Rugged Campobello Island lying off Eastport, Maine, was sunlit that August afternoon in 1921. A small sailboat bobbed in the waters off the island. At the helm, with several of his children, was thirty-nine-year-old Franklin D. Roosevelt. Assistant secretary of the navy during World War I, Roosevelt had been the Democratic party’s vice-presidential candidate in 1920. But all this was far from his mind now. He loved sailing, and he loved Campobello Island.

The idyllic afternoon suddenly took an ominous turn when Roosevelt spotted a fire. Beaching the boat, he and the children frantically beat back the spreading flames. The exertion left Roosevelt unusually fatigued. The next morning his left leg dragged when he tried to walk. Soon all sensation disappeared in both legs. He had suffered an attack of poliomyelitis (infantile paralysis), a viral infection that most often struck children but sometimes struck adults as well. Except for a cumbersome shuffle with crutches and heavy metal braces, he would never walk again.

This illness changed the lives of both Franklin Roosevelt and his wife Eleanor. To Franklin, it seemed the end of his career. But he endured endless therapy and gradually reentered politics. In 1928, laboriously mounting the podium at the Democratic National Convention, he nominated his friend Al Smith for president. That fall, he himself was elected governor of New York.
Somewhat superficial and even arrogant before 1921, this privileged only child became, through his ordeal, more understanding of the disadvantaged and far more determined. “If you had spent two years in bed trying to wiggle your big toe,” he once said, “after that everything else would seem easy!”

Eleanor Roosevelt at first devoted herself to her husband’s care and to the child-rearing duties that now fell to her. But she also encouraged his return to politics, resisting his domineering mother’s efforts to turn him into an invalid at the family home at Hyde Park, New York. Eleanor became her husband’s eyes and ears. Already involved with social issues, she now became active in the New York Democratic party and edited its newsletter for women. Painfully shy, she forced herself to make public speeches.

The Roosevelts would soon need the qualities of character they had acquired. Elected president in 1932 amidst the worst depression in American history, Franklin Roosevelt dominated U.S. politics until his death in 1945. Roosevelt’s presidency, the so-called New Deal, spawned an array of laws, agencies, and programs that historians ever since have tried to whip into coherent form. And, indeed, certain patterns do emerge. In what some label the First New Deal (1933–1935), the dual themes were relief and recovery through a united national effort. In 1935, facing political challenges on the left and right, Roosevelt charted a more radical course. In the so-called Second New Deal (1935–1936), the administration placed less emphasis on unity and more on business regulation and on policies benefiting workers, small farmers, sharecroppers, migrant laborers, and others at the lower end of the scale.

The New Deal involved myriad programs, political infighting, and countless officials and bureaucrats. But in the public mind, it meant Roosevelt. Loved by some almost like a family member and reviled by others as a demagogue or would-be dictator, Roosevelt was a consummate politician whose administration set the national political agenda for a generation.

This chapter develops two interconnected themes. The first is the New Deal’s profound effect on ideas about government, as it defined a more expansive view of the role of the state in promoting economic and social welfare. The second theme is the response of the American people to the Great Depression. From assembly-line workers, urban blacks, and migrant laborers to moviemakers, artists, writers, and photographers, diverse groups met the crisis with resourcefulness, social activism, and creative expression.

The chapter focuses on five major questions:

■ What were the main causes of the Great Depression?
■ What depression-fighting strategy underlay the so-called First New Deal, and why did the Roosevelt administration change course in 1935, giving rise to the so-called Second New Deal?
■ Which New Deal programs have had the greatest long-term effect, and how did ideas about the role of government change as a result of the New Deal?
■ How did the depression and the New Deal affect specific groups in the United States? (Consider, for example, small farmers and sharecroppers, Native Americans, industrial workers, women, African-Americans, and Mexican-Americans.)
■ How did American culture—including both the mass-entertainment industries and the efforts of novelists, artists, photographers, and composers—respond to the events of the 1930s?

Crash and Depression, 1929–1932

The prosperity of the 1920s came to a jolting end in October 1929 with the collapse of the stock market. The Wall Street crash, and the deeper economic problems that underlay it, launched a depression that reached every household. President Hoover struggled with the crisis, but his ideological commitment to private initiative and his horror of governmental coercion limited his effectiveness. In November 1932 voters turned to the Democratic party and its new leader, Franklin Roosevelt. This pivotal election set the stage for a vast expansion in the role of the federal government in addressing social and economic issues.

Black Thursday and the Onset of the Depression

Stock prices had risen steadily through much of the 1920s, but 1928–1929 brought a frenzied upsurge as speculators plunged into the market. In 1925 the market value of all stocks had stood at about $27 billion; by October 1929, with some 9 million Americans playing the market, it hit $87 billion (see Figure 24.1A,B). With stockbrokers lending speculators up to 75 percent of a stock’s cost, credit or “margin” buying spread. The income-tax cuts promoted by Treasury Secretary
Andrew Mellon had increased the volume of money available for speculation. Optimistic pronouncements also fed the speculative boom. In March 1929 former president Calvin Coolidge declared stocks “cheap at current prices.” “Investment trusts,” akin to today’s mutual funds, but totally unregulated, lured novices into the market. The construction industry declined sharply in 1928–1929—an omen few heeded.

In 1928, and again in September 1929, the Federal Reserve Board tried to dampen speculation by raising the interest rate on federal reserve notes. Early in 1929 the Fed warned member banks to tighten their lending policies. But with speculators willing to pay up to 20 percent interest for money to buy more stock, lending institutions continued to loan money freely—an act akin to dumping gasoline on a raging fire. Stock prices zoomed ever higher.

The collapse came on October 24, 1929—“Black Thursday.” As prices fell, some stocks found no buyers at all: they had literally become worthless. On Tuesday, October 29, a record 16 million stocks changed hands in frantic trading. In the ensuing weeks, feeble upswings alternated with further plunges.

President Hoover, in the first of many optimistic statements, pronounced the economy “sound and prosperous.” But few listened. By mid-November the loss in the value of stocks stood at $30 billion. A weak upswing early in 1930 suggested that the worst might be over. However, instead of recovering, as many analysts predicted, the economy went into a long tailspin, producing a full-scale depression.

What were the underlying causes of this depression? Many economists focus on structural problems that made 1920s’ prosperity so unstable. The agricultural sector remained depressed throughout the decade. In the industrial sector, increased productivity did not generate fully equivalent wage increases, but rather took the form of higher corporate profits. In 1929 the 40 percent of Americans who were lowest on the economic scale received only about 12 percent of the total national income. This reduced consumer purchasing power. At the same time, assembly-line methods encouraged overproduction. By summer 1929 the automobile, housing, textile, tire, and other durable-goods industries were seriously overextended. Further, important sectors of industry—including railroads, steel, textiles, and mining—lagged technologically in the 1930s and could not attract the investment needed to stimulate recovery.

Some economists, the so-called monetarist school, also focus on the banking system’s collapse in the early 1930s, which they blame on Federal Reserve System’s
Figure 24.2
The Statistics of Hard Times

The Decline and Recovery of the U.S. Economy, 1925–1945

Business Failures, 1929–1945

Unemployment, 1925–1945

Banks Suspending Payments, 1929–1933

The Stock Market, 1919–1939

The Sagging of the Building Boom, 1919–1939

tight-money policies. This policy, they charge, strangled any hope of economic recovery by reducing the amount of money available to businesses for investment and growth.

All analysts link the U.S. depression to a global economic crisis. European economies, already enfeebled by war debt payments and a severe trade imbalance with the United States, collapsed in 1931. This larger crisis depressed U.S. exports and fed the fear gripping the nation.

Whatever the causes, the depression had a chilling impact on the U.S. economy. From 1929 to 1932, the gross national product dropped from $104 billion to $59 billion. Farm prices, already low, fell by nearly 60 percent. By early 1933 more than fifty-five hundred banks had closed, and unemployment stood at 25 percent, or nearly 13 million workers (see Figure 24.2). In some cities the jobless rate far exceeded the national average. In Toledo in 1932, for example, it stood at 80 percent. Many who still had jobs faced cuts in pay and hours.

**Hoover’s Response**

Historically, Americans had viewed depressions as acts of nature: little could be done other than ride out the storm. President Hoover, an intelligent moderate with activist impulses, disagreed. Drawing upon the legacy of progressive reform and his service as U.S. food administrator in World War I, Hoover initially confronted the crisis boldly. But his approach also reflected his belief in localism and private initiative.

Acting on his convictions, Hoover urged business leaders to maintain wages and employment. Viewing unemployment as a local issue, he advised municipal and state governments to create public-works projects. In October 1930 he set up an Emergency Committee for Employment to coordinate voluntary relief efforts. In 1931 he persuaded the nation’s largest banks to set up a private lending agency, the National Credit Corporation, to help hard-pressed smaller banks make business loans.

These antidepression measures did little good. As the crisis worsened and joblessness increased, public opinion turned against Hoover. In the 1930 midterm election, the Republicans lost the House of Representatives and gave up eight Senate seats. In 1931, dreading a budget deficit, Hoover called for a tax increase, further angering hard-pressed Americans. That same year, despite their pledges to Hoover, U.S. Steel, General Motors, and other big corporations announced major wage cuts. The crisis quickly swamped private charities and local welfare agencies. Philadelphia, with more than three hundred thousand jobless by 1932, cut weekly relief payments to $4.23 per family and then suspended them entirely.

In 1932, a presidential election year, Hoover swallowed his principles and launched a bold federal response to the crisis. In January, at Hoover’s recommendation, Congress set up a new agency, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), to make loans to major economic institutions such as banks and insurance companies. By July the RFC had pumped $1.2 billion into the economy. Congress also authorized the RFC to grant $2 billion to state and local governments for job-creating public-works programs, and allocated $750 million for loans to businesses struggling to survive.

Hoover approved all these measures, but he reaped little political benefit from them. He supported them reluctantly, warning that they could open the door to “socialism and collectivism.” Blaming global forces for the depression, he argued that only international measures would help. Some of his proposals, such as a moratorium on war-debt and reparations payments by European nations, made sense, but seemed irrelevant to the plight of ordinary Americans.

As Hoover issued press releases urging self-help and local initiative and endlessly saw prosperity “just around the corner,” his relations with the news media soured. When he appointed a new press secretary disliked by the White House journalists, one reporter called it the first instance of a rat boarding a sinking ship. An administration launched so hopefully in 1929 by a widely admired president was ending in bitterness and failure.

