17 Government in Action: FDR and the Early New Deal

JAMES MACGREGOR BURNS

Franklin Roosevelt swept to power in 1932, carrying every state but six in the electoral college and gathering 23 million popular votes in contrast to Hoover's 16 million. It was a bitter defeat for the Republicans. But the election was even more disappointing for Norman Thomas and William Z. Foster, candidates for the Socialist and Communist parties, respectively. In this year of distress, with some 16 million people unemployed, Thomas collected 882,000 votes and Foster only 103,000.

Roosevelt was perhaps the most controversial president the United States ever had. For millions of Americans, he was a folk hero: a courageous statesman who saved a crippled nation from almost certain collapse and whose New Deal salvaged the best features of democratic capitalism while establishing unprecedented welfare programs for the nation. For others, he was a tyrant, a demagogue who used the Depression to consolidate his political power, whereupon he dragged the country zealously down the road to socialism. In spite of his immense popular appeal, Roosevelt became the hated enemy of much of the nation's business and political community. Conservatives denounced him as a Communist. Liberals said he was too conservative. Communists castigated him as a tool of Wall Street. And Socialists dismissed him as a reactionary. "He caught hell from all sides," recorded one observer, because few knew how to classify his political philosophy or his approach to reform. Where, after all, did he fit ideologically? Was he for capitalism or against it? Was his New Deal revolutionary or reactionary? Was it "creeping socialism" or a bulwark against socialism? Did it lift the country out of the Depression, or did it make the disaster worse?

In fact, as Roosevelt scholar James MacGregor Burns points out in the following selection, FDR was essentially nonideological. He rejected absolutes in favor of bold and practical experimentation. And the New Deal itself, as one scholar explained, was not a coherent, far-sighted program of reform, but "a series of improvisations" that reflected Roosevelt's empirical temper. He compared himself to a quarterback in a football game, "calling a new play after he saw how the last one turned out." There may not have been an ideology or philosophy behind FDR's New Deal. But "there was a loose collection of values," Burns says. These consisted of "Roosevelt's warm humanitarianism, his belief that the needy must be helped, that [the federal] government must step in when private institutions could not do the job."

And both private institutions and impoverished state governments were totally incapable of dealing with the Depression, the greatest economic disaster in American history, which threatened the very survival of the nation. As the winter of 1932–1933 approached, the crisis deepened. As Burns says elsewhere, "Business activity dropped to between a quarter and a third of 'normalcy' and one worker out of five—perhaps one out of four—was jobless." Those who had jobs were scarcely better off. In Manhattan sweatshops, women who lined slippers earned just over one dollar in a nine-hour day. Young women who sewed aprons made only twenty cents a day. "There is not a garbage-dump in Chicago which is not diligently haunted by the hungry," journalist and critic Edmund Wilson observed.

Out in the farmlands, rural families were also poverty-stricken and desperate. To stay warm, they burned their corn, which was cheaper than coal. When banks attempted to foreclose on farms, desperate rural folk brandished shotguns and hangman's nooses to drive the deputy sheriffs away. When a farm was auctioned, a neighbor would bid a dime and give the farm back to its owner. Farm leaders in Nebraska threatened to march thousands of protestors to the state capitol and destroy it if relief was denied. In Washington, D.C., officials warned that a revolution was building in the countryside.

Against this frightening background, fifty-one-year-old Franklin Delano Roosevelt prepared to speak to the nation in his inaugural address. Stricken by polio in 1921, the president-elect was unable to walk. He wore iron braces on his legs and gripped the arms of his sons in order to stand erect. This sets the scene for the gripping story Burns has to tell about the early New Deal, 1933–1934. It is the story of a crippled president who tried to save his crippled nation by bold and brilliant improvisations.

GLOSSARY

AGRICULTURAL ADJUSTMENT ADMINISTRATION (AAA) A New Deal agency designed to relieve Depression-wracked farmers, who suffered from falling prices and mounting crop surpluses. Established in 1933, the AAA subsidized farm prices until they reached a point of "parity." The AAA also sought to reduce agricultural surpluses by telling farmers how much to plant (acreage allotments) and paying them for what they did not grow. Declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1935, the AAA was superceded by the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act.

BERLE, JR., ADOLF A. A clergyman's son, Berle was a valuable member of FDR's Brain Trust. Berle was the author of *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (1932) and worked to win the support of the business community for the New Deal.

BRAIN TRUST Special group of advisers led by eminent political economists Raymond Moley, Rexford Guy Tugwell, and Adolf A. Berle, Jr.

