a discriminatory policy: "There will be no Negroes pushing wheelbarrows and boys driving trucks getting forty cents an hour when the good white men and white women, working on the fields alongside these roads can hardly earn forty cents a day." Relief payments to blacks in Atlanta averaged \$19.19 per month, while white relief clients in the same city received \$32.66, nearly 70 percent more. A black person in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, summed up the effect of local control in an eloquent, if nearly illiterate, letter to FDR: "i wish you could See the poor hungry an naket half clad's at the relief office an is turned away With tears in their eyes Mississippi is made her own laws and dont treat her destituted as her Pres. had laid plans for us to live."

The need for change should have been obvious. In the 1920s, American popular culture was blatantly racist. Movies portrayed blacks as shiftless, stupid, and laughable. Radio joined in in 1928 with *Amos 'n' Andy*, a series in which white actors spoke the parts of black characters who fit all the white stereotypes of blacks. By 1929, *Amos 'n' Andy* was radio's most popular

program, heard by about 60 percent of all radio listeners. Other broadcasts in the decade made frequent use of “darky” jokes. Amusement parks advertised games in which whites could “Hit the Coon and Get a Cigar.” Optimists seeking signs of improvement were hard pressed for examples. Perhaps it was a significant reform when *The New York Times* began, early in 1930, to spell “Negro” with a capital “N.” Early in the New Deal, though, at least one official of the Federal Housing Administration was still in the habit of telling “darky” and “coon” stories in public speeches. (Administration leaders soon stopped the practice, although it did not die forever, as Nixon-Ford Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz demonstrated in the early 1970s.)

The shift in the attitude of the federal government toward race relations was in large part the work of a few dedicated integrationist reformers, white and black. Unquestionably, the person most responsible for beginning the change in the attitude of the federal government toward blacks was Eleanor Roosevelt. Mrs. Roosevelt had shown no particular concern or understanding for the problems of blacks before her husband became president. But her empathy for the downtrodden led her quite naturally to take up the cause of blacks. She was shocked at the uproar that followed her having lunch with a black woman in Florida in 1933.

In 1927, Eleanor Roosevelt met Mary McLeod Bethune, a black woman who had risen from a sharecropper’s family of seventeen children to found Bethune-Cookman College in Florida. The friendship between these two women continued over the ensuing years, and as a result Mrs. Roosevelt’s understanding of black problems expanded greatly. She recommended Mrs. Bethune as an assistant to Aubrey Williams at the National Youth Administration, and under the leadership of Williams, a dedicated white liberal from Alabama, and the influence of Bethune, the NYA became a model of government assistance for blacks.

The First Lady also became friendly with Walter White, the first black national secretary of the NAACP. With the guidance of Bethune and White, Eleanor Roosevelt became the leading white advocate of racial integration in the United States. As such, she found herself the target of virulent abuse from white racists. One of the harshest was the ditty that put the following words in the President’s mouth, speaking to his wife:

*You kiss the niggers,
I’ll kiss the Jews,
We’ll stay in the White House
As long as we choose.*

Eleanor Roosevelt’s concern for black people was a reflection of her larger attitude of compassion, which in turn meshed with the values of cooperation that were becoming popular among the American people during the Depression years. The “day of selfishness,” Mrs. Roosevelt declared in a 1934 speech to a conference on black education, was over; “the day of working together has come, and we must learn to work together, all of us, regardless of race or creed or color....We go ahead together or we go down together.” Seen in this light, the emerging values of the American people seemed to point toward racial cooperation. But it was not so simple. A move toward racial harmony—admittedly, a very *small* move—was not the only possible effect of the Depression on racial attitudes. A glance at contemporary events in Germany is sufficient to remind us that hard times can cause an intensification of racial and religious

animosity. The increase in lynching in the American South in those years indicates that such a potential existed in the United States as well. Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi was one of the those Americans who thought the Nazis had the right idea. "Race consciousness is developing in all parts of the world," Bilbo declared in 1938. "Consider Italy, consider Germany. It is beginning to be recognized by the thoughtful minds of our age that the conservation of racial values is the only hope for future civilization....The Germans appreciate the importance of race values."

That the United States in the Depression moved in the direction of the values of compassion and cooperation pointed to by Eleanor Roosevelt, rather than toward the "race values" outlined by Senator Bilbo (who sought a \$1 billion congressional appropriation in 1939 to deport all blacks to Africa), was the result of more than Depression-bred concepts of justice, as important as they certainly were. The push given the President and his policies by Mrs. Roosevelt, Mrs. Bethune, Walter White, Harold Ickes, Will Alexander, the southern white Methodist minister who became head of the Farm Security Administration, Aubrey Williams of the NYA, and Clark Foreman, a young white Georgian who became FDR's special assistant on the economic status of Negroes, was of great importance. So was pressure from the Communist party and the CIO, both of which were in the forefront of the quest in the thirties for a larger degree of racial equality. In addition, significant pressure came from blacks themselves, both politically and in terms of organization, demonstrations, and even rioting.