**Mounting Discontent and Protest**

An ominous mood spread over the nation as hordes of the jobless waited in breadlines, slept on park benches, trudged the streets, and rode freight trains from city to city seeking work. Americans reared on the ethic of hard work and self-support experienced chronic unemployment as a shattering psychic blow. Because most of the jobless had families, the unemployment figures must be multiplied several times over to reflect the full impact of the crisis. Family savings vanished as banks failed.

Newspapers humanized the crisis. The *New York Times* described “Hoover Valley”—a section of Central Park where jobless men lived in boxes and packing crates. In winter they wrapped themselves in layers of newspapers they called Hoover blankets. The suicide rate climbed nearly 30 percent between 1928 and 1932.
In Youngstown, Ohio, a fifty-seven-year-old jobless father of ten whose family faced eviction jumped to his death from a bridge. Violence threatened in some cities when people unable to pay their rent were evicted from homes and apartments.

Hard times battered the nation's farms. Many underwent mortgage foreclosures or forced sales because of tax delinquency, with Iowa and the Dakotas especially hard hit. Driving through the midwestern farm belt early in 1931, writer Malcolm Cowley found much of it untended and empty. “I wondered,” Cowley wrote in the *New Republic*, “how much more of it will be abandoned next spring, after the milch cows have been sold for beef, the tractors and combine harvesters seized by finance corporations, the notes and mortgages allowed to go unpaid.” At some forced farm auctions, neighbors bought the foreclosed farm for a trivial sum, and returned it to the evicted family.

In 1931 midwestern farmers organized a boycott movement called the Farmers’ Holiday Association to force prices up by withholding grain and livestock from the market. Dairy farmers angered by low prices dumped milk in Iowa and Wisconsin.

The most alarming protest came from World War I veterans. In 1924 Congress had voted veterans a bonus stretched over a twenty-year period. In June 1932 some ten thousand veterans, many jobless, descended on Washington to lobby for immediate payment of these bonuses. When Congress refused, most of the “bonus marchers” went home, but about two thousand stayed on, building makeshift shelters on the outskirts of Washington. President Hoover called in the army.

On July 28 a thousand troops commanded by General Douglas MacArthur armed with tear gas, tanks, and machine guns drove the veterans from their encampment and burned their shelters. A journalist described the scene:

> [The veterans and their families] wandered from street to street or sat in ragged groups, the men exhausted, the women with wet handkerchiefs laid over their smarting eyes, the children waking from sleep to cough and whimper from the tear gas in their lungs. The flames behind them were climbing into the night sky . . . . Their shanties and tents had been burned, their personal property destroyed, except for the few belongings they could carry on their backs.

To many Americans, this action symbolized the administration's utter bankruptcy.

Matching the mood of discontent, American fiction of the early depression exuded disillusionment and despair. In *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), the first volume of a trilogy, John Dos Passos drew a dark panorama of twentieth-century America as money-mad, exploitive, and lacking spiritual meaning. As one character says, “Everything you’ve wanted crumbles in your fingers as you grasp it.” In *Young Lonigan* (1932), which also launched a trilogy, James T. Farrell portrayed the empty existence of Studs Lonigan, a working-class Irish-immigrant youth in Chicago. Unable to find work and feeling betrayed by the American dream, Studs wanders the streets, trying to piece together a coherent worldview from the bits of mass culture that drift his way.

Some radical novelists of the early thirties attacked the capitalist system even more explicitly. The Communist party encouraged such fiction through writers’ clubs and contests for working-class writers. Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* (1933), dealing with life in the
Missouri coal fields, gained force from the fact that Conroy’s father and brother had died in a mine disaster.

**The Election of 1932**

Gloom pervaded the 1932 Republican convention that renominated Hoover. The Democrats who gathered in Chicago, by contrast, scented victory. Their platform, crafted to erase the party divisions of the 1920s, appealed to urban voters with a call for repeal of prohibition, to farmers with support for aid programs, and to fiscal conservatives with demands for a balanced budget and cuts in federal spending. Rejecting Al Smith, the party’s 1928 standard-bearer, the delegates nominated Franklin D. Roosevelt, governor of New York, for president.

Breaking precedent, FDR flew to Chicago to accept the nomination in person with a rousing speech pledging “a new deal for the American people.” Despite this ringing phrase, Roosevelt’s campaign offered no clear program. He called for “bold persistent experimenta-

holder jauntily tilted upward, a symbol of hope. By 1935, however, some early New Deal programs were in trouble, and opposition was building.

**Roosevelt and His Circle**

FDR’s inaugural address dedicated his administration to helping a people in crisis. “The only thing we have to fear,” he intoned, “is fear itself.” In an outpouring of support, half a million approving letters deluged the White House.

Roosevelt seemed an unlikely figure to become a popular hero. Like his distant cousin Theodore, FDR was of the social elite, with merchants and landowners among his Dutch-immigrant ancestors. He attended Harvard College and Columbia Law School. But as a state senator and governor of New York, he had allied with the Democratic party’s urban-immigrant wing. When the depression struck, he had introduced innovative measures in New York, including unemployment insurance and a public-works program. Intent on reviving the economy while preserving capitalism and democracy, Roosevelt had no detailed agenda. He encouraged competing proposals, compromised (or papered over) differences, and then backed the measures he sensed could be sold to Congress and the public.

Roosevelt brought to Washington a circle of advisers nicknamed the brain trust. It included Columbia University professor Rexford G. Tugwell and lawyer...
Adolph A. Berle. Shaped by the progressive reform tradition, Tugwell and Berle rejected laissez-faire ideas and advocated federal economic planning and corporate regulation. But no single ideology or set of advisers controlled the New Deal, for FDR sought a broad range of opinions.

Eleanor Roosevelt played a key role. A niece of Theodore Roosevelt, she had a keen social conscience expressed in settlement-house work and Florence Kelley’s National Consumers’ League. Through her, FDR met reformers, social workers, and advocates of minority rights. Recalled Rexford Tugwell: “No one who ever saw Eleanor Roosevelt sit down facing her husband, and holding his eyes firmly, say to him ‘Franklin, I think you should . . . ’ or ‘Franklin, surely you will not . . . ’ will ever forget the experience.” Mrs. Roosevelt traveled ceaselessly and served as an astute observer for her wheelchair-bound husband. (A Washington newspaper once headlined “MRS. ROOSEVELT SPENDS NIGHT AT WHITE HOUSE.”) In 1935 she began writing a syndicated newspaper column, “My Day.”

Roosevelt’s cabinet reflected the New Deal’s diversity. Postmaster General James Farley, FDR’s top political adviser, distributed patronage jobs, managed the 1932 and 1936 campaigns, and dealt with state and local Democratic leaders. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, the first woman cabinet member, had served as industrial commissioner of New York. Interior Secretary Harold Ickes had organized liberal Republicans for Roosevelt in 1932. Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace of Iowa held the same post his father had occupied in the 1920s. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, Jr., FDR’s Hudson valley neighbor and political ally, though a fiscal conservative, tolerated the unbalanced budgets necessary to finance New Deal antidepression programs.

A host of newcomers poured into Washington in 1933—former progressives, liberal-minded professors, bright young lawyers. Joining the administration, they drafted bills, competed for influence, and debated recovery strategies. From this pressure-cooker environment
emerged the laws, programs, and agencies gathered under a catch-all label: the New Deal.

**The Hundred Days**

Between March 9 and its adjournment on June 16, 1933, a period labeled the “Hundred Days,” Congress enacted more than a dozen important measures (see Table 24.1). Rooted in the experience of the Progressive Era, World War I, and the Hoover presidency, these measures expanded the federal government’s involvement in the nation’s economic life.

FDR first addressed the banking crisis. As borrowers defaulted, panicky depositors withdrew savings, and homeowners missed mortgage payments, thousands of banks had failed, undermining confidence in the entire system. On March 5 Roosevelt ordered all banks to close for four days. At the end of this so-called bank holiday, he proposed an Emergency Banking Act. This law, supplemented by a later one, permitted healthy banks to reopen, set up procedures for managing failed banks, increased government oversight of banking, and required banks to separate their savings deposits from their investment funds. Congress also created the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) to insure all bank deposits up to five thousand dollars. In the first of a series of radio talks dubbed “fireside chats,” the president assured Americans that they could again trust their banks.

Other measures of the Hundred Days addressed the problem of relief—the urgent plight of Americans struggling to survive. Two new agencies assisted those who were losing their homes. The Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) helped city-dwellers refinance their mortgages. The Farm Credit Administration provided loans to rural Americans to meet their farm payments (see Figure 24.3).

Another early New Deal relief program, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), employed jobless youths in such government projects as reforestation, park maintenance, and erosion control. The CCC thus combined

| Major Measures Enacted During the “Hundred Days” (March 9–June 16, 1933) |
|-----------------|------------------|------------------|
| March 9         | Emergency Banking Act |
| 20              | Economy Act |
| 31              | Unemployment Relief Act (Civilian Conservation Corps) |
| May 12          | Agricultural Adjustment Act |
| 12              | Federal Emergency Relief Act |
| 18              | Tennessee :Valley Authority |
| 27              | Federal Securities Act |
| June 13         | Home Owners’ Refinancing Act |
| 16              | Farm Credit Act |
| 16              | Banking Act of 1933 (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation) |
| 16              | National Industrial Recovery Act (National Recovery Administration; Public Works Administration) |

**FIGURE 24.3**

*Agriculture During the Great Depression*

The depression hit rural America with brutal ferocity, as the statistics on commodity prices and farm mortgages show.

The graph shows the price per pound for cotton and the price per bushel for corn and wheat.

work relief with environmental programs. By 1935 half a million young men were earning thirty-five dollars a month in CCC camps—a godsend to families with no income at all.

The principal relief measure of the Hundred Days, the Federal Emergency Relief Act, appropriated $500 million for state and local relief agencies that had exhausted their funds. To head this program, FDR chose Harry Hopkins, the relief administrator in New York State. A gaunt chain smoker who enjoyed parties and the racetrack, Hopkins soon emerged as a powerful New Deal figure.