BYRD, HARRY F. Conservative Democratic senator from Virginia, Byrd often opposed the New Deal and advocated a return to a balanced budget and greater states' rights.

CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS (CCC) Created in 1933, the CCC employed over two million young people, who came mainly from urban families on relief, to work in the nation's parks and recreational facilities. CCC employees received thirty dollars per month to plant trees, build trails, and work on soil conservation.

CIVIL WORKS ADMINISTRATION (CWA) Created in 1933, with Harry Hopkins at its head, the CWA put over four million people to work on "light" projects such as building roads and playgrounds. In its one-year existence, the CWA provided money for many unskilled workers who, because of the Depression, were unemployed and desperate.

CHURCHILL, WINSTON In the spring of 1940, when World War II in Europe was only seven months old, Churchill replaced the disgraced Neville Chamberlain as the United Kingdom's prime minister. Churchill's courage bolstered Great Britain during its darkest hours when the bombing of the German *Luftwaffe* almost destroyed the country.

GARNER, JOHN NANCE Former speaker of the House of Representatives, this Texan served as FDR's vice president from 1933 to 1941. Garner split with Roosevelt over the administration's failure to balance the budget and its refusal to oppose the labor movement's sit-down strikes.

GLASS, CARTER Conservative Democratic senator from Virginia, Glass frequently opposed FDR's monetary policies. Glass was a tenacious foe of the NRA, which he believed promoted monopolies and kept consumer prices high.

GREEN, WILLIAM President of the American Federation of Labor, Green was a respected leader of the organized labor movement in the 1930s.

HOPKINS, HARRY Director of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and later secretary of commerce, Hopkins was one of Roosevelt's closest and most trusted advisors. Although weakened by cancer, Hopkins vigorously organized the Cabinet to prepare the nation for war.

HUGHES, CHARLES EVANS A former governor of New York and moderate Supreme Court justice, Hughes was the nominee of the Republican party in the presidential election of 1916. He later became President Harding's secretary of state and served as Chief Justice to the Supreme Court from 1930 to 1941.

ICKES, HAROLD "Honest Harold" served as Roosevelt's secretary of the interior and head of the Public Works Administration (PWA).

JOHNSON, HUGH Director of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), Johnson helped devise voluntary codes of fair competition and used public relations and propaganda to persuade employers to adhere to them.

LEWIS, JOHN L. Head of the United Mine Workers, Lewis was the driving force behind the creation of the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO). Although a lifelong Republican, he campaigned for Roosevelt in 1936 and brought most of the labor movement into the Democratic camp. Lewis argued that "capitalism need not be uprooted, but its fruits must be more equally distributed."

MOLEY, RAYMOND A former Columbia University college professor, Moley was a shrewd and valuable member of FDR's Brain Trust. He also served as assistant secretary of state. Moley admired Roosevelt's courageous efforts to end the Depression, the greatest economic crisis in American history. Moley said FDR "was like the fairy-story prince who didn't know how to shudder."

NATIONAL RECOVERY ADMINISTRATION (NRA) Established in 1933, this New Deal agency sought to end unemployment by devising "industrial fair practice codes." It often impeded competition by authorizing production quotas and price fixing. In 1935, the Supreme Court declared the NRA unconstitutional.

PERKINS, FRANCES The first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet, Perkins was Roosevelt's secretary of labor from 1933 to 1945. She mediated bitter labor disputes and helped write the Social Security Act of 1935, the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, and other important New Deal legislation.

PUBLIC WORKS ADMINISTRATION (PWA) Created in 1933, with Harold Ickes at its head, the PWA focused on "heavy" projects such as building bridges and schools.

ROGERS, WILL This popular humorist was an astute observer of the American way of life. His sardonic assessments of political leaders made him into a legend.

TENNESSEE VALLEY AUTHORITY (TVA) In 1933, Congress created this public corporation, which focused on regional planning. The TVA completed a dam at Muscle Shoals, Alabama, on the Tennessee River, and improved or built many other dams, which all but ended flooding in the region. The TVA also generated and sold inexpensive electricity to thousands of rural Americans who had never had it before.

TUGWELL, REXFORD GUY A valuable member of Roosevelt's Brain Trust, Tugwell was an expert on agriculture.