The chronological proximity of President Roosevelt's shift to more forceful opposition to racial discrimination with the only major race riot of the decade, that in Harlem in 1935, may have been coincidence. Be that as it may, the growing importance of black voters in national politics surely was directly related to FDR's move to include blacks in his new Democratic coalition. Black voters began their historic desertion of the Republican party in 1934, before the Roosevelt administration had done much specifically for them. In the midterm elections of 1934, a majority of black voters cast their ballots for Democrats for the first time. That year Arthur Mitchell became the first black Democrat ever to win a seat in Congress, when he upset incumbent black Republican Oscar De Priest in a Chicago district. Mitchell won using the slogan "Forward with Roosevelt." The fact that Roosevelt at least attempted to prohibit discrimination in some federal programs and that his administration provided significant amounts of relief for blacks were enough to end three-quarters of a century of Republican allegiance. "Let Jesus lead you and Roosevelt feed you," a black preacher advised his congregation in 1936.

In that year, the dramatic shift in black political support was unmistakable. "Abraham Lincoln," the Baltimore *Afro-American* reminded its readers, "Is Not A Candidate in the Present Campaign." Franklin Roosevelt was, and he won an incredible 76 percent of the black vote, roughly reversing the outcome of four years earlier. The change in black voting was more decisive than that of any other group in 1936. As with working-class whites, many blacks who had never voted before were sufficiently impressed with the New Deal to cast their first ballots for Roosevelt. Even in the rural South, many blacks were by this time getting to participate in elections of a sort for the first time, as they voted in AAA referendums on such issues as crop limitations. A new political awareness and hope began to dawn among southern blacks. "They's talked more politics since Mistuh Roosevelt been in than ever befo'," one southern black said of

other blacks in his area. “I been here twenty years, but since WPA, the Negro sho’ has started talkin’ politics.”

Unsurprisingly, some Democrats did not welcome the new black members of their party. When a black minister rose to give the invocation at the 1936 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, Senator Ellison D. “Cotton Ed” Smith of South Carolina was horrified. “By God, he’s as black as melted midnight!” Smith gasped. “Get outa my way. This mongrel meeting ain’t no place for a white man!” Smith stormed out of the convention. It was the first time there had been reason for any southern delegate to walk out of a Democratic convention since 1860, but the South Carolinian’s action was a foretaste of the future, not a dim reflection of the past. Some southern delegates bolted the Democratic conventions again in 1948 and 1964, as the party gave them considerably more provocation than a black minister’s prayer. Senator Smith insisted that he had no objection to “any Negro praying for me, but I don’t want any blue-gummed, slew-footed Senagambian praying for me politically.” As he later embellished the story for the white folks down home, Smith said that as he left the convention, “it seemed to me that old John Calhoun leaned down from his mansion in the sky and whispered in my ear, ‘You did right, Ed.’”

The attitude of such southern reactionaries as “Cotton Ed” Smith to the Democratic alliance with blacks indicates the last critical factor in the Depression-era association between liberalism and the quest for racial justice. Early in the Roosevelt administration, such vehement racists as Theodore Bilbo and John Rankin of Mississippi and Martin Dies of Texas supported the New Deal. But as southern fears grew that Roosevelt was moving toward the twin horrors of socialism and racial equality, racism and economic conservatism became intertwined. Southern conservatives combined red-baiting and race-baiting in their struggle against Roosevelt and his liberal economic policies. Charging that the President sought a second Reconstruction, southern racists created a climate in which racism was plainly identified with conservatism. For economic liberals, this provided one more incentive to come out strongly for greater equality between the races. Racism, particularly as it came increasingly to be associated with fascism and Hitler in the late thirties, was a powerful weapon to use against conservatives. In the 1930s, for the first time since the 1870s, reforms for blacks took their clear place on the liberal agenda. The groundwork was laid, but the “second Reconstruction” so dreaded by such conservative southern senators as Virginia’s Carter Glass and North Carolina’s Josiah Bailey would not come until a quarter century later.

Although obviously severely limited, the improvements for blacks during the Depression were discernible. In May 1935, as the “Second New Deal” was getting under way, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 7046, banning discrimination on projects of the new Works Progress Administration. Discrimination continued, but the WPA proved to be a godsend for many blacks. In the later thirties, between 15 and 20 percent of the people working for the agency were black, although blacks constituted less than 10 percent of the national population. This, of course, was a reflection of how much worse off blacks were than whites, but the WPA did enable many blacks to survive. More than that, even minimum WPA wages of \$12 a week were *twice* what many blacks had been earning previously.