While supplying money for immediate relief of the needy, the early New Deal also faced the longer-term challenge of promoting recovery in the agricultural and industrial sectors of the economy. In confronting the chronic problem of low farm prices, New Dealers held different opinions. Some favored the approach of the 1920s McNary-Haugen bill (see Chapter 23) by which the government would buy agricultural surpluses and sell them abroad. Others, however, advocated reduced production as a means of raising farm income, and this approach won the day.

As a first step to cutting production, the government paid southern cotton planters to plow under much of their crop and midwestern farmers to slaughter some 6 million piglets and pregnant sows. This proved a public-relations nightmare, as Americans criticized the killing of pigs amid widespread hunger. Pursuing the same goal more systematically, Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act in May 1933. This law set up a program by which producers of the major agricultural commodities—including hogs, wheat, corn, cotton, and dairy products—received payments, called subsidies, in return for cutting production. A tax on grain mills and other food processors (a tax ultimately passed along to consumers) financed these subsidies. A new agency, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), supervised the program.

The other key recovery measure of the Hundred Days, the National Industrial Recovery Act, appropriated $3.3 billion for heavy-duty government public-works programs to provide jobs and stimulate the economy. Interior Secretary Harold Ickes headed the agency that ran this program, the Public Works Administration (PWA).

This law also set up another new agency, the National Recovery Administration (NRA). The NRA brought together business leaders to draft codes of “fair competition” for their industries. These codes set production limits, prescribed wages and working conditions, and forbade price cutting and unfair competitive practices. The aim was to promote recovery by breaking the cycle of wage cuts, falling prices, and layoffs. This approach revived the trade associations that Washington had encouraged during World War I (see Chapter 22). Indeed, the NRA’s head, Hugh Johnson, had served with the War Industries Board of 1917–1918. The NRA also echoed the theme of business-government cooperation that Herbert Hoover had promoted as secretary of commerce in the 1920s.

The NRA’s success depended on voluntary support by both business and the public. Johnson, a flamboyant showman, used parades, billboards, magazine ads, and celebrity events to persuade people to buy only from companies that subscribed to an NRA code and that displayed the NRA symbol, a blue eagle, and its slogan, “We Do Our Part.”

While the NRA’s purpose was to promote economic recovery, some New Dealers saw its reform potential as well. Under pressure from Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, the NRA’s textile-industry code banned child labor. And thanks to Senator Robert Wagner of New York, Section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act affirmed workers’ right to organize unions and to bargain collectively.

The Reconstruction Finance Corporation, dating from the Hoover years, remained active in the New Deal era. Under its chairman Jesse H. Jones, a Houston banker, the RFC lent billions of dollars to banks, insurance companies, and even new business ventures, making the RFC a potent financial resource for corporate
America. The early New Deal thus had a strong pro-business flavor. In his speeches of 1933–1935, FDR always included business as a key player in the “all-American team” fighting the depression.

A few measures adopted during the Hundred Days, however, took a more regulatory approach to business. The stock-market crash had produced a strong antibusiness reaction and led to a Senate investigation of Wall Street. This probe revealed that not one of the twenty partners of the Morgan Bank had paid any income tax in 1931 or 1932. People jeered when the president of the New York Stock Exchange told a Senate committee considering regulatory legislation, “You gentlemen are making a big mistake. The Exchange is a perfect institution.”

Reflecting the antibusiness mood, the early New Deal legislation also included a key regulatory measure, the Federal Securities Act. This law required corporations to inform the Federal Trade Commission fully on all stock offerings, and made executives personally liable for any misrepresentation of securities their companies issued. (In 1934 Congress curbed the purchase of stock on credit—a practice that had contributed to the crash of 1929—and created the Securities and Exchange Commission [SEC], to enforce the new regulations.)

The most innovative long-range recovery program of the Hundred Days was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). This program had its origins in World War I, when the government had built a hydroelectric station on the Tennessee River in Alabama to power a nearby nitrate plant run by the War Department. In the 1920s Senator George Norris of Nebraska had urged the use of this facility to supply electricity to nearby farmers. Expanding Norris’s idea, TVA advanced the economic and social development of the entire Tennessee River valley, one of the nation’s most poverty-stricken regions.

A European visitor in the 1930s described the region’s farms:

[A] very large percentage of them had kitchens with ovens burning wood. . . . They were lighted by dim, smoking, smelly oil lamps . . . . [T]he washing of clothes was done by hand in antiquated tubs . . . . [T]he water was brought into the house by women and children, from wells invariably situated at inconvenient and tiring distances. . . . Ordinarily there is no icebox, so many products that might be grown to vary the horribly monotonous diet are out of the question; they could not be stored.

Such conditions stunted the lives of the region’s inhabitants. Wrote a Tennessee school administrator of the children in her schools, “Due to insufficient clothing and food, many are unable to attend school. . . . It is not uncommon for a child to have but one dress or one shirt. They have to stay at home the day the mother launders them.”

TVA’s ambitious goal was to remedy such conditions. A series of TVA dams supplied cheap hydroelectric power, bringing electricity to the region. TVA also promoted flood control, water recreation, and erosion prevention. Under director David Lilienthal, TVA proved one of the New Deal’s most popular and enduring achievements.

For many Americans, the mind-boggling burst of laws and the “alphabet-soup” of new agencies during the Hundred Days symbolized both the dynamism and the confusion of the New Deal. How these new programs and agencies would work in practice remained to be seen.

**Failures and Controversies Plague the Early New Deal**

As the depression persisted, several early New Deal programs, including the NRA, the AAA, and the various relief agencies, faced difficulties. The NRA’s problems related partly to the personality of the hard-driving, hard-drinking Hugh Johnson. But the trouble went deeper. As the unity spirit of the Hundred Days faded, corporate America chafed under NRA regulation. Code violations increased. Small businesses complained that the codes favored big corporations. The agency itself, meanwhile, became bogged down in drafting trivial codes. The shoulder-pad industry, for example, had its own code. Corporate trade associations used the codes to restrict competition and maintain prices, not to stimulate recovery.

Gradually, the NRA sank of its own weight. Johnson left in 1934, and in May 1935 the Supreme Court unanimously ruled the NRA unconstitutional. The Court cited two reasons: first, the law gave the president regulatory powers that constitutionally belonged to Congress; second, the NRA regulated commerce within states, violating the constitutional provision limiting federal regulation to interstate commerce. Few mourned the NRA. As a recovery measure, it had failed.

The AAA fared better, but it too proved controversial. Farm prices did rise as production declined, fulfilling the planners’ hopes. In 1933–1937, overall farm income increased by 50 percent. But the AAA did not help farm laborers or migrant workers; indeed, its crop-reduction payments actually hurt southern tenants and sharecroppers when cotton growers removed acreage...
from production, banked the subsidy checks, and evicted the sharecroppers. One Georgia sharecropper wrote Harry Hopkins, “I have Bin farming all my life But the man I live with Has Turned me loose . . . I can’t get a Job.”

Some victims of this process resisted. In 1934 the interracial Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union, led by the Socialist party, emerged in Arkansas. Declared one black sharecropper at the organizing meeting, “The same chain that holds my people holds your people too . . . [We should] get together and stay together.” The landowners struck back, harassing union organizers.

Debate raged between New Dealers intent on raising total agricultural income and others who urged special attention to the poorest farmers. FDR at first backed the former group, but the advocates of a more class-based farm policy soon gained influence. Their cause was strengthened as a parching drought turned the Great Plains into a dust bowl (see Map 24.2). The rains failed in 1930, devastating wheat and livestock on the southern plains. In 1934 dust clouds spread across the nation, darkening cities from Chicago to Boston and Savannah before blowing out to sea. Through 1939, each summer brought a new scourge of dust. The worst year was 1937, with the dust storms centered in Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Survivors never forgot the experience. Even night brought no relief. Recalled a Kansas woman, “A trip for water to rinse the grit from our lips, and then back to bed with washcloths over our noses. We try to lie still, because every turn stirs the dust on the blankets.” Folk singer Woody Guthrie recalled his 1930s’ boyhood in Oklahoma and Texas in his song “The Great Dust Storm.” It began:

It fell across our city like a curtain of black rolled down. We thought it was our judgment, we thought it was our doom.

Battered by debt and drought alike, many families gave up, leaving behind abandoned houses and farms. Nearly 3.5 million people left the Great Plains in the 1930s; the population of Cimarron County, Oklahoma, fell by 40 percent. Some migrated to nearby cities, further swamping relief rolls. Others packed their meager belongings into old cars and headed west. Though coming from various states, they all bore a derisive nickname, Okies. The plight of dust-bowl migrants further complicated New Deal agricultural planning.

Rivalries and policy differences also plagued the New Deal relief program. As unemployment continued, Harry Hopkins convinced Roosevelt to support direct federal relief programs, rather than channeling funds through state and local agencies. Late in 1933 FDR named Hopkins to head a temporary public works agency, the Civil Works Administration (CWA). Through
the winter the CWA expended nearly a billion dollars on short-term work projects for the jobless. When warm weather returned, FDR abolished the CWA. Like his conservative critics, FDR feared creating a permanent underclass living on welfare payments. But persistent unemployment swamping local relief agencies made further federal programs inevitable.

Hopkins and Harold Ickes, head of the Public Works Administration, competed to control federal relief policy. The cautious Ickes examined every PWA proposal with a fine-tooth comb. Large-scale PWA public-works projects did promise economic recovery, but “Honest Harold’s” deliberate approach left billions in relief funds stalled in the pipeline. Hopkins, by contrast, wanted to put people to work and get money circulating. Even make-work projects like raking leaves and collecting litter had merit, he argued, if they achieved these goals. Given the urgency of the crisis, Hopkins’s approach proved more influential in shaping federal relief policy.

1934–1935: Challenges from Right and Left

Despite the New Deal’s brave beginnings, the depression persisted. In 1934 national income rose about 25 percent above 1933 levels, but remained far below that of 1929. Millions had been jobless for three or four years. The rising frustration found expression in 1934 in nearly two thousand strikes, some of them communist-led, from New York taxi drivers to San Francisco dockworkers. With the NRA under attack, conflict flaring over farm policy, and relief spending growing rather than declining, criticism mounted. Conservatives attacked the New Deal as socialistic. In 1934 several business leaders, joined by an embittered Al Smith, formed the anti-New Deal American Liberty League. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce blasted the New Deal. Anti-Roosevelt jokes circulated among the rich, many of whom denounced him as a traitor to his class.