W*ashington, D.C., March 4, 1933:* Perched on the icy branches of the gaunt trees overlooking the Capitol's east front, they waited for the ceremony to which they had no tickets: an old man in ancient, patched-up green tweeds; a pretty young redhead in a skimpy coat; an older woman in rags, her face lined with worry and pain; a college boy whose father was jobless. They watched the crowd below as rumors drifted through that Roosevelt had been shot, that the whole area was covered by army machine guns. The older woman prayed on her tree limb: "No more trouble, please, God. No more trouble."

They watched as dignitaries straggled down the Capitol steps: Herbert Hoover, morose and stony-faced; Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, his white beard fluttering a bit in the cold wind; Vice President [John Nance] Garner, shivering without an overcoat; finally Franklin D. Roosevelt, moving down the steps with agonizing slowness on the arm of his son James. They watched as the new President took the oath of office, his hand lying on the 300-year-old Roosevelt family Bible, open at Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians: "though I have faith . . . and have not charity, I am nothing." And they watched as, still unsmiling, he gripped the rostrum firmly and looked out at the crowd.

"I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our Nation impels." The cold wind riffled the pages of his text.

"This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper." The President's words rang out across the plaza. "So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."

The great crowd stood in almost dead silence. Chin outthrust, face grave, Roosevelt went on: "In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory."

The crowd began to respond as it caught the cadence of the phrases: "The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. . . .

"This Nation asks for action, and action now. Our greatest primary task is to put people to work." The throng stirred to these words. The President gave the core of what would become the first New Deal programs. He touched on foreign policy only vaguely and briefly.

"In the field of world policy I would dedicate this Nation to the policy of the good neighbor—the neighbor who resolutely respects himself and, because he does so, respects the rights of others. . . ."

He hoped that the Constitution, with its normal balance of presidential and congressional power, would be adequate to the crisis. But if Congress did not respond to his proposals or act on its own, and if the national emergency continued, "I shall ask the Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis—broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe." The American people wanted direct, vigorous action.

"They have asked for discipline and direction under leadership. They have made me the present instrument of their wishes. . . ."

As Roosevelt ended, he was still grim; but his face lighted up when the crowd seemed to come to life. The old man in the tree had broken into tears. "It was very, very solemn, and a little terrifying," Eleanor Roosevelt said later to reporters in the White House. "The crowds were so tremendous, and you felt that they would do anything—if only someone would tell them what to do."

Someone would. The new President had no sooner reviewed the inaugural parade and hosted a White House reception for a thousand guests than he swore in his cabinet en masse upstairs in the Oval Room. Washington had come alive with rumor and hope. Even while couples waltzed gaily at the inaugural balls, haggard men conferred hour after hour in the huge marble buildings along Pennsylvania Avenue. Republican holdovers and Democrats newly arrived in Washington sat side by side, telephoning anxious bankers, drawing up emergency orders, all the while feeling the financial pulse of the nation and world. . . .

At the center of the action sat Franklin Roosevelt, presiding, instructing, wheedling, persuading, enticing, pressuring, negotiating, manipulating, conceding, horse-trading, placating, mediating—leading and following, leading and misleading. People marveled how the President, his cigarette holder deployed more jauntily than ever, appeared to bounce and skip through the day, despite his inability to walk, as he punctuated solemn conferences with jests, long and somewhat imaginary stories, and great booming laughter. While still in bed in the morning, his large torso looming over legs that hardly ribbed the sheets, he spouted ideas, questions, instructions to his aides. Wheeled over to the west wing, he swung into his office chair for long hours of visitors, letters, telephone calls, emergency sessions.

Calvin Coolidge had allegedly disposed of visitors by a simple formula: "Don't talk back to 'em." Roosevelt used talk as a tool of influence, outtalking his advisers, outtalking department heads, even outtalking visiting senators.

The President soon proved himself an artist in government—in his fine sense of timing, his adroit application of pressure, his face-to-face persuasiveness, his craft in playing not only foes but friends off against one another. Like a creative artist, Frances Perkins said, he would begin his picture "without a clear idea of what he intends to paint or how it shall be laid out upon the canvas, and then, as he paints, his plan evolves out of the material he is painting." He could think and feel his way into political situations with imagination, intuition, insight.

These traits dominated his policy thinking as well as his political calculating—and with less success. People close to Roosevelt were dismayed by his casual and disorderly intellectual habits. To Adolf Berle his judgments of people and ideas were "primarily instinctive and not rational," his learning came not from books but from people. He read not books but newspapers, perhaps half a dozen before breakfast—devoured them "like a combine eating up grain," a friend noted. He was not so much a creator of ideas as a broker of them. He did not assemble his ideas into a comprehensive and ordered program, with priorities and interconnections. Just as he lived each day for itself, as he liked to tell friends, so he appeared to flirt with each idea as it came along.

