



Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940

William E. Leuchtenburg

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"Leuchtenburg has brilliantly and effectively brought together thousands of fascinating bits on the New Deal to form a striking mosaic. This is by all means the best one-volume synthesis of the New Deal that has yet appeared in print. I for one doubt that there will ever be a better one. The combination of intensive scholarship, level-headed interpretation, and lively writing make this an invaluable book."

-- Frank Freidel

"Here is the best one-volume synthesis of the New Deal years yet published. Learned, thorough, lucid, fresh, it provides an incomparable introduction to the period for college students and intelligent general readers."

-- John Morton Blum

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 Details

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From Reader Review Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 for online ebook

Don says

I was looking for a solid history of the New Deal, and this was just right. At 348 pages of text, it wasn't too long.

When I read a history, I look for two things: I want the book to be informative without assuming too much prior knowledge of the subject, and I want it to be well-written--not too dry. The New Deal period is one that I knew little about and this book did an excellent job of covering both the politics of the period and the New Deal programs. And while it is not the most compelling read (Wm. Manchester and David Halberstam are my idea of excellent historical writing), it is straightforward. Leuchtenburg lets the facts and the story carry him forward.

This is not a biography of FDR. However, in telling the story of the New Deal, Leuchtenburg tells us much about FDR as President.

All in all, a very worthwhile read.

Chase says

Great synopsis of President Roosevelt's First and Second New Deal and the projects in it from both a political and civilian view. Taking us from his election in 1932 through all the New Deal projects he created and initiated.

B says

Leuchtenberg is like the exact opposite of Doris Kearns Goodwin. He's always cited for his work but never quoted, let alone outside his narrow body of knowledge. (Also, no one ever said that he didn't write his books.)

So I made it a point to actually read the book.

I should have checked the copyright date. Although it's interesting to know what historians in the 1960s thought about the New Deal, I think it's less authoritative than a good modern historian's view despite the length of time.

Ultimately, what you get is a quick check-in on most of the major events from 1932-1940 with little snippets of color here and there. (Can you snip color?) The main thesis is bifurcated like the book itself: As to domestic issues, Roosevelt should have been more Keynesian as that would have greatly reduced unemployment and prevented the major economic setback of 1937 (a kind of second Depression). As to foreign issues, Roosevelt should have been more internationalist for reasons that are not fully explained because Leuchtenberg never articulates how unpreparedness and neutrality in the 1930's hindered the

American war effort. As to the first, Roosevelt was checked by his own inclination and the second, the people. This is pretty standard liberal thinking on the 1930s and certainly reflects Leuchtenberg's milieu.

Also, the New Deal is so large that perhaps it cannot really be told in this nice-sized paperback. I kept thinking that they could make a five-volume series on, say, the CCC if they wanted. "They" being someone with a lot of free time, I guess.

Daren Doucet says

FDR, a great American President. Led this country through the most difficult times, during the great depression, and into World War.

Great economic stabilizing initiatives, and planning, on how to get the struggling economy going again.

Insight into the elections which FDR won, with the old grand standing, public speaking from railway trains, and so on.

Tom says

A comprehensive review of the New Deal and the role FDR played in its creation and roll-out. I'd just finished a book on the Great Depression, so much of the information in here wasn't exactly new to me, but this one goes into greater analysis on FDR and his political mindset, what the New Deal itself set out to do compared to what other rival political ideologies Left and Right were looking to do, and the lead up to World War II. Anyone looking for the basics on the New Deal and the President most associated with it would be wise to start here.

nick says

If you want to read a book to understand every program implemented during the new deal, find another book, but if you are looking for what impact of the new deal was on US society then this is the perfect book.

William E. Leuchtenburg does a tremendous job in putting to paper the sentiment of the times and the people involved both implementer, critic as general public. However before I start praising, I should point out a few things. A lot if not the majority of new deal programs are mentioned or discussed briefly in fact the core of the book is the process by which the programs came to be implemented, the actual effects of these programs are less central to the book (not absent mind). The effect is two sided on the one hand it leaves you wanting more for many of these programs (the name dropping and accumulation of acronyms made my head spin at times) on the other hand it did shatter a lot of assumptions commonly heard when remembering the new deal. Assumptions such as the ease that Roosevelt had for implementing his plans, his strong defense of urban labor and a general progressive radical mindset that broke with the past. All of which are less true when one reads the background of many of the new deal programs.