But the New Deal remained popular, reflecting both its achievements and FDR’s political skills. Assisted by speechwriters and publicists, Roosevelt commanded the political stage. Pursuing his “national unity” theme, Roosevelt exhorted everyone to join the battle for economic recovery just as Americans had united in 1917 against a foreign foe. Although Republican newspaper publishers remained hostile, FDR enjoyed good relations with the working press. He loved bantering with reporters, and they responded by portraying his administration favorably.

In contrast to Hoover, Roosevelt loved public appearances and took naturally to radio. Frances Perkins described his radio talks, “His head would nod and his hands would move in simple, natural, comfortable gestures. His face would smile and light up as though he were actually sitting on the front porch or in the parlor with [his listeners].” Roosevelt’s mastery of radio provided a model for his successors in the era of television.

The 1934 midterm election ratified the New Deal’s popularity. Reversing the usual pattern, the Democrats increased their congressional majorities. As for FDR, Kansas journalist William Allen White observed, “He’s been all but crowned by the people.” As the returns rolled in, Harry Hopkins exulted to a group of New Deal friends, “Boys, this is our hour!”

Despite this seeming vote of confidence, the political scene was highly unstable in 1934–1935. While conservatives criticized the New Deal for going too far, critics on the left attacked it for not going far enough. Socialists and communists ridiculed Roosevelt’s efforts to include big business in his “all-American team.” Clifford Odets’ 1935 play Waiting for Lefty portrayed noble workers battling evil bosses and ended by inciting the audience to chant “Strike! Strike! Strike!”.

Pushing the New Deal’s experimental spirit still further, demagogues peddled more radical social and economic programs. The Detroit Catholic priest and radio spellbinder Charles Coughlin attacked FDR as a “great betrayer and liar,” made anti-Semitic allusions, and called for nationalization of the banks. For a time, Coughlin’s followers, organized as the National Union of Social Justice and drawn mainly from the lower middle class, seemed a potent force.

Meanwhile, California physician Francis Townsend proposed that the government pay two hundred dollars a month to all retired citizens, requiring them to spend the money within thirty days. This plan, Townsend insisted, would help the elderly, stimulate the economy, and open up jobs by encouraging retirement. The scheme would have bankrupted the nation, but many older citizens, especially in California, rallied to Townsend’s banner.

FDR’s wiliest rival was flamboyant Huey Long of Louisiana. A country lawyer elected governor of Louisiana in 1928, Long built highways, schools, and public housing. He roared into Washington as a senator in 1933, preaching his “Share Our Wealth” program: a 100 percent tax on all incomes over $1 million and appropriation of all fortunes in excess of $5 million. With this money, Long promised, every family could enjoy a comfortable income, a house, a car, old-age benefits, and free college education. “Every man a king,” Long proclaimed, and millions responded. By 1935 he boast-
ed 7.5 million supporters. The title of his 1935 book, My First Days in the White House, made clear his ultimate goal. An assassin’s bullet killed Long that September, but his organization survived.

Responding vigorously to these challenges, Roosevelt regained the political high ground in 1935 with a bold series of legislative initiatives. The result was a fresh surge of social legislation that rivaled that of the Hundred Days.

**THE NEW DEAL CHANGES COURSE, 1935–1936**

As the spirit of national unity faded and Roosevelt faced criticism from the left and right, he abandoned the unity theme and veered leftward. In 1935–1936, Roosevelt pushed through a bundle of reform measures so impressive that some call this phase the Second New Deal (see Table 24.2). His commitment to fighting the depression and to an activist role for government continued. But while he had initially tried to win the support of all Americans including big business, from 1935 on FDR increasingly criticized the wealthy and the business class, and focused on aiding the most disadvantaged Americans.

In his January 1935 State of the Union address, Roosevelt offered six initiatives reflecting his new priorities: an expanded public-works program, assistance to the rural poor, support for organized labor, benefits for retired workers and other needy groups, tougher business regulation, and heavier taxes on the well-to-do. These goals shaped his program thereafter.

**Expanding Federal Relief**

With unemployment still high, Congress passed the $5 billion Emergency Relief Appropriation Act in April 1935. Roosevelt swiftly set up the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and put Harry Hopkins in charge. Like the Civil Works Administration of 1933–1934, the WPA funneled assistance directly to individuals. Roosevelt insisted that the WPA provide work, not handouts, for the jobless. Over its eight-year life, the WPA employed more than 8 million Americans; pumped $11 billion into the economy; constructed or improved 650,000 miles of roads; built or repaired 124,000 bridges; and erected 125,000 schools, hospitals, post offices, and other public buildings.

The WPA also assisted writers, performers, and artists. In the South, WPA workers collected the reminiscences of former slaves. The Federal Writers’ Project employed jobless authors to produce state guides and histories of ethnic and immigrant groups. Under the Federal Music Project, unemployed musicians gave free concerts, often featuring American composers. By 1938 more than 30 million Americans had attended an FMP concert.

The Federal Theatre Project (FTP) employed actors. One FTP project, the Living Newspaper, which dramatized contemporary social issues, was criticized as New Deal propaganda. Marc Blitzstein’s radical musical The Cradle Will Rock (1937), which had FTP funding, was cancelled by nervous WPA officials before the opening-night performance. The cast and audience defiantly walked to another theater, and the show went on. FTP drama companies touring small-town America gave many their first taste of theater. Artists working for the Federal Arts Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 24.2</th>
<th>Major Later New Deal Legislation (November 1933–1938)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nov. 1933</td>
<td>Civilian Works Administration</td>
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<td>1934</td>
<td>Civil Works Emergency Relief Act</td>
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<td>Home Owners’ Loan Act</td>
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<td>Securities Exchange Act (Securities and Exchange Commission)</td>
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<td>Communications Act (Federal Communications Commission)</td>
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<td>Federal Farm Bankruptcy Act</td>
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<td></td>
<td>National Housing Act (Federal Housing Administration)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taylor Grazing Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Emergency Relief Appropriations Act (Works Progress Administration)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National Youth Administration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>National Labor Relations Act (Wagner Act)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Revenue Act of 1935</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Social Security Act</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public Utilities Holding Company Act</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Banking Act of 1935</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Resettlement Administration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Rural Electrification Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>National Housing Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenancy Act (Farm Security Administration)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>Fair Labor Standards Act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938</td>
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</table>
designed posters, offered school courses, and decorated post offices and courthouses with murals.

Harold Ickes’ Public Works Administration, after a slow start, now picked up steam, expending more than $4 billion over its life span. PWA workers completed some thirty-four thousand construction projects, including dams, bridges, and public buildings. Among the PWA’s undertakings were New York City’s Triborough Bridge and Lincoln Tunnel, and the awesome Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River.

With heavy relief spending came large federal budget deficits, cresting at $4.4 billion in 1936. These deficits were covered by government borrowing. According to British economist John Maynard Keynes, governments should deliberately use deficit spending during depressions to fund public-works programs, thereby increasing purchasing power and stimulating recovery. The New Deal approach, however, was not Keynesian. Because all the dollars spent on relief and recovery programs were withdrawn from the economy through taxation or government borrowing, the stimulus effect was nil. FDR saw deficits as an unwelcome necessity, not a positive good.

**Aiding Migrants, Supporting Unions, Regulating Business, Taxing the Wealthy**

The second phase of the New Deal was more frankly geared to the interests of workers, the poor, and the disadvantaged. Social-justice advocates like Frances Perkins and Eleanor Roosevelt helped shape this program, but so did hard-headed politics. Looking to 1936, FDR’s political advisers feared that the followers of Coughlin, Townsend, and Long could siphon off enough votes to cost him the election. This worry underlay FDR’s 1935 political agenda.

The Second New Deal’s agricultural policy addressed the plight of sharecroppers (a plight the AAA had helped create) and other poor farmers. The Resettlement Administration (1935), directed by Rexford Tugwell, made loans to help tenant farmers buy their own farms and to enable displaced sharecroppers, tenants, and dust-bowl migrants move to more productive areas. The Rural Electrification Administration, also started in 1935, made low-interest loans to utility companies and farmers’ cooperatives to extend electricity to the 90 percent of rural America that still lacked it. By 1941, 40 percent of U.S. farms enjoyed electric power.

The agricultural-recovery program suffered a setback in January 1936 when the Supreme Court declared the Agricultural Adjustment Act unconstitutional. The processing tax that funded the AAA’s subsidies, the court held, was an illegal use of the government’s tax power. To replace the AAA, Congress passed a soil-conservation act that paid farmers to plant grasses and legumes instead of soil-depleting crops such as wheat and cotton (which also happened to be the major surplus commodities).

Organized labor won a key victory in 1935, again thanks to Senator Robert Wagner. During the New Deal’s national-unity phase, FDR had criticized Wagner’s campaign for a prolabor law as “special interest” legislation. But Wagner persisted, and in 1935, when the Supreme Court ruled the NIRA, including Section 7a protecting union members’ rights, unconstitutional, FDR called for
a labor law that would survive constitutional scrutiny. The National Labor Relations Act of July 1935 guaranteed collective-bargaining rights, permitted closed shops (in which all employees must join a union), and outlawed such management tactics as blacklisting union organizers. The law created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to supervise shop elections and deal with labor-law violations. The Wagner Act, as it was called, stimulated a wave of unionization (see below).

The Second New Deal’s more class-conscious thrust shaped other 1935 measures as well. The Banking Act strengthened the Federal Reserve Board’s control over the nation’s financial system. The Public Utilities Holding Company Act, targeting the sprawling public-utility empires of the 1920s, restricted gas and electric companies to one geographic region.

In 1935, too, Roosevelt called for steeper taxes on the rich to combat the “unjust concentration of wealth and economic power.” Congress responded with a revenue act, also called the Wealth Tax Act, that raised taxes on corporations and on the well-to-do to a maximum of 75 percent on incomes above $5 million. Though this law had many loopholes and was not quite the “soak the rich” measure some believed, it did express the Second New Deal’s more radical spirit.

The Social Security Act of 1935; End of the Second New Deal

The Social Security Act of 1935, perhaps the most important of all New Deal laws, stands out for its long-range significance. Drafted by a committee chaired by Frances Perkins, this measure had complex sources, including Progressive Era ideas and the social-welfare programs of England and Germany. It established a mixed federal-state system of workers’ pensions; unemployment insurance; survivors’ benefits for victims of industrial accidents; and aid for disabled persons and dependent mothers with children.

