

THE NEW DEAL AND THE ECONOMIC APPROACH TO HISTORY

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Part I: Letters to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt¹

President Franklin D. Roosevelt once remarked that the immense amount of mail he received was the "most perfect index to the state of mind of the people." While most of this mail was handled by clerks, who forwarded letters on to the government department or agency best suited to reply to them, many letters were read and answered by presidential assistants and secretaries in the White House.

Given the volume of correspondence, many of these replies were formulaic. But Louis Howe, FDR's close adviser, recalled that FDR would often answer letters himself. "I have seen him spend precious moments," Howe remembered, "poring over letters scribbled on butcher paper or ruled pages torn from a cheap pad, often directing special attention or replies to the writers of such letters."

FDR greatly valued the letters that people sent him. His personal reading of selected letters, and of the "mail briefs" that his staff prepared for him to summarize main themes in his correspondence, gave him a sense of the national mood. Speaking to a group of newspaper editors, he once declared, "I am more closely in touch with public opinion in the United States than any individual in this room."

Eleanor Roosevelt made time in her busy schedule to read about fifty pieces of her mail each day, often sharing the more interesting letters she received with FDR. She believed that "the times were too serious and the requests too desperate" to simply ignore these letters. In their first year in the White House, Mrs. Roosevelt alone received about 300,000 letters.²

St. Louis, Mo., 10/23/33
Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt,
Chief Executive:

After listening to another of your very interesting talks over the Radio last night, as I have never missed any, I am taking the liberty of writing you, and I will try to keep it as brief as possible.

Am the father of five good Christian children, and my wife has been, and still is an invalid most of the time for the past twelve years; being afflicted with a very sore limb, being caused from varicose ulcers.

I have always been able to provide fairly well for my family, but in the past three years my salary has been on a constant decline, but still I am thankful that I have a position.

The points that I am trying to bring out are these: I owe a few little minor bills that have accumulated in the past three years, through no fault of mine. These people keep hounding me night and day. Through this, I got back with other matters. Even to the [illegible], and this is the reason for me writing you; Winter coming on, no coal in our coal bin, and the children needing warm clothes to go to school. Two children in Grammer

¹ These letters are drawn from Robert S. McElvaine, ed., *Down and Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the "Forgotten Man"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). Original spelling has been retained.

² Lawrence W. Levine and Cornelia R. Levine, *The People and the President: America's Conversation with FDR* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 1-24.

School, and two in High School. Cannot even give my wife the necessary medical attention she should have.

I have a loan company that I borrowed some money from, and who have more back now than was borrowed, who keep on Garnisheeing my pay when I fall behind.

Is there some way or some person who I can go to that can help me through my difficulty. I have never as yet begged, but I must and will be very candid, that I would appreciate some kind of help for just a short period of time, so that I can get caught up a little and back on my feet right again. I have always put up a good fight, and worked many a day when I was almost unable to stand up; but all to no avail. I am 50 years old, and never missed an unnecessary day from work, until just forced to do so.

Thanking you in advance for any help, advice or information given me, I remain, your humble servant,

[Initials omitted because of writer's request] St. Louis, Mo.

[P.S.] My one request is, to please keep this correspondence confidential.

* * * * *

Middletown, N.Y.
April 10, 1934.

Mr. F D. Roosevelt,
President of the U.S.A.
Mr. President:

I am badly in need of your help. I have a home but I have a mortgage and they have hand me notice that they are going to close said mortgage because I am not able to pay interest and I cannot pay taxes for 3 years and they are going to close my water which I am not able to pay. I have asked for the home loan but I have not heard from them. Mr. President, I have 5 children, the oldest is 10 years of age. I have been working on the relief 3 days a week and making \$12.00 week is not sufficient to feed a family of 7. I have asked different times for little help from the town but they said that I was working and they would not help me. This winter they gave me 2 orders, one for \$5.00 and one for \$4.00. Now I have one of my child sick. I asked for a doctor and I had to fight to have one sent to me and they sent it 2 days later and the doctor came said that they was not getting enough to eat. Now, Mr. President, we are in a land of plenty but I see that good many of us are starving. I am a world war veteran. Mr. President try to Help me in this thing if you can. I do not ask this for me but for my children.