The Roosevelt I got from this book, was a man willing to experiment, to force others (administrators, congressmen, senators and judges) to go along with the plans, to support one group and drop them at first

sign of disappointment. the new deal as less a coherent idea and more a ramshackle of projects, programs and ideas often brought forward by academics given the freedom to try out their plans until Roosevelt was no longer supportive or stop when they failed to get powerful interest groups to keep backing the plans they came up with. This unorthodox politics and creative broker state power-play was a major revelation for one as me who had assumed a more or less coherent top down plan behind the new deal from the onset.

Roosevelt as the author pointed out had a janus quality to him with on the one hand supporting mass relief for the urban poor and at the same time dreaming of what would later be called suburbia. At the same time not publicly addressing segregation while at the same time quietly incorporating black communities in the new deal programs (including an all black mobile theater group performing shakespeare as part of a national more boosting scheme). A man remembered for empowering labor and unions in the US while privately focused on rural america and genuinely wanting business support for his new deal. And yet after every one of these lets look at this project from the inside, one gets the results, millions of trees planted, infrastructure built to last, child labor abolished, higher literacy, a genuine national democratic interest/spirit, lower child mortality, an end to the dust bowls and the first steps on the path of re configuring the democratic and republican parties.

All of this made me respect Roosevelt and the new deal more then before; while people might be appealed by the methods and experimental mindset utilized by the Roosevelt or frown at the often unbalanced power certain groups had on the administration (the silver mining industry got a real sweet deal out of the new deal despite having relatively little employees) and yet one has to acknowledge the guts the Roosevelt administration had. Roosevelt accepted that a radical change was needed to get the country going again to break the spell of bleakness that had taken hold of society. One has to grudgingly respect the enthusiasm he was able to inspire and the humanistic non moralizing core of his new deal (the liquor ban was one of the first to go in his administration). this was a man who fully appreciated the momentum he had been given and would not waste it while at the same time would not try to mold the US into a specific Utopian ideal, he wanted results nothing less and in the process remade the US and the presidency.

A worthwhile book to read as a start to further delve into the new deal, a sobering view on one the most influential political/ societal programs of the 20th century and it's (un)intentional effects long term.

Sagar Jethani says

William E. Leuchtenburg's "Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal" is a shrewd appraisal of the legacy of one of the most controversial efforts ever undertaken by the federal government. It is hard to read Leuchtenburg's history without drawing parallels to the perils now facing the United States in late 2011. It may be fairly said that an American's views on FDR and the New Deal serve as accurate predictors of his politics—liberals applaud the New Deal and its effect on improving the lives of millions crushed by the depression, while conservatives criticize it as ineffectual and the primary cause of the massive federal deficits which vex us today. Although an avowed admirer of Roosevelt, Leuchtenburg has studiously avoided producing a mere homage to liberalism. Through a dispassionate observation of what actually took place during the tumultuous years of 1932-1940, he paints a picture that is nearly as often at odds with cherished liberal principles as it is with common caricatures of FDR and the New Deal.

Many Americans today cannot appreciate the magnitude of the crisis which followed the stock market crash of 1929. National income had been halved. Over 5,000 banks had crashed, wiping out nine million savings

accounts. Millions suffered the effects of hunger and malnutrition. "We are like the drounding [sic] man, grabbing at every thing that flotes by, trying to save what little we have," reported a North Carolinian. Fifty hungry men in Chicago fought over a barrel of garbage left outside the back of a restaurant. Men in Stockton, California waded through the city dump in search of rotted vegetables. Hundreds of children were kept out of school nationwide due to a lack of clothes. Hundreds of World War I veterans occupied buildings outside of Washington D.C to protest their dire economic conditions. Only after President Herbert Hoover called in four troops of cavalry to clear them out with tanks and infantry did they flee, along with their wives and children.

And the proximate cause of this misery?

The banks.

Stop me when this sounds familiar--

"Frustrated by the failure of the economy to respond to his nostrums, Hoover encouraged a Senate investigation into Wall Street in the spring of 1932 to make an example of the "bears," who he believed had been organizing "raids" on the stock market.

Under the persistent probing of Ferdinand Pecora, the committee shattered the image of the investment banker as a man of probity whose first concern was the welfare of his customers and who operated in an institution that was a model of fair play. Pecora revealed that the most respected men on Wall Street had rigged pools, had profited by pegging bond prices artificially high, and had lined their pockets with fantastic bonuses. The leading financial houses, the committee learned, invited insiders to purchase securities at a price much below that paid by the public. When officers of Charles Mitchell's National City Bank faced ruin because they could not cover their investments, the bank gave them interest-free loans while ruthlessly selling out their own customers. The bankers seemed bereft of a sense of obligation even to their own institutions. Albert Wiggin, president of the Chase National Bank, had even sold short the stock of his own bank.