Taxes paid partly by employers and partly by workers (in the form of amounts withheld from their paychecks) funded the pension and survivors’ benefit features. This payroll-withholding provision helped bring on a recession in 1937. But it made sense politically because workers would fight any effort to end a pension plan they had contributed to. As Roosevelt put it, “With those taxes in there, no damned politician can ever scrap my social security program.”

The initial Social Security Act paid low benefits and bypassed farmers, domestic workers, and the self-employed. But it established the principle of federal responsibility for social welfare and laid the foundation for a vastly expanded welfare system in the future.

By September 1935, when Congress adjourned, the Second New Deal, with its historic record of legislative accomplishment, was complete. Without embracing the panaceas preached by Coughlin, Townsend, or Long, FDR had addressed the grievances they had exploited. Although conservatives called this phase of the New Deal “antibusiness,” FDR always insisted that he had saved capitalism by addressing the social problems it spawned. During much of the post-Civil War era the business class had dominated government, marginalizing other groups. Business remained influential in the 1930s, but as the New Deal evolved, it increasingly acted as a broker for all organized interest groups, including organized labor, not just corporate America. And in 1935, with an election looming, New Deal strategists reached farther still, to address the situation of sharecroppers and migrant workers, the disabled, the elderly, needy mothers with dependent children, and others whose plight had rarely concerned politicians of the past.

In the process, the New Deal vastly expanded the role of the federal government in American life, as well as the power of the presidency. Building on precedents set by Theodore Roosevelt a generation earlier, FDR so dominated the politics of the 1930s that Americans began to expect presidents to offer “programs,” address national issues, and shape the terms of public debate. This decisively altered the balance of power between the White House and Congress. The New Deal’s importance thus lies not only in specific laws, but also in the way it redefined the scope of the executive branch and, more broadly still, the social role of the state.

The 1936 Roosevelt Landslide and the New Democratic Coalition

With the Second New Deal in place, FDR faced the 1936 campaign with confidence. “There’s one issue . . . ,” he told an aide; “it’s myself, and people must be either for me or against me.”

The Republican candidate, Governor Alfred Landon of Kansas, was a fiscal conservative who nevertheless believed that government must address social issues. Landon proved to be an earnest if inept campaigner. (“Wherever I have gone in this country, I have found Americans,” he revealed in one speech.) When Republicans lambasted FDR’s alleged dictatorial ambitions and charged that the social security law would require all workers to wear metal dog tags, he struck
back with his usual zest. Only the forces of “selfishness and greed” opposed him, he declared at an enthusiastic election-eve rally in New York City, adding, “They are united in their hatred for me—and I welcome their hatred.”

In the most crushing electoral victory since 1820, FDR carried every state but Maine and Vermont (see Table 24.3). Landon even lost Kansas. Pennsylvania went Democratic for the first time since 1856. The Democrats increased their already top-heavy majorities in Congress. Roosevelt buried his minor-party opponents as well. Socialist Norman Thomas received under 200,000 votes, the Communist party’s presidential candidate only about 80,000. The Union party, a coalition of the Coughlinites, Townsendites, and Huey Long supporters who had appeared so formidable in 1935, polled only 892,000 votes.

FDR’s 1936 landslide victory announced the emergence of a potent new Democratic coalition. Since Reconstruction, the Democrats had counted on three bases of support: the white South, parts of the West, and urban white ethnic voters mobilized by big-city Democratic machines. FDR retained and solidified these centers of strength. He rarely challenged state or local party leaders who produced the votes, whether they supported the New Deal or not. In Virginia he even withdrew support from a pro-New Deal governor who clashed with the state’s conservative but powerful Democratic senators. When the Democratic boss of Jersey City, Frank Hague, faced mail tampering charges, FDR said to Jim Farley, “Tell Frank to knock it off... but keep this thing quiet because we need Hague’s support if we want New Jersey.”

Building on Al Smith’s urban breakthrough in 1928, FDR carried the nation’s twelve largest cities. Not only did New Deal relief programs aid city-dwellers, but Roosevelt wooed them persuasively. When the presidential entourage swept through cities like New York and Boston, cheering crowds lined the route. FDR also appointed many representatives of the newer urban-immigrant groups, including Catholics and Jews, to New Deal positions.

Expanding the Democratic base, FDR reached out to four partially overlapping groups: farmers, union members, northern blacks, and women. Midwestern farmers, long rock-ribbed Republicans, liked the New Deal’s agricultural program and switched to Roosevelt. In Iowa, where Democrats had garnered scarcely 20 percent of the vote in the 1920s, FDR won decisively in 1936. Organized labor also joined the New Deal coalition. The unions pumped money into Roosevelt’s campaigns (although far less than business gave the Republicans), and union members voted overwhelmingly for Roosevelt. Despite his early foot dragging on the Wagner bill, FDR’s reputation as a “friend of labor” proved unassailable.

Although most southern blacks remained disfranchised, northern blacks voted in growing numbers, and as late as 1932 two-thirds of them went for Hoover, leading one exasperated African-American editor to advise: “[T]urn Lincoln’s picture to the wall. That debt has been paid in full.” The New Deal era saw a historic shift. In 1934 Chicago’s black voters replaced Republican Congressman Oscar DePriest with a Democrat. In 1936, 76 percent of black voters supported FDR.

In economic terms, this shift made sense. Owing mainly to racial discrimination, blacks’ unemployment rates in the 1930s surpassed those of the work force as a whole. Thus, jobless blacks benefited heavily from New Deal relief programs.

On issues of racial justice, however, the New Deal’s record was mixed at best. Some NRA codes contained racially discriminatory clauses, leading black activists to dismiss the agency as “Negroes Ruined Again.” TVA and other New Deal agencies tolerated racial bias. Lynchings increased in the 1930s as some whites translated economic worries into racial aggression, but Roosevelt kept aloof from the NAACP’s campaign to make lynching a federal crime. An antilynching bill passed the House of Representatives in 1935, but southern Democratic senators killed it with a filibuster. To protect his legislative program and retain southern white voters, FDR did little. Blacks must realize, the NAACP concluded bitterly, “that... the Roosevelt administration [has] nothing for them.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Parties</th>
<th>Electoral Vote</th>
<th>Popular Vote</th>
<th>Percentage of Popular Vote</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Franklin D. Roosevelt</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>523</td>
<td>27,752,869</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfred M. Landon</td>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16,674,665</td>
<td>36.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William Lemke</td>
<td>Union</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>882,479</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 24.3 The Election of 1936**

The New Deal Changes Course, 1935–1936
In limited ways, however, FDR did address racial issues. Assuring an audience at Howard University, a black institution in Washington, D.C., that there would be “no... forgotten races” in his administration, Roosevelt cautiously worked to rid New Deal agencies of blatant racism. He appointed more than a hundred blacks to policy-level and judicial positions, including Mary McLeod Bethune as director of minority affairs in the National Youth Administration. Bethune, a Florida educator, head of the National Council of Negro Women, and a friend of Eleanor Roosevelt, led the so-called black cabinet that linked the administration and black organizations. The “Roosevelt Supreme Court” that took shape after 1936 issued antidiscrimination rulings in cases involving housing, voting rights, wage inequity, and jury selection.

The New Deal also supported racial justice in symbolic ways. In 1938, when a meeting of the interracial Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama, was segregated in compliance with local statutes, Mrs. Roosevelt pointedly placed her chair halfway between the white and black delegates. In 1939, when the Daughters of the American Revolution barred black contralto Marian Anderson from performing in Washington’s Constitution Hall, Mrs. Roosevelt resigned from the organization, and Harold Ickes arranged an Easter concert by Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial. Even symbolic gestures outraged many southern whites. When a black minister delivered the invocation at the 1936 Democratic convention, Senator Ed Smith of South Carolina noisily stalked out.

The Roosevelt administration courted women voters. The head of the Democratic party’s women’s division, Molly Dewson, a friend of the Roosevelts, led this effort. In the 1936 campaign Dewson mobilized fifteen thousand women who went door to door distributing flyers describing New Deal programs. “[W]e did not make the old-fashioned plea that our nominee was charming,” she later recalled; “...we appealed to [women's] intelligence.”

Unlike earlier feminists, Dewson did not promote a specifically feminist agenda. New Deal efforts for economic recovery and social welfare, she argued, served the best interests of both sexes. She did, however, push for more women in federal policy-level positions. FDR appointed not only the first woman cabinet member but also the first woman ambassador and unprecedented numbers of female federal judges. Through Dewson’s efforts, the 1936 Democratic platform committee reflected a fifty-fifty gender balance.

Symbolic gestures and the appointment of a few blacks and women ought not be overemphasized. Racism and sexism pervaded American society in the 1930s, and Roosevelt, preoccupied with the economic crisis, did relatively little to change things. That challenge would await a later generation.

The Environment, the West, and Indian Policy

Environmental issues loomed large in the 1930s, reflecting FDR’s own priorities. As early as 1910, in the New York Senate, he had sought to regulate logging that threatened wildlife. As president, he prodded the Civilian Conservation Corps to plant trees, thin forests, and build hiking trails.

Soil conservation emerged as a major priority. The Great Plains dust storms of the 1930s resulted not only from drought but also from years of overgrazing and unwise farming practices. Throughout history, periodic drought had struck the Great Plains beyond the hundredth meridian, which bisects central Kansas. But the dust storms were not inevitable. For decades settlers had used ever more powerful tractors and combines to cultivate more land. In the process they had plowed up the grama-buffalo grass and other native grasses that anchored the soil, leaving the topsoil exposed to parching winds when the rains failed. By the 1930s, 9 million acres of farmland had been lost to erosion in the Great Plains, the South, and elsewhere, with more in jeopardy.

The Department of Agriculture’s Soil Conservation Service set up projects to demonstrate the value of contour plowing, crop rotation, and soil-strengthening grasses. The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934—enacted as dust clouds darkened the skies over Washington, D.C.—restricted the grazing on public lands that had contributed to the problem. The TVA helped control the floods that worsened erosion in the Tennessee valley.

New Deal planners avidly promoted the national-park movement. Olympic National Park in Washington, Virginia’s Shenandoah National Park, and Kings Canyon National Park in California all date from the 1930s. The administration also established some 160 new national wildlife refuges. Roosevelt even closed a Utah artillery range that threatened a nesting site of the endangered trumpeter swan.