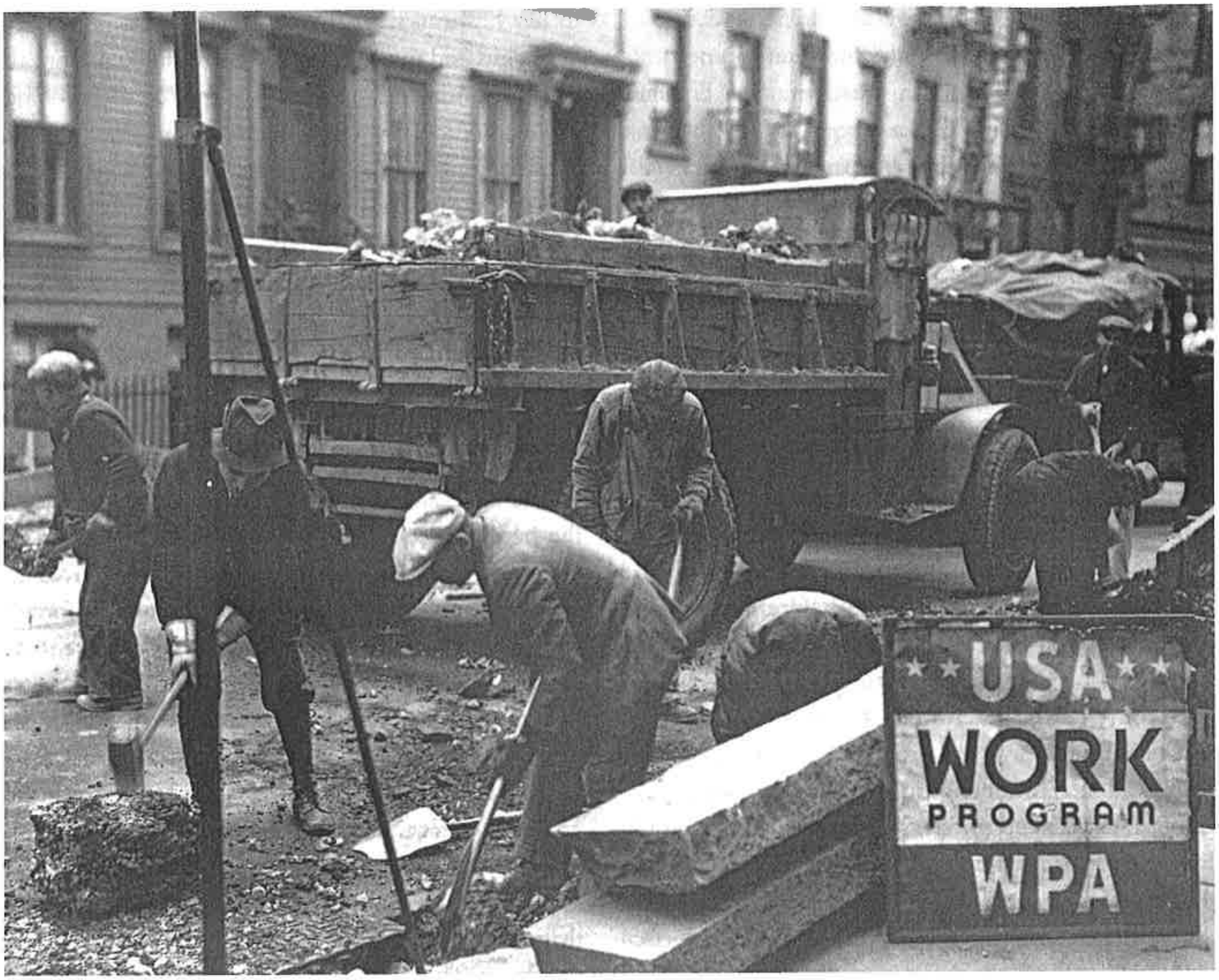
Everything seemed to conspire to fortify these intellectual habits of the new President—his eclectic education and reading, the ideologically divided party he led, the factionalized Congress he confronted, above all the advisers he had chosen and who had chosen him. His chief brain truster during 1933 was Ray Moley. Prickly and hard-driving, the former Columbia professor—now Assistant Secretary of State—shared some of his boss's political shrewdness and opportunism, intuitive judgment, and keenness in evaluating friend and foe. But Roosevelt also talked at length with Berle about banking, railroad, and monetary problems, and Berle's ideas for raising business to a higher level of efficiency and responsibility; with Tugwell about conservation, agriculture, and industrial discipline, and Tugwell's notions of democratic planning of the economy. . . .