Yet it was less their financial transgressions than their social irresponsibility which caused the loss of faith in America's business leaders. At a time when millions lived close to starvation, and some even had to scavenge for food, bankers like Wiggin and corporation executives like George Washington Hill of American Tobacco drew astronomical salaries and bonuses. Yet many of these men, including Wiggin, manipulated their investments so that they paid no income tax at all. In Chicago, where teachers, unpaid for months, fainted in classrooms for want of food, wealthy citizens of national reputation brazenly refused to pay taxes or submitted falsified statements. In Detroit, the hardest hit of any large city, Henry Ford set the standard for businessmen by shrugging off all responsibility for the welfare of the jobless. Detroit bankers, in fact, insisted that before the city would be granted a loan to maintain relief, it would have to cut relief pittances still further.

The real responsibility for their poverty, insisted John Edgerton in his presidential address to the National Association of Manufacturers in October, 1930, lay with the jobless themselves. If, he asked, "they do not...practice the habits of thrift and conservation, or if they gamble away their savings in the stock market or elsewhere, is our economic system, or government, or industry to blame?" The tone of lament in Edgerton's remarks was common. One of the most popular themes of business literature of the period was that they wealthy businessmen had suffered more than the worker.

By the time Roosevelt took office, the country had been whipped to a fury at the performance of bankers and

businessmen. The New York bankers especially were the target of popular wrath."

The charismatic senator Huey P. Long called for capping all annual income at \$1 million to provide a higher standard of living for all as part of his "Share the Wealth" campaign. The American Communist party pronounced that Americans were witnessing the end of capitalism and an inevitable historic turn towards a collectivist society in which personal wealth would be outlawed.

"I come home from the hill every night filled with gloom," one Washington correspondent noted. "I see on streets filthy, ragged, desperate-looking men, such as I have never seen before." By the end of Hoover's reign, more than fifteen million workers had lost their jobs... In Seattle, jobless families whose lights had been cut off spent every evening in darkness, some even without candles to light the blackened room. In December, 1932, a New York couple moved to a cave in Central Park, where they lived for the next year. That same month, Rexford Tugwell wrote in his diary: "No one can live and work in New York this winter without a profound sense of uneasiness. Never, in modern times, I should think, has there been so widespread unemployment and such moving distress from sheer hunger and cold." (p.19)

One-quarter of all farmers in Mississippi saw their farms go up in foreclosure. Other farmers in Sioux City rampaged through the streets, committing acts of vandalism. Telegraph poles and railway cars were spiked with explosives. Unemployed coal miners looted over \$100,000 worth of coal each day from their former mine in Pennsylvania, confident in the knowledge that a jury of their peers—fellow miners—would not convict. Trotskyites and a business-sponsored "citizen's army" clashed in the streets of Minneapolis in 1934, leaving two dead amid a throng of 20,000 protesters. Popular sentiment questioned whether the crash demonstrated the incapacity of democracies to resolve economic crises. Hanging over all was the specter of communism: the Bolshevik revolution had taken place a mere 13 years earlier.

The Congress responded to this national tumult with halfhearted measures and gridlock. "Both political parties," wrote William Dodd, "have been bankrupted." Faced with an unparalleled national crisis, Congress failed to produce a single piece of meaningful legislation. Many observers remarked that a shift to totalitarianism might be just what the country required to break the paralysis—

"Of course, we all realize that dictatorships and even semi-dictatorships in peace time are quite contrary to the spirit of American institutions and all that," remarked Barron's. "And yet—well, a genial and lighthearted dictator might be a relief from the pompous futility of such a Congress as we have recently had." A popular topic of the day was whether the country was about to experience a violent revolution.

It is in this context that FDR and the New Deal took place. The oft-repeated observation that FDR did not seek to replace capitalism, but to rescue it makes sense in light of the rapidly-deteriorating environment in which he took the helm of the nation. Modern skeptics err in dismissing this as subterfuge, as if Roosevelt secretly harbored communistic tendencies. The reason we are so quick to dismiss Roosevelt's rescue of capitalism is because we cannot imagine its tenuous condition in the early 1930's, given our contemporary experience of capitalism as the undefeated victor over communism following the end of the Cold War.