The wilderness movement won powerful new adherents. In 1935 Robert Marshall of the U.S. Forest Service and environmentalist Aldo Leopold helped found the Wilderness Society to lobby for the cause. Under pressure from wilderness advocates, Congress set aside a large portion of Kings Canyon National Park as a wilderness area. These movements sometimes created unusual alliances. For example, the National Wildlife...
Federation (1936) was funded by the firearms industry, which had an economic interest in preserving wilderness areas and wild game for hunters.

To be sure, today’s environmental issues—pollution, pesticides, dwindling fossil fuels, and so forth—received little attention in the 1930s. Most New Dealers welcomed ever-rising levels of energy consumption. The decade’s hydroelectric projects, while necessary at a time when most farmers still lacked electricity, nevertheless fed an ideology of boundless consumption that in retrospect seems heedless and wasteful. Nor did the ecological effects of these projects attract much attention. The Grand Coulee Dam, for example, destroyed salmon spawning on much of the Columbia River’s tributary system. As Joseph E. Taylor shows in *Making Salmon: An Environmental History of the Northwest Fisheries* (1999), not only Grand Coulee but also other New Deal dams disrupted fragile ecosystems and adversely affected local residents, particularly Native American communities, that depended on them for their livelihood.

Still, when viewed in context, the New Deal’s environmental record remains impressive. While coping with a grave economic crisis, the Roosevelt administration focused a level of attention on environmental issues that had not been seen since the Progressive Era, and would not be seen again for a generation.

The depression profoundly affected the American West, particularly as hordes of hard-hit citizens, including dust-bowl refugees, sought a fresh start in the region, especially in California. Continuing a long-term demographic trend, the West Coast’s share of the population spiked upward in the 1930s, and Los Angeles jumped from tenth to fifth among U.S. cities.

The New Deal had a big impact on the West as well, especially because the federal government owned a third or more of the land in eleven western states. New Deal agencies and laws such as the AAA, the Soil Conservation Service, the Taylor Grazing Act, and the Farm Security Administration (see below) set new rules for western agriculture from the grain and cattle of the Great Plains to the Pacific Coast citrus groves and truck farms dependent on migrant labor.

Some of the largest PWA and WPA projects were built in the West, including thousands of public buildings (246 in Washington State alone) from courthouses and post offices to tourist facilities such as Timberline Lodge on Oregon’s Mount Hood. The highways linking the West to the rest of America, such as the Lincoln Highway from Philadelphia to San Francisco, Yellowstone Trail from Chicago to Seattle, and Route 66 from Chicago to Los Angeles, were upgraded in the 1930s with federal assistance.

Above all, the PWA in the West built dams—not only Grand Coulee, but also Shasta on the Sacramento River, Bonneville on the Columbia, Glen Canyon on the Colorado, and others. Boulder (later Hoover) Dam on the Colorado, authorized by Congress in 1928, was completed by the PWA. Despite their ecological effect, these great undertakings—among the largest engineering projects in human history—supplied hydroelectric power to vast regions while also contributing to flood control, irrigation, and soil conservation.

A New Deal initiative with special importance for the West was Harold Ickes’ National Planning Board of 1934, later renamed the National Resources Planning Board. This agency facilitated state and regional management of natural resources, including water, soil,
tribal culture. Despite the West’s celebrated “rugged individualism,” the New Deal’s emphasis on planning, in tandem with the PWA’s dams and infrastructure development, reshaped the public life of the region.

The 1930s also revived attention to the nation’s 330,000 Native Americans, most of whom endured poverty, scant education, poor health care, and bleak prospects. The Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 (see Chapter 17) had dissolved the tribes as legal entities, allocated some tribal lands to individual Indians, and offered the rest for sale. By the 1930s whites held about two-thirds of the land that Indians had possessed in 1887, including much of the most valuable acreage. Indians had been granted full citizenship and voting rights in 1924, but this did little to improve their lot.

In the 1920s a reform movement arose to reverse the Dawes Act approach. One reformer, John Collier, who had lived among the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico, founded the American Indian Defense Association in 1923 to preserve what he saw as the spiritual beauty and harmony of traditional Indian life. Gertrude Bonnin, a Yankton Dakota Sioux and president of the National Council of American Indians, while not sharing all of Collier’s goals, also pressed for reform.

Appointed commissioner of Indian affairs in 1933, Collier cadged funds from New Deal agencies to construct schools, hospitals, and irrigation systems on reservations, and to preserve sites of cultural importance. The Civilian Conservation Corps employed twelve thousand Indian youths to work on projects on Indian lands.

Pursuing his vision of renewed tribal life, Collier drafted a bill to halt the sale of tribal land, restore the remaining unallocated lands to tribal control, create new reservations, and expand existing ones. It also envisioned tribal councils with broad governing powers and required Indian schools to teach Native American history and handicrafts. Collier’s bill sparked opposition in western states. Some Indian leaders criticized it as a plan to transform the reservations into living museums and to treat Native Americans as an exotic people cut off from modern life. Indians who had succeeded as individual property owners or entrepreneurs rejected the bill’s tribalist assumptions. The bill did, indeed, reflect the idealism of well-meaning outsiders rather than the views of the nation’s diverse Native American groups.

The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, a compromise measure, halted the sale of tribal lands and enabled tribes to regain title to unallocated lands. But Congress scaled back Collier’s proposals for tribal self-government and dropped his calls for renewal of traditional tribal culture.

A majority of tribes approved the law (a requirement for it to go into effect), but opinion was divided. Of the tribes that voted, 181, representing 130,000 Indians, approved, while 77, comprising 86,000 persons, did not. America’s largest tribal group, the 40,000-strong Navajo, voted no, largely because the law, to promote soil conservation, restricted grazing rights.

Indian policy clearly remained contentious. But the law did reflect greater recognition of Indian interests and a greater acceptance of cultural diversity. The restoration of tribes as legal entities laid the groundwork for later tribal business ventures as well as tribal lawsuits seeking to enforce long-violated treaty rights (see Chapters 30 and 31).

The New Deal’s End Stage, 1937–1939

Buoyed by his landslide victory in 1936, Roosevelt launched an abortive attack on the Supreme Court. Bloodied by this divisive fight, an embattled FDR confronted both a stubborn recession and newly energized conservative opposition. With a few final measures in 1937–1938, the New Deal came to a close.

FDR and the Supreme Court

In 1937 the Supreme Court was made up of nine elderly justices, four of whom were archconservatives who abhorred the New Deal. Joined by others of more moderate views, these conservatives had invalidated the NRA, the AAA, and progressive state laws. With good reason, Roosevelt feared that key measures of the Second New Deal, including the Social Security Act and the Wagner Act, would meet a similar fate. Indeed, some corporate lawyers were so sure that the Social Security Act would be found unconstitutional that they advised their clients to ignore it.

In February 1937 FDR proposed a court-reform bill that would have allowed him to appoint an additional Supreme Court member for each justice over age seventy, up to a total of six. Roosevelt blandly insisted that he was concerned about the heavy workload of aging justices, but his political motivation was obvious.

FDR hoped that his personal popularity would assure support for his Court plan, but in fact the congressional and public reaction was sharply hostile. The Supreme Court’s size (unspecified in the Constitution) had fluctuated several times in the early Republic, but the membership of nine, dating to 1869, had become almost sacrosanct. Conservatives blasted the “court-
packing” scheme. Some feared a power grab by FDR in the wake of his electoral triumph; others resented the devious way FDR presented the plan. Even some New Dealers disapproved. When the Senate voted down the scheme in July, FDR quietly gave up the fight.

But was it a defeat? One conservative justice retired in May 1937; others announced retirement plans. In April and May the Court upheld several key New Deal measures, including the Wagner Act, as well as a state minimum-wage law. This outcome may have been Roosevelt’s objective all along. His challenge to the Court, plus his 1936 victory, sent powerful political signals that the justices heeded. From 1937 to 1939 FDR appointed four new members to the Supreme Court, laying the groundwork for a liberal majority that would long outlive Roosevelt and his New Deal.

The Roosevelt Recession

After improving in 1936 and early 1937, the economy again plunged ominously in August 1937. Industrial production slumped. Steel output sank to 19 percent of capacity. Jobless rates of more than 20 percent again dominated the headlines. This short but severe “Roosevelt recession” resulted in part from federal policies that reduced consumer income. Social-security payroll taxes withdrew some $2 billion from circulation. A drastic contraction of the money supply undertaken by the Federal Reserve Board to forestall inflation contributed to the recession. Furthermore, concerned about mounting deficits, FDR had seized on the signs of recovery to end or cut back the various New Deal relief programs.

Echoing Hoover, FDR assured his cabinet, “Everything will work out all right if we just sit tight and keep quiet.” Meanwhile, however, some New Dealers had been persuaded by the Keynesian view that deficit spending was the key to recovery. Aware that FDR would have to be persuaded by political rather than economic arguments, they warned the president of a political backlash if breadlines and soup kitchens returned. Convinced, in April 1938 FDR authorized new relief spending. WPA work-relief checks soon rained down on the parched economy, and the PWA received a new lease on life. By late 1938 unemployment declined and industrial output increased.

Final Measures; Growing Opposition

Preoccupied by the Supreme Court fight, the 1937–1938 recession, and a menacing world situation (see Chapter 25), FDR offered few domestic initiatives in his second term. Congress, however, enacted several significant measures.

The Farm Tenancy Act of 1937 created the Farm Security Administration (FSA), replacing Rexford Tugwell’s Resettlement Administration. The FSA made low-interest loans enabling tenant farmers and sharecroppers to buy family-size farms. Although the FSA generally bypassed the poorest farmers, considering them a bad credit risk, it did lend more than $1 billion through 1941, easing the plight of many rural folk battered by hard times.

The FSA operated camps offering clean, sanitary shelter and medical services to migrant farm workers living in wretched conditions. The FSA also commissioned some of the nation’s most gifted photographers to record the lives of tenants, migrants, and uprooted dust-bowl families. These FSA photographs helped shape a starkly realistic documentary style that pervaded 1930s’ popular culture, including Hollywood movies and Henry Luce’s photo magazine *Life*, launched in...
1936. Today they comprise a haunting album of depression-era images.

