

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Great Depression

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When historians were asked a couple of years ago to grade each of the American presidents, they decided that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was the second-best president of all time—greater even than George Washington—with only Abraham Lincoln ahead of him. Why did he get such a high grade? For a lot of reasons. He served longer than any other president did—more than twelve years. He led the country to victory in World War II. He helped to found the United Nations. But probably most important, he brought the country through the worst depression it has ever known and made the national government in Washington much more important in our lives.

When Franklin Roosevelt became president on March 4, 1933, this country was in the worst depression it has ever known. Millions upon millions of men and women, at least one fourth of the nation's workers, had lost their jobs. In a city such as Asheville, 90 percent of the men who worked at crafts like bricklaying lost their jobs. Still worse, 95 percent of the musicians became unemployed. A few Americans had so little to eat that they starved to death, and many others no longer had any money to pay for their homes. They had to live in shacks, even sometimes in caves. The Great Depression was particularly hard on African Americans, who were often the first to be fired and the last to receive help.

Today, we assume that in such an awful time the national government should step in to help out. But in those days, more than half a century ago, the country was not used to that idea. As a result, millions of Americans had no one to provide them food or a chance to work.

Franklin Roosevelt wanted to change that. When the Democratic Party nominated him for president in the summer of 1932, he flew to the convention in Chicago to accept the nomination in person, something that other presidential candidates had never done. Not many people traveled in airplanes then either, and by doing so he showed that he was a man of courage who would not let the fact that he was crippled by polio limit him in any way. When he got to Chicago, he told the convention, "I pledge to you, I pledge to myself, to a new deal for the American people." And during his presidency, especially during his first term, he made it possible for American citizens to earn money working for the government at jobs like repairing roads, and even at jobs like painting pictures or acting in plays.

President Roosevelt was especially concerned about young people. When he took office, millions of young boys and girls in North Carolina and other states could not afford to go to school but were forced to look for work. In North Carolina, many children worked long, hard hours in mills for very little pay. The New Deal helped to stop many of the abuses of child labor in America. One of the president's programs, the Civilian Conservation Corps, put jobless young men to work in the forests. Many of the fine, tall trees we see in North Carolina today were planted by

the CCC boys, sometimes called “Roosevelt’s forest army.” FDR, as people called the president, also arranged for young people to get part-time jobs so that they could stay in college. One such student, who was able to a government job while he was attending Duke University in Durham, later became president of the United States: Richard M. Nixon.

Roosevelt also wanted to make permanent changes that would go on even after the Great Depression had ended. He thought it was wrong for people to work hard all their lives and then have to go to a poorhouse when they were old. He asked Congress to put together a plan so that a little money was taken and saved each week both from a worker’s pay and from his employer, so that when the worker got old he would have something to live on. That is what we call “social security.” He also thought it was wrong for a worker to lose his job and have no money to feed himself or his family. Congress agreed to another plan that gave a jobless worker money for several months so that he would be secure while he looked for another job. This is what we call “unemployment compensation.” Other changes that began in the 1930s also continued long after Roosevelt died in 1945 and are still here today—the great Tennessee Valley Authority dams, regulation of business, insurance of bank deposits, government help to North Carolina tobacco farmers, big public housing projects in the cities, hot lunches for schoolchildren, and many, many more.

Not all of FDR’s ideas were good ones, and some did not work as well as he had hoped. But he made so many changes that did help people who were down and out that ever since then, we have looked toward the national government in Washington for help in times of trouble. That is a very important reason why historians today rank Franklin Delano Roosevelt as the greatest president of the last century.

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