Leuchtenburg navigates the glossary of new programs and departments formed by Roosevelt, Frankfurter, and Tugwell over the course of four administrations. It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive review of these agencies, but a few highlights should be recognized:

- The Home Owner's Loan Corporation (HOLC) refinanced 1 in every 5 private dwellings in America, saving a generation from foreclosure.
- The Civil Works Administration (CWA) invented jobs for over 4.2 million unemployed Americans in the span of 30 days.
- The National Youth Association (NYA) put over 2.6 million unemployed young people to work in a novel

combination of vocational training and public service.

- The Works Progress Administration (WPA) employed 3 million people.
- Social Security ended senior poverty within a single generation.
- The Public Works Administration (PWA) constructed 70% of America's new schools, 65% of its courthouses, city halls, and sewage plants, and 35% of its hospitals.
- The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) effectively ended poverty in the Tennessee Valley—a region beset with malaria, soil depletion, deforestation, and persistently low incomes. It developed cheap electricity, modern home appliances, fertilizers to improve crop regeneration, rotation training to help farmers increase yield, improved fish and wildlife habitats, and lifted the entire region out of poverty.
- The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) brought electricity to the nation. Prior to its founding, 9 out of 10 farms had no electricity; by 1950, only 1 out of 10 lacked power.
- The Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) provided price supports and foreclosure relief for farmers, causing farm income to increase 50%.
- The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) reduced the ability to companies and financiers to manipulate the stock market for their private gain. It forced companies to subject their financial statements to the government for review and approval prior to listing on a public exchange, and placed shadowy financial transactions under federal regulation.
- Glass-Steagall separated commercial and investment banking, ensuring that banks would be prevented from using depositors' savings as collateral in high-risk ventures (a law that did an admirable job preventing financial meltdown until Bill Clinton and Barack Obama's financial chiefs eliminated it in the late 1990's.)
- The National Recovery Administration (NRA) ended industrial child labor and protected workers' rights to collective bargaining. It eliminated sweatshops, created minimum wages, and created an estimated 2 million jobs in the process.
- The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) guaranteed bank deposits and effectively put an end to the dissolution of financial institutions across the nation.

As a result of these and a host of other programs, Roosevelt infused the nation with a new sense of optimism it had not felt since before the crash. Although unemployment did not return to pre-crisis levels until World War II, people began to believe once more that good times would return. Far from seeming aloof and far-off, government showed that it could fulfill a direct role in the lives of Americans by creating economic opportunities for them to participate in the life of the nation—whether by teaching in rural schools, opening up a textile mill in the Tennessee Valley, or opening a bank protected by federal deposit insurance. So great was the sense of renewal that the Republican party got trounced in Roosevelt's first mid-term elections—an unheard-of phenomenon for the opposition party mid-way through a new president's first term.

And what of Roosevelt, himself? Was he a closet socialist who believed in the power of government to mandate the nuances of citizens' lives from a central planning agency in Washington? Hardly. Above all else, Roosevelt was a pragmatist. Although the dire state of the nation at the time of his inauguration may have necessitated bold action, FDR was under no illusions as to the need for trial-and-error in solving the nation's woes--

“All of this is perfectly terrible because it is all pure theory, when you come down to it... We must lay hold of the fact that economic laws are not made by nature. They are made by human beings.”

And, in another instance—

“Better the occasional faults of a Government that lives in a spirit of charity than the constant omission of a Government frozen in the ice of its own indifference.”

Henry Hopkins, the head of the Works Progress Administration echoed such sentiments when he observed—

“I am for experimenting... in various parts of the country, trying out schemes which are supported by reasonable people and see if they work. If they do not work, the world will not come to an end.”

Even First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt remarked upon the limits of government in 1939—

“[The programs of the New Deal] helped but they did not solve the fundamental problems... I never believed the Federal government could solve the whole problem. It bought us time to think.”

Another misconception concerns the degree to which the Roosevelt administration was enamored by the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes. Certainly, at the present moment (2011), Keynesian economics have become an acid test of one’s fiscal purity. Either one is for balanced budgets, we are told, or else one is for wasteful spending in the name of priming the economic pump. It should come as little surprise that the architects of the New Deal experimented with the concepts of both fiscal stimulus as well as austerity measures in their attempts to reboot the economy.