Thank you.

Yours truly,
F D. [male]
Middletown, N. Y.

* * * * *

Cambridge, Mass.
May 16, 1934

[Dear President Roosevelt:]

. . . I am now at the point of despration. But as I have 19 grandchildren all under 14 years of age 9 of whom are boys, to do anything desperette now they would never live down the disgrace. I was always a hard worker saved money invested in the auto business

and lost. Am 55 years old. . . . I would not wish at the cost of my life that any one should know I wrote you this letter [seeking a loan]. All shall be returned [in due time]. All I want is a chance

It is my last hope and effort All else has failed.

[Initials omitted because of writer's request]

* * * * *

[Fair Haven, Vermont
June 1934]

[Dear President Roosevelt:]

. . . We have certainly seen some hard days. we have been to bed good many night with out nothing to eat. & some days all we would have was black Berries. I would go & pick Black Berries last summer & we would eat them for dinner then my oldest boy 9 years old would take care of the smallest children while I & the next one to hime eight years old would go & pitch on hay for mr. Ferguson. When my baby girl was born last Dec. I didn't have a thing to put on her I wropt her up in one of my dresses until the Doctor got a few things for her. that is the way we are getting use. We didn't get only two quilts & one Blanket that you sent out for the poor. & there is one person not far from here has got so many Blankets she has got them stored away I am not complainin for it don't do any good. but it makes me feel bad. when some gets all they want & others can't. I know a party that has got a radio & spends some of his money for beer. We don't have no plesure of any kind

. . . & also tell us what we will do about the house I hate to lose it when I have seven little children & no place to go

Mrs. A. J. F

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[no address]
Jan. 18, 1937

[Dear Mrs. Roosevelt]

I . . . was simply astounded to think that anyone could be nitwit enough to wish to be included in the so called social security act if they could possibly avoid it. Call it by any name you wish it, in my opinion, (and that of many people I know) is nothing but downright stealing. . . .

Personally, I had my savings so invested that I would have had a satisfactory provision for old age. Now thanks to his [FDR's] desire to "get" the utilities I cannot be sure of anything, being a stockholder, as after business has survived his merciless attacks (if it does) insurance will probably be no good either

Then the president tells them they should hire more men and work shorter hours so that the laborers, who are getting everything now raises etc. can have a "more abundant life:" That simply means taking it from the rest of us in the form of taxes or otherwise

Believe me, the only thing we want from the president, unless or if you except Communists and the newly trained chiselers, is for him to balance the budget and reduce taxes. That, by the way, is a "mandate from the people" that isn't getting much attention.

I am not an "economic royalist," just an ordinary white collar worker at \$1600 per [year]. Please show this to the president and ask him to remember the wishes of the forgotten man, that is, the one who dared to vote against him. We expect to be tramped on but we do wish the stepping would be a little less hard.

Security at the price of freedom is never desired by intelligent people.

M. A. [female]

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Phila., Pa.
November, 26, 1934

Honorable Franklin D. Roosevelt.
Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

I am forced to write to you because we find ourselves in a very serious condition. For the last three or four years we have had depression and suffered with my family and little children severely. Now Since the Home Owners Loan Corporation opened up, I have been going there in order to save my home, because there has been unemployment in my house for more than three years. You can imagine that I and my family have suffered from lack of water supply in my house for more than two years. Last winter I did not have coal and the pipes burst in my house and therefore could not make heat in the house. Now winter is here again and we are suffering of cold, no water in the house, and we are facing to be forced out of the house, because I have no money to move or pay so much money as they want when after making settlement I am mother of little children, am sick and losing my health, and we are eight people in the family, and where can I go when I don't have money because no one is working in my house. The Home Loan Corporation wants \$42 a month rent or else we will have to be on the street. I am living in this house for about ten years and when times were good we would put our last cent in the house and now I have no money, no home and no wheres to go. I beg of you to please help me and my family and little children for the sake of a sick mother and suffering family to give this your immediate attention so we will not be forced to move or put out in the street.