Other late New Deal measures set important precedents for the future. The Housing Act of 1937 appropriated $500 million for urban slum clearance and public housing, projects that would loom large in the 1950s. The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 banned child labor and set a national minimum wage (initially forty cents an hour) and a maximum workweek of forty hours. This measure reflected not only humanitarianism but also some northern legislators’ desire to undermine the competitive edge of the South, with its low wage scales. Despite many loopholes, the law improved conditions for some of the nation’s most exploited workers, and underscored the government’s role in regulating abuses by employers.

In a final stab at dealing with farm surpluses and low farm prices, the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1938 set up new procedures for limiting production of basic commodities. It also created a mechanism by which the government, in years of big harvests and low prices, would make loans to farmers and warehouse their surplus crops. When prices rose, farmers could repay their loans and market their commodities. This complicated system of price supports set the basic framework of federal agricultural policy for decades to come.

Overall, however, the New Deal’s pace clearly slowed after 1935. This reflected in part the rise of an anti-New Deal congressional coalition of Republicans and conservative southern Democrats. In 1937 this coalition teamed up to torpedo FDR’s proposal for a major reorganization of the executive branch. The plan made administrative sense, but critics warned darkly of a White House dictatorship.

The conservative coalition also slashed relief appropriations; cut corporate taxes in 1938; and in 1939 killed the WPA’s Federal Theatre Project, long a conservative target for its alleged radicalism. The 1939 Hatch Act, forbidding federal employees from participating in electoral campaigns, reflected conservatives’ suspicions that FDR was using WPA staff for campaign purposes. The Fair Labor Standards Act became law only after intense White House lobbying and watering down by conservatives. Congress and the public, lamented Harry Hopkins, had become “bored with the poor, the unemployed, the insecure.”

Although FDR campaigned actively in the midterm election of 1938, the Republicans gained heavily in the House and Senate and won a net of thirteen governorships. Roosevelt also tried to purge several prominent anti-New Deal Democratic senators, but his major targets all won reelection. Focusing on foreign affairs in his January 1939 State of the Union message, FDR proposed no new domestic measures and merely noted the need to “preserve our reforms.” The New Deal was over.

**Social Change and Social Action in the 1930s**

For a fuller picture of American life in the 1930s, we must look beyond the New Deal and take a broader view of society and culture. The depression’s effects were psychological and social as well as economic and political. The crisis was traumatic for the jobless and their families; it had significant implications for working women; and it affected all age groups. For industrial workers, African Americans, and migrant laborers, the activist climate of the New Deal stimulated movements to resist exploitation and discrimination.

**The Depression’s Psychological and Social Impact**

This decade of hard times brought untold human suffering and marked all who lived through it. Despite the New Deal, unemployment never fell below about 14 percent in the 1930s, and for much of the decade it was considerably higher. Even those who remained employed were often forced to take jobs below their level of training: college alumni pumped gas; business-school graduates sold furniture; a retired navy captain became an usher in a movie theater. With rural America the scene of bankruptcies, foreclosures, and abandoned farms, a quarter of all farm families had to accept public or private assistance during the 1930s.

Psychologists described “unemployment shock”: jobless persons who walked the streets seeking work and then lay awake at night worrying. When shoe soles wore out, cardboard or folded newspapers had to serve. Tacks pierced worn shoe heels, cutting the skin. “You pass . . . shoe-shops where a tack might be bent down,” one young man recalled, “but you can’t pull off a shoe and ask to have that done—for nothing.”

In the face of adversity, some people went to great lengths to maintain appearances. Advertisements for mouthwashes, deodorants, and correspondence courses exploited feelings of shame and failure. Women’s magazines described low-cost meals and other budget-trimming strategies. Habits of scrimping and saving acquired in the 1930s often survived into more affluent times. As Caroline Bird wrote in *The Invisible Scar*, a
social history of the 1930s, the depression for many boiled down to “a dull misery in the bones.”

New York Senator Robert Wagner called the working woman in the depression “the first orphan in the storm.” Indeed, for the 25 percent of American women employed in 1930, the depression brought difficult times. The female jobless rate stood at more than 20 percent through much of the decade. Women desperate to continue working often did so only by taking lower-paying jobs. A laid-off factory worker might become a waitress. Many young women new to the job market had to settle for temporary or part-time work. Competition from displaced male workers reduced the proportion of women even in such traditional “women’s professions” as library work, social work, and school teaching.

Married women workers faced harsh criticism. Although most worked because of economic necessity, they were accused of stealing jobs from unemployed men. Even Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins joined in the criticism, urging married women to stay out of the labor market so more jobless men could be hired. Many cities refused to employ married women as teachers and even fired women teachers who married.

Women workers also faced wage discrimination. In 1939, for example, the average woman teacher earned nearly 20 percent less than the average male with comparable experience. Female office workers generally earned far less than male factory workers. A number of the NRA codes authorized lower pay for women workers. The minimum-wage clause of the Fair Labor Standards Act helped some women workers, but did not cover many, including the more than 2 million women who worked for wages in private households.

A unionization campaign of the later 1930s (see below) had mixed effect on women workers. Some who were employed in the mass-production industries benefited, but the most heavily female sectors of the labor force—textile, clerical, service, and sales work—proved resistant to unionization. A 1937 campaign to unionize mostly female clerical workers was opposed by male bosses and many male union leaders, and made little progress.

Despite the roadblocks, the proportion of women working for wages crept up in the 1930s. In the face of criticism, the percentage of wage-earning married women increased from under 12 percent to nearly 16 percent. The crisis may actually have accelerated the long-term movement of women into the workplace as married women took jobs to augment the family income. One working wife explained, “One day in ‘32 [my husband] just went fishing . . . and he fished for the rest of the bad times. . . . So at twenty-eight, with two little girls, . . . I took a job as a salesclerk in the J.C. Penney, and worked through the Depression.”

As this woman’s account suggests, the depression had a profound effect on families, old and young alike. Bank failures wiped out the savings of many older Americans. By 1935 a million Americans over sixty-five were on relief. The birthrates fell in the early thirties as married couples postponed a family or limited its size. Family planning became easier with the spread of birth-control devices such as condoms and diaphragms. A declining birthrate plus reduced immigration held population growth in the 1930s to a scant 7 percent, in contrast to an average of 20 percent per decade between 1900 and 1930.

For parents, running a household in the 1930s often meant a struggle to make ends meet and hold the family together. They patched clothes, stretched food resources, and turned to public assistance when necessary. In homes with a tradition of strong male authority, the husband’s loss of a job and consequent erosion of self-esteem often had a devastating psychological impact. “I would rather turn on the gas and put an end to the whole family than let my wife support me,” one man told a social investigator. Desertions increased, and the divorce rate, after a dip in the early- and mid-1930s, edged upward, hitting a then all-time high by 1940.

As for young people, one observer compared them to a team of runners waiting for a starting gun that never sounded. High-school enrollment increased sharply, since many youths, seeing no jobs in view, simply stayed in school. The marriage rate declined as young people facing bleak prospects postponed this step. Commented Eleanor Roosevelt in 1934, “I have moments of real terror when I think we might be losing this generation. We have got to bring these young people into the active life of the community and make them feel that they are necessary.”

Children found vacation plans canceled, birthdays with few presents, and mealtimes tense with anxious discussions. Maria Tighe of Long Island, who was seven years old when the stock market crashed, recalled sneaking to 6 A.M. mass so her friends would not see her shoes, which were provided by the welfare bureau. Many children of the depression wrote sad letters to Eleanor Roosevelt. A Michigan high-school senior described her shame at not having a graduation dress. “I give all I earn for food for the family,” she explained. A thirteen-year-old Arkansas girl wrote, “I have to stay out of school because I have no books or clothes to wear.”
Out of necessity, many depression-era families also rediscovered traditional skills. They painted their own houses and repaired their own cars. Domestic skills such as baking and canning revived. Many who lived through the 1930s would later recall it as a time when adversity encouraged cooperation, savoring simple pleasures, and sharing scant resources.

For the neediest families, among them blacks, Hispanics, and southern sharecroppers, the depression imposed added misery on poverty-blighted lives. In his novel *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright vividly portrayed the desperate conditions of depression-era family life in Chicago's black slums. Yet not all was bleak. Emotional resilience, long-standing patterns of mutual aid, and survival skills developed through years of oppression helped many black families cope with the depression. In New York's Harlem a charismatic black religious leader calling himself Father Divine institutionalized this cooperative spirit by organizing kitchens that distributed thousands of free meals daily.

**Industrial Workers Unionize**

Between 1900 and 1930, the ranks of factory workers had soared from 3.7 million to 7.7 million. Yet most of these workers remained unorganized. Major industries such as steel, automobiles, and textiles had resisted attempts to unionize their workers. The prosperity and probusiness mood of the 1920s had further weakened the labor movement.

But in the 1930s hard times and a favorable government climate bred a new labor militancy. When the Wagner Act of 1935 guaranteed labor's right to bargain collectively, tremors of activism shook the American Federation of Labor. In November 1935 John L. Lewis of the United Mine Workers (UMW) and Sidney Hillman of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, frustrated by the AFL's slowness in organizing factory workers, started the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO) within the AFL. Young CIO activists preached unionization in Pittsburgh steel mills, Detroit auto plants, Akron rubber factories, and southern textile mills. Unlike the craft-based and racially exclusive AFL unions, CIO unions welcomed all workers in a particular industry, regardless of race, gender, or degree of skill.

In 1936 a CIO-sponsored organizing committee geared up for a major strike to win union recognition by the steel industry. (In fact, John L. Lewis had already secretly worked out a settlement with the head of U.S. Steel.) In March 1937 U.S. Steel recognized the steelworkers' union, granted a wage increase, and accepted a forty-hour workweek. Other big steel companies followed suit, and soon four hundred thousand steelworkers had signed union cards (see Figure 24.4).

Meanwhile, organizers had mapped a campaign to unionize General Motors, an antiunion stronghold. Their leader was a redheaded young autoworker and labor activist, Walter Reuther. Reuther's father, of German-immigrant stock, was a socialist who idolized Eugene V. Debs. When the depression hit, Reuther and his brother Victor rediscovered their socialist roots. In December 1936 employees at GM's two body plants in Flint stopped work and peacefully occupied the factories, carefully protecting the equipment and the cars on the assembly lines. This “sit-down strike” paralyzed GM's production.

Although women workers did not participate in the plant occupation (to avoid gossip that might discredit the strike), they picketed on the outside. A Women's Auxiliary organized by strikers' wives, sisters, and daughters fed the striking workers, set up a speakers' bureau, and marched through downtown Flint.