Hopkins, Eccles, and Ickes argued that when private investment fell, government had to spend more. Doing so would lessen the severity of boom-bust cycles which characterized advanced capitalist economies. “The Government,” intoned Marriner Eccles, “must be the compensatory agent in this economy; it must unbalance its budget during deflation and create surpluses in periods of great business activity.” (p.245) Despite this, Eccles was largely unfamiliar with Keynesian theory. Fiscal stimulus and fiscal austerity were but levers which could be tried and discarded as necessary. Indeed, when Roosevelt made sharp reductions in public spending projects in his second term to address the deficit question, it plunged the economic back into a tailspin—and he once more turned on the spigot of federal spending. This is but another example of how the administration elevated the pragmatic over the dogmatic. Roosevelt had a deep aversion to subscribing whole-heartedly to any economic theory—

“Total commitment was required, and total commitment he would not give. The Keynesian formula for gaining prosperity by deliberately creating huge deficits year after year seemed to defy common sense. Roosevelt was willing to countenance limited, emergency spending...” (p. 264)

Even when Roosevelt sanctioned huge fiscal expenditures during such emergency measures, he nearly always did so in a limited manner.

Consider the creation of the Civil Works Administration (CWA), a federal operation designed as an emergency rescue for unemployed Americans about to enter the winter of 1933. CWA paid minimum wages to Americans culled from the ranks of the unemployed. It invented jobs for over 4 million people within the span of about 30 days. It built or improved 500,000 miles of roads, 40,000 schools, 3,500 playgrounds and athletic fields, and 1,000 airports. Workmen renovated Montana’s State Capitol Building, and built Pittsburgh’s Cathedral of Learning. It put 50,000 teachers to work keeping rural schools open, hired 3,000 artists and writers, and, all told, pumped a billion dollars of new purchasing power into the economy by giving Americans the work they so desperately needed.

But Roosevelt was alarmed at the sheer cost of maintaining such a program, and ended it as quickly as possible. Leuchtenburg writes—

“[Roosevelt] feared he was creating a permanent class of reliefers whom he might never get off the government payroll. If CWA were continued... it would ‘become a habit with the country... We must not take the position that we are going to have permanent depression in this country.’” By early April, the CWA had all but disbanded, and had fired over 4 million workers.

Indeed, such concerns over the long-term effect of providing what was meant as temporary relief were shared by many New Deal architects, contrary to the thinking by modern conservatives that FDR cynically engineered a generation that would be forever dependent upon Democratic administrations. Roosevelt and his lieutenant, Harry Hopkins believed that charity sapped worker morale. “What I seek is the abolition of relief altogether,” Roosevelt wrote to Colonel House in 1934. “I cannot say so out loud yet but I hope to be able to substitute work for relief.” In January, 1935, Roosevelt proposed a large emergency public employment program. Those who enrolled would receive less than prevailing private wages so as not to “encourage the rejection of opportunities for private employment.” Charity, Roosevelt warned Congress, was “a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit... The Federal Government must and shall quit this business of relief.” Vice-President Garner warned Hopkins that he did not like the implications of WPA officials referring to reliefers as “clients.”

Roosevelt's focus on working-class America, his subjection of financial markets to federal regulation, and his redistributive tax reforms made him the target of deep resentment among the upper classes—

“Many of the nation’s wealthy were almost incoherent with rage at President Roosevelt. They refused to say his name, but referred to him as “that man” or “he”. One of Roosevelt’s wealthy neighbors, Howland Spencer, hated the President so much that he exiled himself in the Bahamas and returned only after the Republicans won the congressional elections in 1946. Terrified by the prospect of confiscatory taxation, the wealthy viewed Roosevelt as a reckless leveler. Accustomed to having their authority unchallenged, businessmen resented the rising empires of government and labor. Many businessmen were openly defiant.” (p. 176-177)

On the opposite end of the spectrum, working-class Americans increasingly viewed Roosevelt as an ally. One worker put it: “Mr. Roosevelt is the only man we ever had in the White House who would understand that my boss is a sonofabitch.” And it wasn’t only working-class whites who flocked beneath the banner of the administration. By 1932, Republicans began observing that African-Americans were abandoning them in favor of the Democratic party. “They’re getting tired of Lincoln,” remarked one observer. Prior to the New Deal, black wards predominantly voted Republican; by 1938, nearly 90% of them were pro-Roosevelt.