Most remarkable of all was that one-woman brain trust, Eleanor Roosevelt—and all the more influential for not being viewed in that role. Through quick visits to her husband while he was still breakfasting in bed, little chits and memos, thick reports infiltrated into the executive offices, the visitors she invited to the White House, and her own influence on public opinion and Washington attitudes, she soon became a penetrating voice for the humanitarian liberal-left. Through a wide correspondence—she received 300,000 pieces of mail the first year—her press conferences and newspaper columns, her speeches and magazine articles, her widely advertised (and criticized) trips to CCC camps and coal mines, she began to build up a potentially powerful constituency of her own. Historian Mary Beard wrote admiringly of her ability to give "inspiration to the married, solace to the lovelorn, assistance to the homemaker, menus to the cook, and help to the educator, direction to the employer, caution to the warrior, and deeper awareness of its primordial force to the 'weaker sex.'" The First Lady also served as a model for other women in Washington government. Her close friend Frances Perkins, with her labor and urban concerns and constituencies, had special access to both Roosevelts, and women . . . learned that they could be, all at the same time, competent, caring, and controversial.

Such was the flux and flow of advice to the President that no one really knew which advisers were influential or why or when. Who was having the President's ear at the moment provoked jealousies worthy of the royal courts of old. The President's mind seemed awesomely accessible—to the kitchen cabinet, to department heads like Ickes and Perkins, to experts coming through Washington. The President would be seen talking animatedly with men regarded by the orthodox—though not necessarily by history—as quacks.

Roosevelt was following no set course, left, right, or center. He was leading by guess and by God. He not only admitted to playing by ear but boasted of it. He was a football quarterback, he told reporters, calling a new play after he saw how the last one turned out. Snap judgments had to be made. But Washington wondered what lay back of the snap judgments—some ideology or philosophy?

Neither of these, but rather a loose collection of values—Roosevelt's warm humanitarianism, his belief



Through the Works Progress Administration, the New Deal put unemployed men like these to work on a variety of projects, from building bridges in the cities to blazing nature trails in the wilderness. The workers shown here are widening a street. This creative agency also employed writers to do guidebooks to the states and artists to draw murals for government buildings. (The Bettmann Archive)

that the needy must be helped, that government must step in when private institutions could not do the job, and that now—in 1933—this meant the federal government. The President also had a fine grasp of political and governmental nuts and bolts. But between the two levels of grand philosophy and policy specifics he would be experimental, eclectic, nonprogrammatic, nondoctrinaire. He would be a broker of ideas as well as of interests and individuals.

As a master broker Roosevelt presided over a grand concert of interests. Labor, farmers, businessmen, investors, unemployed youth, some of the poor—all got a slice of the first New Deal, at least on paper. FDR assumed the role of bipartisan leader, "president of all the people," virtually the national father. He happily cited a Nebraska congressman's definition of the New Deal as an effort "to cement our society, rich and poor, manual worker and brain worker, into a voluntary brotherhood of freemen, standing together, striving together, for the common good of all." Government, he told a convention of bankers, was "essentially the outward expression of the unity and the leadership of all groups." All this seemed a long cry from the "discipline and direction under leadership" he had promised in his inaugural address.

Congress, though more responsive to regional and special interests, quickened to the energy that radiated from the President. Even some Republicans fell over themselves to express support for the Democratic Roosevelt. In many respects the Chief Executive was Chief Legislator. Congress was by no means supine. Conservative Democratic senators like Carter Glass and Harry F. Byrd of Virginia usually opposed the President's bills. Congress as a whole, however, was more positive than even Roosevelt toward the New Deal. Many congressmen wanted more inflation than Roosevelt, ampler spending for people's needs, greater generosity to veterans and farmers, bigger public works, tougher policies toward Wall Street. The President skillfully brokered with the congressional left. For the conservative Democrats in the Senate he had growing hostility. Byrd opposed the AAA, FDR told Tugwell, because, as an apple grower, "he's afraid you'll force him to pay more than ten cents an hour for his apple pickers."