Waiting and Hoping that you will act quickly.

Thanking you very much I remain

Mrs. E. L.

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Philadelphia Pa.
Feb'y 19, 1935.

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

After Seeing So many of your pictures in the Magazines and papers, and seeing that you always look so well dressed, a thought came to me that you may have a few old discarded dresses among the ones that you have tired of that you would like to get rid of, and do some one good at the same time. I have waited and waited for work until every thing I had is about finished. I can sew and would only be too glad to take two old things and put them to gether and make a new one. 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. I will await an early reply.

Thanking you in advance.

Mrs. E. T.
Phila. Pa.
Chicago Ill 4/3-35

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Mrs F .D. Roosevelt
Washington D. C.

Dear Mrs Roosevelt:-

Please pardon the liberty I am taking in writing you this note. Like thousands of others have lost and used up what we have saved, have been forced to go on relief. Have been compelled to store the small amt of things we had, and live in one room which is detrimental to our health and unless we can raise our storage chg. Amt \$28 by 4/10 the things may be sold for storage while not so valuable to any one else there are things that Cannot be replaced. I would like to borrow the amt \$28 so I can pay the chg. and get a More healthful place to live. We are American born citizens and have always been self-supporting. It is very humiliating for me to have to write you Asking you again to pardon the privilege I am taking. I am hoping I may hear from you without publicity by ret. post.

Very Respectfully

Mrs. [Initials omitted because of writer's request]

* * * * *

September 15, 1935

Dear President

I have written to you before, It is worse than it was before I can not get a job and my mothers shop is not doing well pretty soon she will be laid off

Dear President we had to borrow money of my mother's policy the amount was \$75 off of Hancock our insurance to pay taxes

Dear President Winter is coming and we have no coal I haven't got a suit of clothes, to where to church I hope you will give me a good answer and may God Bless you and Family You see I am the only boy and I am worried bot my mother I don't want to lose her I hope you won't forget me.

Good Bye

My address is Jefferson Street, Troy, N.Y.

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Dec. 14-1937
Columbus, Ind.

Mrs. FD. Roosevelt,
Washington, D.C.

Mrs. Roosevelt: I suppose from your point of view the work relief, old age pensions, slum clearance and all the rest seems like a perfect remedy for all the ills of this country, but I would like for you to see the results, as the other half see them.

We have always had a shiftless, never-do-well class of people whose one and only aim in life is to live without work. I have been rubbing elbows with this class for nearly sixty years and have tried to help some of the most promising and have seen others try to help them, but it can't be done. We cannot help those who will not try to help themselves and if they do try a square deal is all they need, and by the way that is all this country needs or

ever has needed: a square deal for all and then, let each one paddle their own canoe, or sink. . . .

As for the old people on beggars' allowances: the taxpayers have provided homes for all the old people who never liked to work, where they will be neither cold nor hungry: much better homes than most of them have ever tried to provide for themselves. They have lived many years through the most prosperous times of our country and had an opportunity to prepare for old age, but they spent their lives in idleness or worse and now they expect those who have worked like slaves, to provide a living for them and all their worthless descendants. Some of them are asking for from thirty to sixty dollars a month when I have known them to live on a dollar a week rather than go to work. There is many a little child doing without butter on its bread, so that some old sot can have his booze and tobacco: some old sot who spent his working years loafing around pool rooms and saloons, boasting that the world owed him a living.

Even the child welfare has become a racket. The parents of large families are getting divorces, so that the mothers and children can qualify for aid. The children to join the ranks of the "unemployed" as they grow up, for no child that has been raised on charity in this community has ever amounted to anything.

You people who have plenty of this worlds goods and whose money comes easy, have no idea of the heart-breaking toil and self-denial which is the lot of the working people who are trying to make an honest living, and then to have to shoulder all these unjust burdens seems like the last straw. . . . The crookedness, shelfishness, greed and graft of the crooked politicians is making one gigantic racket out of the new deal and it is making this a nation of dead-beats and beggars and if it continues the people who will work will soon be nothing but slaves for the pampered poverty rats and I am afraid these human parasites are going to become a menace to the country unless they are disfranchised. No one should have the right to vote theirself a living at the expense of the tax payers. They learned their strength at the last election and also learned that they can get just about what they want by "voting right." They have had a taste of their coveted life of idleness, and at the rate they are increasing, they will soon control the country. . . .