Leuchtenburg weaves a solid narrative of the causes and effects of the New Deal. The account suffers in places from an excessive examination of the aforementioned alphabet-soup of agencies. In the process, the reader is momentarily unsure of the actual effects of these agencies, and it is only by careful cross-referencing that their impact upon the economic health of the nation may be understood.

Dan Gorman says

3/17/2017: 4 stars. Excellent classic history of the New Deal. Leuchtenburg is a talented writer in that mid-twentieth-century urbane newspaperman way. He discusses African American and civil rights history to a laudable degree, but few women aside from Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins appear in the book. Leuchtenburg faults Roosevelt for being too cautious and too focused with deflationary politics in the early years of the New Deal, but praises Roosevelt's later inflationary spending (the author is a Keynesian, alright). The author also shows how the New Deal's initiatives sometimes backfired, as when Southern farmers (especially African Americans) were driven off their land because of new land use regulations. At the same time, Leuchtenburg highlights the creativity and experimentation of the Roosevelt administration officials, particularly the leftist Agriculture Secretary and future Vice President Henry Wallace.

10/25/2018: Downgraded to 3 stars. Leuchtenburg does highlight themes and demographic changes in the African American experience, but he does not profile a single African American leader of note in this period. The omission of gender issues from this book, not to mention the inattention to Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, is even more glaring on repeat. I agree with Leuchtenburg's wish that Roosevelt had undertaken greater Keynesian economic spending, but Leuchtenburg could have done more to explain how fiscal conservatives had two forms. Some merely resisted government spending; this was true for a number of Democrats as well as Republicans. Other fiscal conservatives in the two parties, however, were what Martin Sklar calls "corporate liberals" — supporting government regulation of the economy so as to decrease ruthless competition, but still prioritizing the private sector above statist central planning. Finally, the book is dry, listing one bill after another, and not capturing much of the cultural changes happening beyond the realms of labor and politics.

Frank Stein says

A near perfect synopsis of the New Deal and of Franklin Roosevelt's central place in constructing it.

Published back in 1962, Leuchtenberg's book proves itself to be a preeminent example of old-fashioned political history. He of course focuses on the big names and the big players, yet he also draws a disturbing picture of the state of the country they aimed to transform. By 1932 Milo Reno and the Farmers' Holiday Association had called for a national farm strike; they eventually dynamited factories and dairies and blocked roads to cities with spiked telegraph poles. Jobless coal miners in Pennsylvania had sunk their own coal shafts and "bootlegged" millions of dollars worth of coal. Judges across the country who tried to foreclose properties were threatened with lynching. In one Colorado county 200 taxpayers threatened to go on strike unless county officials took a 10% salary cut. All this while national unemployment reached 25%. By 1933 it seemed like the country was spiraling out of control.

Leuchtenburg is right that Roosevelt's greatest success after he was inaugurated was in restoring confidence and faith in the American system. His fireside chats (the first one, just a week after he assumed office, explained the intricacies of fractional reserve banking in simple language) gave people hope that somebody was looking out for their interests, after Hoover had retreated into the silence out of fear.

Overall, Leuchtenberg is, unsurprisingly, a rabid fan of most of the New Deal programs (his favorite is perhaps the Rural Electrification Administration), yet he also recognizes when Roosevelt's "Brain Trust" intellectuals went too far in trying to manage the economy precisely to their whims. For instance, in 1938 the Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace, concerned overwhelmingly with keeping crop prices high, stated without irony that one more year of large harvests and the country "would be sunk." He aimed again to limit production and raise food prices for consumers. Leuchtenberg also notes that Roosevelt's attempt to create a "broker government," which mediated between large interest groups (farmers, labor, business, etc.) further alienated some groups (mainly "Negroes"), while it inflated the power of others (John Lewis's CIO, basically created by the Wagner Labor Act of 1935, became the single largest donor of funds to Roosevelt's campaign by just the next year).

While I disagree with many of the policies touted by Leuchtenburg, I couldn't recommend a better, more comprehensive account of our country's politics during what were undoubtedly the most crucial years of the 20th century.

Larissa says

Vivid, written like a script for a James Cagney movie. Read all about the founding of our great, familiar social security institutions and banking legislation and the strange ones that didn't last, like the National Recovery Administration, with its code agreements. Great language (John Lewis of the American Federation of Labor: "It ill behooves one who has supped at Labor's table to curse with equal fervor and fine impartiality at labor and its adversaries when they become locked in a deadly embrace.") Want to know more about Supreme Ct Justice Louis Brandeis and "anti-bigness"! Useful, instructive to read right now. More or less supports P Krugman when he warns that the New Deal didn't work b/c it didn't go far enough.