As master broker Roosevelt for a time could stay above the political and ideological battles raging around him. In the distribution of good things—whether government money or patronage jobs or social policy or his smile of approval—he could act as transactional leader within the existing system. He might give TVA to the left and economy to the right, but as a compromising broker rather than ideological leader he would not move decisively left or right. Social justice, he said, "ought not to consist of robbing Peter to pay Paul."

It all seemed to work beautifully for a time. Employment, prices, income all soared in the weeks after the Hundred Days. The industrial production index nearly doubled from March to July. Unemployment fell off from around 15 million at the time of Roosevelt's inaugural to about 11 million in October, a drop in the jobless rate from about 30 to about 22 percent.

Roosevelt's popularity floated high on this first gust of recovery. "If he burned down the capitol," said Will Rogers, "we would cheer and say, 'well, we at least got a fire started anyhow.'"

He won praise from Bertie McCormick's Republican Chicago *Tribune* and William Randolph Hearst's New York *American.* Daily, White House mailmen hauled in sacks of mail, most of it laudatory, some of it fulsome. An adviser found the President happily leafing through a sheaf of this mail. He was sorting letters he had received from British subjects addressing him as "Your Majesty" or "Lord Roosevelt" or in other monarchical terms. Why? He wanted to send them to King George V for his "amusement." History has not recorded that His Majesty was amused.

Psychology overwhelmed economics. In sad reality at least 10 million Americans remained jobless in 1933, and industrial production was still far below that of the prosperity years and even the first year of the depression. In October 3 million families—at least 12 million people—still depended on unemployment relief of about $23 a month, which covered food but left little or nothing for rent and utilities. But people *felt* better—and this was largely Roosevelt's doing. He exuded cheerfulness. He raised hopes and expectations. Above all, he *acted;* for several months he simply dominated the front pages of the nation's newspapers with his speeches, bill-signings, trips, executive orders, pronunciamentos.

His fireside chats carried his buoyant presence directly into home and hearth. "I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking," he said at the start of his first fireside chat in mid-March. "I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be." And he proceeded to do just that, in simple, human terms. Read later in cold print, the chats seemed a bit limp and pedestrian. Read by Roosevelt over the radio, they sounded warm, intimate, homely. Watching him deliver a fireside chat, Frances Perkins sensed that he could actually see the families listening at the other end. "His face would smile and light up as though he were actually sitting on the front porch or in the parlor with them." The President took care not to overuse this device, giving only four chats the first year, at two- or three-month intervals.

Nor did he overstrain the press conference as a way of reaching people. He held these twice a week, to the joy of the White House press corps, but the

FDR was the first president to effectively use mass communication. His radio "fireside chats" comforted Americans during the darkest moments of the Depression. Frances Perkins observed that Roosevelt's "face would smile and light up" when he delivered these broadcasts to the American people. It was "as though he were actually sitting on the front porch or in the parlor with them," Perkins said. (Bettmann/CORBIS)

sessions were often more frustrating than rewarding to the reporters. Roosevelt was a master at withholding information. He spent much of the half hour jovially fencing and parrying with the reporters, or offering them tidbits, or lecturing them. Crowding around the President's gadget-covered desk, the correspondents pressed him hard, with mixed results. Roosevelt wanted to control the flow of information, to create his own sensations, to set his own timing. He was not the first or the last President to do all this; he was simply more effective than most.

Nothing epitomized the New Deal in action better than the National Recovery Act and Administration—epitomized Roosevelt's Concert of Interests, his role of broker, the psychological impact of the Hundred Days, the fundamental problems of the "broker state" at work. As boss of NRA, Roosevelt chose General Hugh Johnson, who was a mass of contradictions himself—outwardly a tough old cavalryman with a leathery face, squint eyes, and a rough bark of a voice, inwardly an amalgam of public commitment, touchy ego, maudlin sentimentality, business savvy, and as clamorous and picturesque as a sideshow barker. The general's first job was to persuade employers to draw up codes of fair competition, a task he attacked like a cavalry charge. Once approved by the President and given the force of law, the codes were designed to discourage wasteful, junglelike competition by setting more orderly pricing and marketing policies, and to benefit workers by establishing higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions, and the end of child labor. As part of the deal, anti-trust policies would be softened so that businessmen could cooperate in setting up the codes. Code signers could affix the "Blue Eagle" label to products and shopwindows.