Is it any wonder the taxpayers are discouraged by all this penalizing of thrift and industry to reward shiftlessness, or that the whole country is on the brink of chaos?

M. A. H. [female]

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Columbus, Ind.
Detroit, Mich
Oct 2--1935

Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt.
Dear Mr. President.

In this letter I'm asking you if you are kind enough to help me out. I'm a girl of 18 years old. And I need a coat. I have no money to buy a coat I need about \$25.00. Dear President are you kind to help me and send me the money so I can buy my self the coat.

My father isnt working for 5 yrs. He has a sore leg they wont take him to work any place because of that sore leg. He cant buy me a coat. Were on welfare

Dear Mr. President my father voted for you he also told lot of his friends to vote for you. He help you so please help us now.

I know that you have a kind heart and wont refuse a girl that needs help Others are dressed but me with out a coat If I wont get any help from you Dear Mr. President than I will take my life away. I can't stand it no longer. We were thrown out on the street few times[.] I hate to live the way I'm living now.

Again please be kind and help me. I'll be waiting for your answer.

Yours Truly
M. L. [female]
Detroit, Mich.

[P.S.] My father reads the Bible and he has a picture of you in the bible.

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Beaverdam, Va.
Oct. 23rd, 1935.

Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt
President of United States

Dear Sir--

I wish to express my thoughts of our poor and needed country. first we are looking for work, but never can't find any to do. Need clothes, food, and in debt so bad. You know merchants don't want to credit people now. Every body after money now days. We have tried to get on the relief work but they claim they takes care of no one but those with heart trouble, sickly, and widows with no one to help take care of their children. But they don't do that.

But that's not right if we poor ones with husbands and little one to raise and send to school, can't get any work what more is it for them on the relief to starve than it is for us? . .

Once I was sick, went to Dr. he waited on me, for his money and I still owe him to-day. Then I went to the Druggist no we credit no one here, So I had no money and no way of making any Wasn't I in a bad shape?

No one know how it is until you experience it.

Right now, we have to find a place to go, no money on hand to move or pay rent. If it's anything you can do to help please be kind enough to help us. Just give us work to do and we will be only too glad to do it. We never can go to church for we never have money enough to pay for a trip seem so dishearten in life to live like this when it use to be plenty of work for every body.

Hoping we have more work to help feed our loved one. For I know it's One above who cares for all.

Yours Truly,
[Anonymous]
Beaverdam Virginia

* * * * *

[St. Louis, Mo.
October 25, 1935]

Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt

Dear Sir

Is there eny thing you can do about people not getting their pay from Mo State Emp. office no one has had eny pay for 3 Months and our family as with dozens of others are in Verry bad Circumstances[.] People are in Much worse Shape than the ones on Relief[.] gas + Lights have been Cut off and Credit stopped and furniture houses are taking the furniture away when some have these things about paid for--one family has 4 children that was not able to start to school by their dad not getting his pay. We all need help badly[.] I

wish I could sign my name but if I did my Husband would be let out So please do something if you can[.] we had to buy a few Bushels of coal on credit but cant get eny more Groceries until we pay up and they are all in the same fix. So thanking you in advance

I Remain
yours Truly.
[Anonymous]

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Nov. 22 [1935] Friday Granby Mo

Mrs Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Dear Friend as I understand you are a good ladie friend I will ask you to do me a favor I halve a little Boy of school age 13 years old only in the 7 grade cince he had to stop school as he has Bad eyes he cant see to get his lessons[.] I ask you if you will be kind to send him the money to get him a pair of glasses[.] I taken him to our Dr which is Dr Rollens and he said the Boy needed glasses and I halvent no money to get them as we are on the Relieff and you know we dont halve no money so am asking you to be so kind to my Boy so please send him \$5 or \$6 dollars to get some eye glasses if I wasnt so poor I wouldnt ask you for a favor he wants to go on to school so bad. so please be kind to the Boy. he was operated on about a year agoe and that put him back in school then now. tis his eyes so please send him the money dirrect to [D. C.] Granby Mo. . . .