Samuel says

Franklin Delano Roosevelt has been regarded as one of the most beloved presidents of the 20th century (I mean, he's on the dime; his cousin Teddy Roosevelt--while one of the four faces on Mount Rushmore--has no coin to speak of). While most Americans see him and his New Deal policies as the beginnings of the American socialist state and excessive government spending, he ran his initial campaign against Herbert Hoover criticizing the Republican administration for spending too much and calling for a reduction in government spending! While he was the first Democratic candidate to successfully capture the majority of the African-American vote convincing them that their debt to the party of Lincoln had been paid sufficiently, FDR took no actions to dismember the Jim Crow legislation that kept African-Americans as second class citizens in much of the country. A true politician, FDR had an uncanny ability to say one thing, do another, and come out looking like he was a completely honest, straightforward, and upstanding individual throughout the entire process.

Leuchtenburg does a commendable job revealing the complex nuances of the president that broke the two-term rule (prompting a constitutional amendment to formally limit presidents to two terms after his death) and otherwise radically redefined the role of both the government and the president in American life. FDR's personality and physical handicap are discussed quite thoroughly; the fact that he was never publicly photographed in his wheelchair until after meeting with some maimed WWII vets in the early 1940s is another fascinating dimension to this personality. This book is full of interesting facts and balances well between institutional primary sources and a synthetic appraisal of secondary sources previously written about FDR and his New Deal. While the success of the New Deal continues to be obfuscated by the economic boost of World War II, American memory by and large holds Roosevelt's proactive legislation in a positive light especially by comparison to the villainized Hoover whose use of the National Guard to put down the Bonus Army of WWI veterans who marched on Washington to get their service bonuses when they needed them (more than a decade earlier than their contractual agreement). This is an interesting and pivotal moment in American history and this book captures the political and legislative climate very well.

*(pp. 1-196)

John King says

I enjoyed this book very much. It shows the chances President Roosevelt was willing to take, with or without support from his own party and supporters. He was of the mind that he had to do something to make things better for people and if what he proposed did that, it was a success.

There were so many parallels to today's economic crisis that at first it's easy, but then you realize it's that we just never learn our lesson. Many of the regulations that were put through due to the New Deal to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past were removed by politicians with the help of big business over the last forty years. Look where that got the working and middle class.

Reading parts of the book you would think that you were reading a current synopsis of the financial collapse in present day America, one of them being "At a time when millions lived close to starvation, and some even had to scavenge for food, bankers like Wiggin and corporation executives like George Washington Hill of American Tobacco drew astronomical salaries and bonuses. Yet many of these men, including Wiggin, manipulated their investments so that they paid no income tax at all." Sound familiar?

Judy says

This book was published in 1963 and it won the 1964 Bancroft Prize and the 1964 Francis Parkman Prize. I first read this book in college many, many, many years ago and I like to reread it every few years. I think that this is one of the best one-volume examinations of the crisis that existed when Franklin D. Roosevelt was inaugurated in March, 1933 and vividly describes how his administration attempted to deal with economic collapse of the Great Depression. The narrative traces the evolution of significant New Deal programs and features the major personalities of the period. In my opinion, this book is well written and absolutely fascinating.

David Bates says

In the depths of the emergency the political institutions of the United States were transformed. Under Franklin Roosevelt the Presidency eclipsed Congress, the federal government inserted itself deeply into economic affairs, and citizens learned to think differently about what government could and should accomplish. A mythic quality hangs over the events of the decade; the first hundred days of Roosevelt's first term, the flood of experimental legislation, the growing impatience and radicalism that spurred a second wave of reform in 1935, triumphant re-election followed by renewed recession and steadily increasing political headwinds. "It is the stuff of good history, this" wrote Henry Steel Commager and Richard Brandon Morris in the Editor's Preface of William Leuchtenberg's 1963 *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, "The sun rises on a stricken field; the new leader raises the banner and waves it defiantly at the foe; his followers crowd about him, armies of recruits emerge from the shadows and throng into the ranks . . . soon the sound of battle and the shouts of victory are heard in the distance. In perspective we can see that it was not quite like that, but that was the way it seemed at the time." If with a generation of hindsight it was harder to make out the significance of the New Deal, more perplexing to trace its twisting path and motivations, it was only a mark that memory was giving way to historical study and revision. Subsequent scholarship questioned the role of the New Deal in meeting the economic crisis, what forces guided it, and the significance of its legacy.