With Johnson as bugler, the NRA galvanized the American people like a national call to arms. Suddenly the Blue Eagle was everywhere—on magazine covers, in the movies, on girls in chorus lines. (But not on Ford cars; Henry Ford perversely refused to sign the automobile code, then lived up to it anyway.) Rushing from city to city in an army plane, dishing out Boy Scout–style enthusiasm, biting criticism, and wisecracks at every stop, Johnson pressured and coaxed businessmen to endorse the codes, then gathered them in Washington for the signing and orating. As the very personification of recovery, the general staged a monster Blue Eagle parade on New York's Fifth Avenue. For hours he reviewed the parade of a quarter million persons, with another million and a half cheering from the sidewalks. Not since 1917 had Americans savored such a throbbing sense of marching unity.

As the months passed, though, the questions became more and more urgent: Unity for what? Marching to where? Under pressure for quick results, Johnson dealt with the business and labor leaders closest at hand, those who were most vocal, best organized, most skillful in dealing with bureaucrats and politicians. Inevitably he delegated crucial pricing and production decisions to the dominant interests, which often turned out to be the biggest corporations. . . .

Union labor, being organized, fared better under NRA. Section 7(a) of the act boldly proclaimed that employees "shall have the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and shall be free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers" in choosing their representatives. No one seeking or holding a job "shall be required as a condition of employment to join any company union or to refrain from joining, organizing, or assisting a labor organization of his own choosing." Union leaders greeted this as labor's Magna Carta—comparable to Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, said John L. Lewis—and the message was clear: Organize. "THE PRESIDENT WANTS YOU TO JOIN A UNION," placards read. "Forget about injunctions, yellow dog contracts, black lists and the fear of dismissal." But there were complications. President William Green and the American Federation of Labor old guard wanted to organize workers into separate craft unions, even in huge auto plants, while Lewis and the rising young militants around him wanted to organize all the workers in a plant or company or industry into big, solid industrial unions.

Employers bridled at 7(a). Many set up company unions—or "employee representation plans"—which came to be run by company stooges. Labor responded with a rash of strikes during the summer of 1933; by September nearly 300,000 workers had walked out. The "concert of interests" seemed to be emitting discordant noises. "N.R.A. means National Run Around," read a sign hoisted on a picket line. The President set up special boards, trimmed NRA's power, eased Johnson out, and put in more domesticated chiefs, but to little avail; during 1934 the NRA eagle fluttered through heavy weather.

In the end the significance of the National Recovery Administration was not its impact on economic recovery, which was mixed, but its curbing of child labor, sweatshops, and unfair trade practices, its big boost to unionization and its modest protection to consumers. Why then was the NRA finally dismissed as a failure, even privately by Roosevelt himself? Largely because it failed in its highly touted supreme aim of bringing capital, labor, and other interests into a happy concert under the "Broker State," and by artificially raising prices and restricting production, it only marginally helped produce recovery.

If the Concert of Interests did not work, what would? Public works, the companion piece to the NRA, was launched with little of the drama of the Blue Eagle, under the leadership of one of the most committed and stout-hearted New Dealers, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes. Touchy and cantankerous, suspicious of friend and foe—and especially of government contractors— "Honest Harold" did not hesitate to use government snoopers to check on suspect PWA employees and their financial connections. Ickes was in no great hurry; his big projects needed careful planning and budgeting as well as laborious scrutiny by the secretary himself. When the public works program finally got underway it built gas and electric power plants, jails and hospitals, sewage and water systems, bridges, docks, and tunnels—and aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, army and navy airplanes. But the $9 billion that PWA ultimately spent were not central to recovery during Roosevelt's first two years.

Much quicker to get underway was the federal relief program under a lanky young ex-director of private welfare programs named Harry Hopkins, who acted almost as fast as he talked. Appointed Federal Emergency Relief Administrator with a grant of half a billion dollars, Hopkins began authorizing millions of dollars in relief even while he was waiting in a hallway to be moved into his office. Since he could give money only to the state and local public relief agencies, which in turn administered relief programs, he could do little more than monitor the levels of compassion and competence with which programs were carried out. Behind his cynical, wisecracking façade Hopkins was deeply concerned with guarding the dignity, pride, and self-esteem of people on relief. Hence he was eager that the unemployed be given jobs and not merely handouts, but job programs cost more money. Late in 1933 Hopkins persuaded Roosevelt to launch a massive crash program to employ 4 million. In its brief existence, the Civil Works Administration undertook the building or rebuilding of vast numbers of roads, parks, schools, playgrounds, swimming pools, and other "light," short-term projects, in contrast to the PWA's "heavy" jobs.