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[February, 1936]

Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt.
Wash. D. C.

Dear Mr. President:

I'm a boy of 12 years. I want to tell you about my family My father hasn't worked for 5 months He went plenty times to relief, he filled out application. They won't give us anything. I don't know why. Please you do something. 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. My brother goes to Lane Tech. High School. he's eighteen years old, hasn't gone to school for 2 weeks because he got no carfare. I have a sister she's twenty years, she can't find work. 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 next morning I wrote this letter to you. in my room. Were American citizens and were born in Chicago, III. and I don't know why they don't help us Please answer right away because we need it. will starve Thank you.

God bless you.

[Anonymous]
Chicago, Ill.

* * * * *

Battle Creek Mich.
April 5, 1936

President Roosevelt:

Please continue this W.P.A. program. It makes us feel like an American citizen to earn our own living. Being on the dole or relief roll makes us lazy and the funds are not enough to live decent on. We are thankful for what we receive though.

So we as W.P.A. workers in Battle Creek Michigan, appeal to you as our Great Leader to continue this great cause for Better citizens in Battle Creek Michigan.

Your Faithful,
W.P.A. workers
of Battle Creek

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Part II: The American Liberty League³

The American Liberty League was a political organization which drew its membership from the leaders in U.S. business and law. It was not enormously popular with other Americans, and its membership never exceeded a high of about 125,000, reached in mid-1936. The League's financial support came from about 24 businessmen, with one out of every four of the dollars it spent provided by the DuPont family. On July 15, 1936, Jouett Shouse, the President of the American Liberty League, presented his assessment of the New Deal in a nationally broadcast radio address, arguing that it represented a totalitarian blow against individual freedom.

The New Deal has built up a huge bureaucracy which has shown no regard for the Constitutional rights and liberties of our citizens.

The New Deal has converted the Federal Civil Service into a barefaced spoils system.

The New Deal has used the money of taxpayers of all political parties to build up a propaganda machine to aid its efforts to continue in power.

The New Deal has prostituted the administration of the relief of the unfortunate to the ends of partisan politics.

The New Deal has spent huge sums upon public works, despite grave doubts as to the desirability or usefulness of the projects.

The New Deal has instituted a series of boondoggling enterprises which are as ridiculous as they are unwise.

The New Deal has all but destroyed the export market for American agricultural products.

The New Deal has opened American markets to import of foodstuffs which properly should be supplied by the American farmer.

The New Deal has harassed American business and has entered into competition in almost every possible way with private industry.

The New Deal has misused the Federal taxing power in an effort to promote visionary schemes for the redistribution of wealth.

The New Deal has imposed taxes heavier than were ever before placed upon the nation in time of peace and by reckless borrowing has saddled huge obligations upon generations yet unborn.

³ Excerpted from "The New Deal vs. Democracy," *American Liberty League Bulletin*, July 15, 1936, 2-3; reprinted in Richard D. Polenberg, *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933-1945: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000).

The New Deal has led the nation far along the road toward national bankruptcy and has increased the national debt to unprecedented size.

The New Deal has manifested its contempt for constitutional government.