Leuchtenberg's 1963 work synthesized the first generation of scholarship on the New Deal. Leuchtenberg cautiously hedges in his evaluation of the merits of any particular New Deal program, recognizing both the successes and failures of Roosevelt's unprogrammatic, mercurial policy style. More important to his narrative than policy is the psychology of the nation and Roosevelt's management of it to maintain political support. The account opens with the devastation of the Depression and the hopeless tone of President

Hoover's leadership. As Republican Secretary of State Henry Stimson noted of Hoover at the end of his term, “[i]t was like sitting in a bath of ink to sit in his room.” Roosevelt's surprisingly vigorous leadership cut a bright contrast by comparison, marking a revolutionary departure in the trajectory of both the crisis and the State. Indeed, “[l]ike the leader of a colony which had just achieved independence, the President had to create an entirely new government,” Leuchtenberg tells us, providing coverage of the kaleidoscopic array of advisors and agency heads as they defined the new administration. While the economic mobilization for World War I provided the main relevant base of experience, the New Deal's tone was divorced from earlier Progressive Era policy that sought to reform men as well as institutions. As Rexford Tugwell put it, the economic crisis was economic, and in its material aims, “the New Deal is attempting to do nothing to people, and does not seek at all to alter their way of life, their wants and desires.” This materialistic aspect is important enough to Leuchtenberg that he spends almost an entire chapter developing it, underlining the absence of any totalitarian impulse among New Dealers, serving his ultimate thesis that the New Deal helped America avoid poisonous extremist movements. The economic progress of the New Deal might have been incomplete, and many of programs ineffective or unwise, but in ameliorating despair and hopelessness, and in maneuvering to maintain his dominant political position, Roosevelt marginalized the “demagogues and radicals who feasted on the popular discontent.” “At a time when democracy was under attack elsewhere in the world, the achievements of the New Deal were especially significant” Leuchtenberg concludes, crediting Roosevelt for preserving faith in democracy both at home and abroad.

Mark Bowles says

A. Synopsis:

1. No other president since Washington had dominated his times like FDR. IT is the conservative character of the New Deal and of its leader that is most impressive. The “Roosevelt Revolution” was the culmination of a half century of historical development. While an isolationist at heart he soon realized that what happened in Italy, Germany, and Japan affected American freedom and democracy.
2. The Great Depression is seen here as one of the turning points of American history. The argument here is that the 6 years from 1933 to 1938 marked a “greater upheaval in American institutions than any similar period in our history, save perhaps for the impact of the South on the Civil War.” The main subject of this book is the “Roosevelt Revolution:” the devastation wrought by the depression and the remarkable improvisation of new political and social institutions to cope with it.
3. This is a very positive view of FDR and depicts his administration as discontinuous with previous events.

B. Winter of despair:

1. The interval between FDR's election in November and his inauguration in March 1933 was the most harrowing 4 months of the Depression. Who was to blame? There was a tremendous loss of faith in the American business community. Questions were also raised about capitalism itself.

C. The Roosevelt Reconstruction: Retrospect

1. FDR recreated the modern presidency. He restored much of the prestige and power of the office that had been lost in the previous years and took it to a level beyond what TR and WW had done. The White House became the focus of all government and the initiator of action
2. FDR expanded the president's legislative functions. He guided the formation of new bills and Congress began to look to him for guidance.
3. FDR's most important formal contribution was his creation of the Executive Office of the President. Here was placed agencies directly under FDR's control like the Bureau of the Budget. IN later years the NSC, Council of Economic Advisors, and CIA reported to this office. This gave the president the power to uphold the mandate as a one-man branch of our three part government.

4. FDR was a successful administrator because he attracted many highly skilled men to Washington. His periods of indecision were spent observing how rival theories were argued.
5. The first president to reach the people directly over the radio.
6. His administration allowed more than just WASP's into office. Blacks were brought into the New Deal coalition.
7. FDR greatly expanded the federal government. This gave the federal government the power to meet further crises. It gained more power over the economy. Government encroached on the prerogatives of business and yet at the same time was regarded as the "savior of capitalism."
8. Reform in this period meant economic reform--not moral.
9. In the 1930s, 19th individualism gave way to a new emphasis on social security and collective action.
10. The broadest goals of the New Deal was to make man's life on earth more tolerable, which might someday lead to a cooperative commonwealth.