Harold Ickes’s Public Works Administration provided to black tenants a more than fair share of the public housing it built. The PWA went so far as to construct several integrated housing projects. PWA construction payrolls also treated blacks fairly. Some 31 percent of PWA

wages in 1936 went to black workers. Ickes first made use of a quota system requiring the hiring of blacks in proportion to their numbers in the local work force. This precedent was followed again (at least in theory) by the wartime Fair Employment Practices Commission and in the civil rights legislation and court decisions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Other foundations were also laid in the New Deal for later victories in the Civil rights movement. Roosevelt's Attorney General Frank Murphy created the Civil Rights Section in the Justice Department in 1939. Two years earlier, FDR appointed NAACP attorney William Hastie as the first black federal judge in American history. Robert Weaver, who had just completed a Ph.D. in economics at Harvard, was appointed in 1933 with Clark Foreman to advise the President on black economic problems. Almost a quarter century later, Lyndon Johnson named Weaver as the first black Cabinet member. Roosevelt himself was advised by a group of black leaders who came to be known in the press as his "Black Cabinet." It was, in fact, something considerably less than the name implied, but such an advisory group went far beyond anything any previous president had done in the area. By 1941 the number of blacks in regular (as opposed to WPA) government jobs exceeded their percentage in the population as a whole. But what may have been FDR's most significant legacy to the civil rights movement involved several white appointees. Seven of Roosevelt's eight choices for the United States Supreme Court were advocates of civil rights for blacks. (James F. Byrnes of South Carolina was the exception.) The Roosevelt Court set the stage for the Warren Court of the fifties and sixties.

The New Deal did more for blacks than provide hope for the future. There were measurable improvements at the time. Most telling was the increase in life expectancy at birth. During the 1930s this statistic rose from 63 to 67 years for white women, 60 to 62 for white men, 49 to 55 for black women, and 47 to 52 for black men. While blacks still trailed far behind their white counterparts in this key indicator of health and well-being, they narrowed the gap in the Depression years. The New Deal also helped bring about a drop in black illiteracy, from 16.4 percent at the beginning of the decade to 11.5 percent at the end.

Two well-known incidents late in the Depression symbolized both the gains blacks had made and how far they had yet to go. When, in March 1939, the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow black contralto Marian Anderson to give a concert in the organization's Constitution Hall in Washington, administration officials arranged for Miss Anderson to give a free concert at the Lincoln Memorial. An integrated crowd of more than 75,000 attended the event, and more than two-thirds of those asked in a nationwide Gallup poll how they felt about Eleanor Roosevelt's resignation from the DAR in protest over the organization's racist policy approved the First Lady's stand. Little more than a decade before, at the dedication of the Lincoln Memorial, blacks were segregated in a roped-off section across a road from white spectators. A notable change in white attitudes had taken place in the interim.

Less than two years after the Anderson performance, as American industry geared up for war production, A. Philip Randolph, the socialist president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, launched the March on Washington Movement (MOWM). The plan was to stage a massive black march on the capital to press for desegregation of the armed forces and equal opportunity in defense industries. The MOWM was, as historian Richard Dalfiume has said, "something different in black protest." The New Deal had begun a change in the American racial climate, but it had done so in such a way that blacks had been left dependent on whites in the

government. Some blacks, like Randolph, were ready by 1941 to insist on doing things for themselves, on making their own gains. The New Deal approach, Ralph Bunche argued, was “in its very nature” a “defeatist attitude, since it accepts the existing patterns while asking favors and exceptions within them.” The MOWM amounted to a public notice that some blacks wanted to stop asking for favors and start confronting injustice on their own. The threat of the march was sufficient to lead FDR to issue his famous Executive Order 8802, creating a Fair Employment Practices Commission to investigate charges of discrimination in defense-related industries. In exchange for this, Randolph agreed to call off the march. As it happened, the FEPC in World War II was not very effective and Randolph’s militant approach declined. But another precedent had been set, and two decades later Randolph’s March on Washington at last took place. Randolph was there to hear Martin Luther King, Jr., deliver his stirring “I Have a Dream” speech.

The rebirth of that dream of true racial equality, which had been crushed with the end of Reconstruction in the 1870s, was the real achievement of the New Deal years in race relations. The dream, of course, remained only that. Black expectations were raised and white liberals were enlisted in the cause. Little of substance had been accomplished by 1941 in bringing about equal rights for blacks, but the seeds of the Black Revolution of the fifties and sixties had been sown.