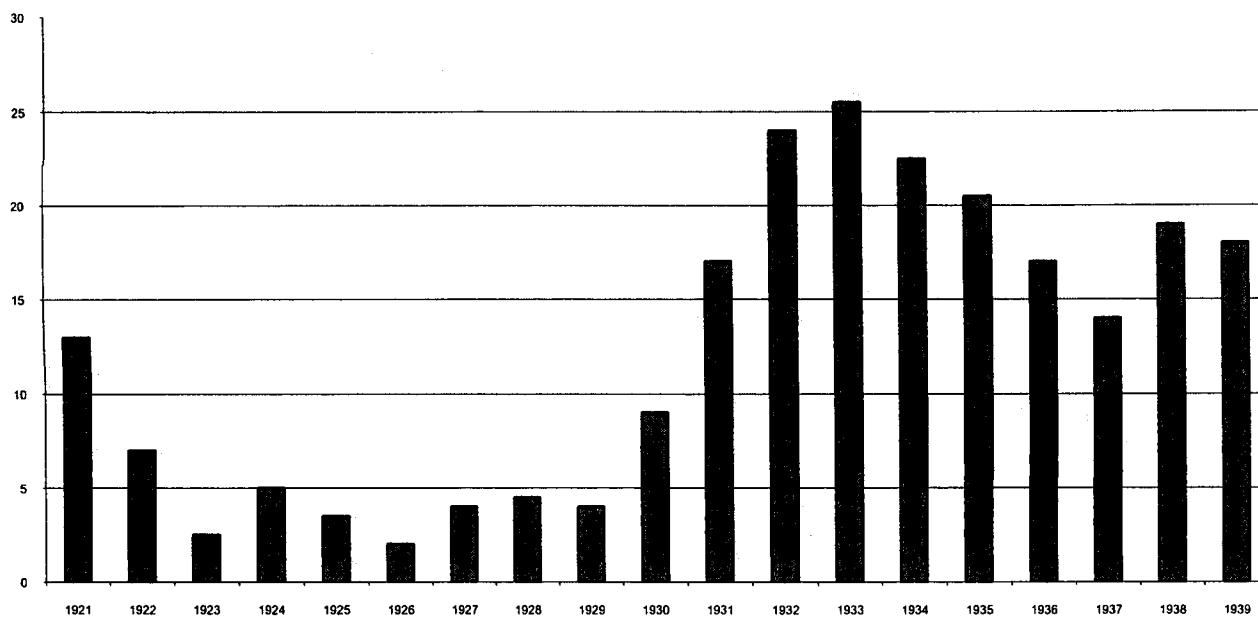
The New Deal has sought to make the Legislative Branch of the government subservient to the will of the Executive.

The New Deal, through its official spokesman, has criticized decisions of the Supreme Court because in the interpretation of the basic law of the land that tribunal held pet New Deal acts unconstitutional.

The New Deal, in the words of Mr. Roosevelt himself, has set up "new instruments of public power," admittedly dangerous in the hands of men who might misuse that power.

In a word, the New Deal has sought to destroy the American system of government composed of three coordinate branches and to upset the dual sovereignty as between state and nation which the Constitution provides.