It was this massive spending on work relief, supplemented by that of the PWA, the TVA, the CCC, the AAA, and other programs, that in 1933 and 1934 provided the central thrust of the early New Deal. It was not really planned that way; Roosevelt was responding not to grand ideology or to grand economics but to sheer human needs that he recognized and that Eleanor Roosevelt, Hopkins, Perkins, and the others brought to him. . . .

The public . . . saw a President who was doing his damnedest, quick to confront specific problems, brilliant at explaining his deeds and hopes, always positive, exuberant, seemingly on top of things. The public saw a leader.

For that public the ultimate test was economic recovery, and the flush of prosperity felt strong by fall 1934, compared to the miseries of March 1933. Could "bucks" be converted to ballots? A third of the senators and all the representatives were up for reelection. Roosevelt's tactic was to stand above the party battle, in line with his bipartisan posture of "leader of all the people." But he helped friendly candidates indirectly, and he posed the campaign issue by asking in a fireside chat, "Are you better off than you were last year? Are your debts less burdensome? Is your bank account more secure? Are your working conditions better? Is your faith in your own individual future more firmly grounded?"

The result was a resounding verdict for the President and his New Deal. Typically Presidents lost ground in midterm congressional elections, but in 1934 Democratic strength rose from 313 to 322 in the House and—incredibly—from 59 to 69 in the Senate. A clutch of highly conservative Republican senators was sacked. "Some of our friends think the majority top-heavy," Garner wrote the President, "but if properly handled, the House and Senate will be all right and I am sure you can arrange that."

Next month a late vote came in from Britain. "The courage, the power and the scale" of Roosevelt's effort, wrote Winston Churchill, "must enlist the ardent sympathy of every country, and his success could not fail to lift the whole world forward into the sunlight of an easier and more genial age." The British Conservative was seeking to place Roosevelt in the broadest sweep of history.

"Roosevelt is an explorer who has embarked on a voyage as uncertain as that of Columbus, and upon a quest which might conceivably be as important as the discovery of the New World."

With the early New Deal behind him, Roosevelt continued his bold experimentation throughout the 1930s. But the treacherous Depression continued to plague Americans. Too many teachers saw hungry children in their classrooms. Too many unemployed men committed "altruistic suicides" because they felt guilty about failing to feed their families. A man who had not had a steady job in over two years lamented: "Sometimes I feel like a murderer. What's wrong with me, that I can't protect my children?" In sum, the New Deal failed to end the Depression—America's entry into World War II would finally do that. Roosevelt had failed to devise a coherent strategy for dealing with the country's economic woes and to restore consumer purchasing power—the key to successful economic recovery.

Nevertheless, the New Deal accomplished many things. It provided relief for millions of Americans, protected the organizing and bargaining rights of labor, and saved the farmers through a system of price supports and acreage allotments. To those who were hurting, the New Deal represented a government that cared. And it made people feel better. Recall what Burns said: "This was largely Roosevelt's doing. He exuded cheerfulness. He raised hopes and expectations. Above all, he acted.*" And common Americans loved him for it. "He was my friend," said a man in Denver. Comparing Roosevelt's reforms to the relative inaction of the Hoover administration, historian William Manchester concluded that if FDR had "been another Hoover, the United States would have followed seven Latin American countries whose governments had been overthrown by Depression victims."*

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 As FDR's inauguration day approached, what was the plight of the unemployed in American cities and the destitute farmers in the countryside? Why was Roosevelt's inaugural address, on that cold March day in 1933, one of the most important presidential speeches in American history?

2 Describe FDR's work habits and his approach toward problem solving. Why was Eleanor called FDR's "one woman brain trust"? Does the author believe that the early New Deal had an ideological focus? Or does he view it as emergency legislation designed to help those people who were hurting the most? Explain your answer by providing specific examples.

3 In describing America's mood in Roosevelt's first Hundred Days, Burns states that "psychology overwhelmed economics." Explain what his assessment means. What methods did FDR use to influence public opinion?

4 What were the goals of the NRA? What leadership qualities did Hugh Johnson bring to that New Deal agency? Describe the impact of the NRA, Section 7(a), on the labor movement.

5 Contrast the personalities and leadership styles of Harold Ickes and Harry Hopkins. What "heavy" jobs did the PWA undertake and what "light" tasks did the CWA initiate?

6 Describe how FDR was able to convert "bucks" into "ballots." How did most of the American people respond to the New Deal's first Hundred Days? How did Roosevelt's approach to solving the Depression compare to that of Herbert Hoover (selection 16)?