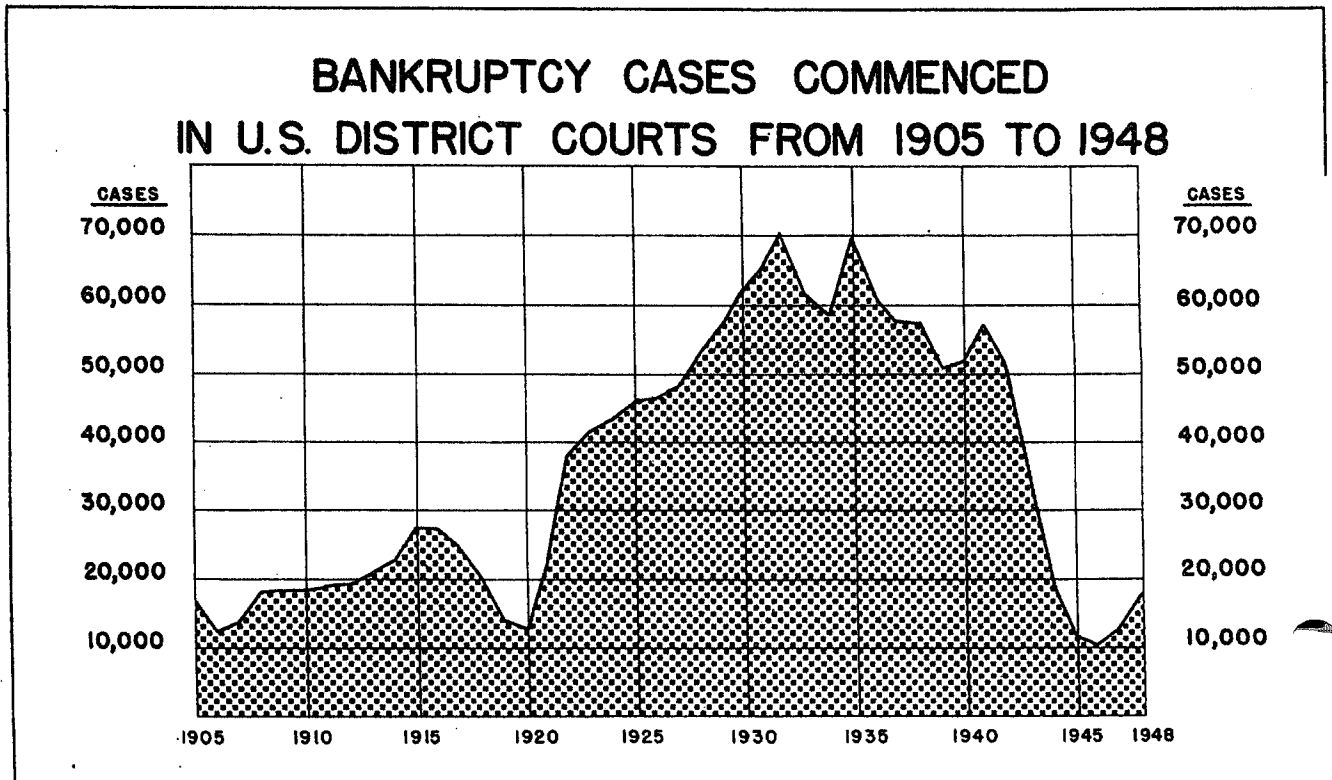
The New Deal represents the attempt in America to set up a totalitarian government, one which recognizes no sphere of individual or business life as immune from governmental authority and which submerges the welfare of the individual to that of the government.

Exhibit 1 Unemployment as Percentage of Eligible Work Force, 1919-1939

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1975): Series D86.

Exhibit 2 Bankruptcy Cases, 1905-1948

CHART '1



Source: *Tables of Bankruptcy Statistics*, U.S. Administrative Office of the United States Courts, June 30, 1948. Prepared in accordance with Sec. 53 of the Bankruptcy Act. (1948).

**Exhibit 3 Real Estate
Foreclosures of Nonfarm
Properties, 1926-1945**

Year	Number
1926	68,100
1927	91,000
1928	116,000
1929	134,900
1930	150,000
1931	193,800
1932	248,700
1933	252,400
1934	230,350
1935	228,713
1936	185,439
1937	151,366
1938	118,357
1939	100,410
1940	75,556
1941	58,559
1942	41,997
1943	25,281
1944	17,153
1945	12,706

Source: Series N301, *Historical Statistics of the United States, 1776-1976*, p. 651.

Exhibit 4 Farm Real Estate: Land Transfers, 1929-1941

Year	Forced Sales and Related Defaults, per 1,000 Farms
1929	19.5
1930	20.8
1931	26.1
1932	41.7
1933	54.1
1934	39.1
1935	28.3
1936	26.2
1937	22.4
1938	17.4
1939	17.0
1940	15.9
1941	13.9

Source: Broadus Mitchell, *Depression Decade: From New Era through New Deal, 1929-1941* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1947), p. 444.

Exhibit 5 Wholesale Prices, Agricultural and Industrial, 1929-1941 (1926 = 100)

Year	All Commodities Other Than Farm Products	Farm Products	All Commodities
1929	93.3	104.9	95.3
1930	85.9	88.3	86.4
1931	74.6	64.8	73.0
1932	68.3	48.2	64.8
1933	69.0	51.4	65.9
1934	76.9	65.3	74.9
1935	80.2	78.8	80.0
1936	80.7	80.9	80.8
1937	86.2	86.4	86.3
1938	80.6	68.5	78.6
1939	79.5	65.3	77.1
1940	80.8	67.7	78.6
1941	88.3	82.4	87.3

Source: Broadus Mitchell, *Depression Decade: From New Era through New Deal, 1929-1941* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1947)