GM's management responded by calling in local police to harass the sit-down strikers, sending spies to union meetings, and threatening to fire strikers. A January 1937 showdown with the police at one of the body plants led to the formation of the Women's Emergency Brigade, on twenty-four-hour alert for picket
duty. With red berets and armbands, Emergency Brigade members played a key role during the rest of the strike. Perhaps recalling the army’s eviction of protesting veterans from Washington in 1932, GM asked the Roosevelt administration and the governor of Michigan to send troops to expel the strikers by force. Both officials declined, however. Although FDR disapproved of the sit-down tactic, he refused to intervene with troops.

On February 11 GM signed a contract recognizing the United Automobile Workers (UAW). Bearded workers who had vowed not to shave until victory was won streamed out of the plants. As Chrysler fell into line also, the UAW soon boasted more than four hundred thousand members. Unionization of the electrical and rubber industries moved forward as well.

In 1938 the Committee for Industrial Organization broke with the AFL to become the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a 2-million-member association of industrial unions including the autoworkers. In response to the CIO challenge, the AFL began to adapt to the changed nature of the labor force. Overall, union membership in the United States shot from under 3 million in 1933 to over 8 million in 1941.

Some big corporations fought on. Henry Ford hated unions, and his tough lieutenant Harry Bennett organized a squad of union-busting thugs to fight the UAW. In 1937 Bennett’s men viciously beat Walter Reuther and other UAW officials outside Ford’s plant near Detroit. Not until 1941 did Ford yield to the union’s pressure.

The Republic Steel Company, headed by a union hater named Tom Girdler, dug in as well. Even after U.S. Steel and other major steelmakers signed with the CIO, Republic and a group of smaller companies known collectively as “Little Steel” resisted. In May 1937 workers in twenty-seven Little Steel plants, including Republic’s factory in South Chicago, walked off the job. Anticipating the strike, Girdler had assembled an arsenal of riot guns and tear gas. On May 30, Memorial Day, a mass of strikers approached over 250 police guarding the factory. When someone threw a large stick at the police, they responded with a hail of gunfire that left four strikers dead and scores wounded. A blue-ribbon investigative committee found that the killings had been “clearly avoidable by the police.” In 1941, under growing pressure, the Little Steel companies, including Republic, finally accepted the CIO union.

Another holdout was the textile industry, with over six hundred thousand workers, mostly in the South and 40 percent female. Most textile workers earned very low wages and had no recourse against autocratic bosses. The AFL’s United Textile Workers had made little headway in the 1920s owing to a series of failed strikes, a lack of support from AFL officials, and a policy of admitting only skilled workers. In 1934 the CIO launched its own drive to organize textile workers. Some four hundred thousand workers went on strike, but the mill owners viciously fought back. Southern governors mobilized the National Guard to fight the strike. Several strikers were killed, many wounded, and thousands arrested. The strike failed, and the 1930s ended with most textile workers still unorganized.

Also left behind by this unionizing wave was a large pool of low-paid workers—domestics, agricultural laborers, department-store clerks, and restaurant and laundry workers, for example—who tended to be women, blacks, or recent immigrants. Overall, more than three-quarters of nonfarm workers remained unorganized in 1940. Nevertheless, the unionization of key sectors of America’s industrial work force ranks as one of the decade’s most memorable developments.

Why did powerful corporations finally yield to unionization after resisting for so long? Certainly workers’ militancy and the tactical skill of labor leaders like Reuther were crucial. But labor’s successes also reflected a changed government climate. Historically, corporations had routinely called on the government to help
break strikes. Although this still occasionally happened in the 1930s, as in the failed textile-industry strike, in general the Roosevelt administration and key state officials refused to intervene on the side of management. The Wagner Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, and the oversight role of the National Labor Relations Board made clear that Washington would no longer automatically back management in labor disputes. Once corporate managers realized this, unionization soon followed.

Organized labor’s apparent unity by the end of the 1930s concealed some complex tensions. A hard core of activists, many of them advocates of radical social change, had led the unionizing drive. But most rank-and-file factory workers had no desire to overthrow the capitalist system. Indeed, many initially held back from striking, fearful for their jobs. But once the CIO’s militant minority showed that picket lines and sit-down strikes could win union contracts and tangible gains, workers signed up by the thousands. As they did, the radical organizers lost influence, and the unions became more conservative.

Reuther himself, despite his socialist roots, reflected the shift and tried to rein in the more radical spirits in the CIO unions. After World War II, in a different political climate, Reuther purged from the CIO some of the same leftists and communists who had led the organizational battles of the 1930s.

**Blacks and Hispanic Americans Resist Racism and Exploitation**

The depression also brought social changes to and stirred activism within the African-American and Hispanic communities. Black migration to northern cities continued in the 1930s, though at a slower rate than in the 1920s. Four hundred thousand southern blacks moved to northern cities in the 1930s, and by 1940 23 percent of the nation’s 12 million blacks lived in the urban North.

Rural or urban, life was hard. Black tenant farmers and sharecroppers often faced eviction. Among black industrial workers, the depression-era jobless rate far outran the rate for whites, largely because of racism and discriminatory hiring policies. Although black workers in some industries benefited from the CIO’s nondiscriminatory policy, workplace racism remained a fact of life.

Lynching and miscarriage of justice continued, especially in the South. Twenty-four blacks died by lynching in 1933. In 1931 an all-white jury in Scottsboro, Alabama, sentenced eight black youths to death on highly suspect charges of rape. In 1935, after heavy publicity and an aggressive defense, the Supreme Court ordered a new trial for the “Scottsboro Boys” because they had been denied legal counsel and blacks had been excluded from the jury. Five of the group were again convicted, however, and served long prison terms.

But a rising tempo of activism signaled changes ahead. The NAACP battled in courts and legislatures against lynching, segregation, and the denial of voting rights. The Urban League campaigned against businesses in black neighborhoods that employed only whites. Under the banner “don’t shop where you can’t work,” black protesters picketed and boycotted businesses that refused to hire blacks. In March 1935 hostility toward white-owned businesses in Harlem, fueled by more diffuse anger over racism and joblessness, ignited a riot that caused an estimated $200 million in damage and left three blacks dead.

The Communist party publicized lynchings and racial discrimination as part of a depression-era recruitment effort in the black community. A defense committee formed by the Communist party supplied lawyers for the “Scottsboro Boys”. But despite a few notable recruits (including the young novelist Richard Wright), few blacks joined the party.
Other minority groups also faced discrimination. California continued its efforts to prevent Japanese-Americans from owning land. In 1934 Congress set an annual quota of fifty for immigrants from the newly created Commonwealth of the Philippines, still a U.S. colony—lower than that for any other nation. Congress also offered free travel “home” for Filipinos long settled in the United States.

The more than 2 million Hispanic-Americans faced trying times as well. Some were citizens with ancestral roots in the Southwest, but most were recent arrivals from Mexico or Caribbean islands such as Cuba and Puerto Rico (a U.S. holding whose residents were and are American citizens). While the Caribbean immigrants (including those from Jamaica, a British colony) settled in East Coast cities, most Mexican newcomers worked as migratory agricultural laborers in the Southwest and elsewhere, or in midwestern steel or meatpacking plants.

As the depression deepened, Mexican-born residents endured rising hostility. The western trek of thousands of “Okies” fleeing the dust bowl worsened the job crisis for local Hispanic farm workers. By 1937 more than half of Arizona's cotton workers were out-of-staters who had supplanted Mexican-born laborers. With their traditional patterns of migratory work disrupted, Mexican-Americans poured into the barrios (Hispanic neighborhoods) of southwestern cities. Some later recalled signs warning “NO NIGGERS, MEXICANS, OR DOGS ALLOWED.”

Lacking work, half a million Mexicans returned to their native land in the 1930s. Many did so voluntarily; others were repatriated by immigration officials and local authorities. Los Angeles welfare officials announced free one-way transportation to Mexico. The annual savings in relief payments, they calculated, would more than offset the cost of sending a full train-load of repatriados to Mexico. Though the plan was “voluntary,” those who remained were denied relief payments or jobs with the various New Deal work programs. Under combined federal and local pressure, an estimated seventy thousand Mexicans left Los Angeles in 1931 alone.

Mexican-American farm workers who remained endured appalling conditions and near-starvation wages. A wave of protests and strikes (some led by Communist party organizers) swept California. A labor organization called the Confederación de Uniones de Campesinos y Obreros Mexicanos (Confederation of Unions of Mexican Workers and Farm Laborers) emerged from a 1933 strike of grape workers in El Monte, California. More strikes erupted in 1935–1936 from the celery fields and citrus groves around Los Angeles to the lettuce fields of the Salinas Valley.

Organizations like the Associated Farmers of California and the California Fruit Growers Exchange (which marketed its citrus under the brand name Sunkist) fought the unions, sometimes with violence. In October 1933 bullets presumably fired by someone hostile to the strikers ripped into a cotton pickers’ union hall in Pixley, California, killing two men and wounding others. Undeterred, the strikers won a 20 percent increase in pay. Other Mexican-American farm workers gained a few hard-fought victories. Striking cotton pickers, for example, increased the rate for a hundred pounds of cotton from sixty cents to seventy-five cents. These strikes awakened at least some Americans to the plight of one of the nation’s most exploited groups.
The American Cultural Scene in the 1930s

Hard times and the New Deal shaped American cultural life in the 1930s. While radio and the movies offered escapist fare, novelists, artists, playwrights, and photographers responded to the crisis as well. When the depression first struck, as we have seen, their view of U.S. society and of the capitalist system tended to be highly critical. As the decade wore on, however, a more positive and affirmative view emerged, reflecting both the renewed hope stimulated by the New Deal and apprehensions stirred by a deepening threat of war.

Avenues of Escape: Radio and the Movies

The standardization of mass culture continued in the 1930s. Each evening, millions of Americans gathered around their radios to listen to network news, musical programs, and comedy shows. Radio humor flourished as hard times battered the real world. Comedians like Jack Benny and the husband-and-wife team George Burns and Gracie Allen attracted millions.

So, too, did the fifteen-minute afternoon domestic dramas known as soap operas (for the soap companies that sponsored them). Despite their assembly-line quality, these daily dollops of romance and melodrama won a devoted audience, consisting mostly of housewives. Some wrote letters advising the characters how to handle their problems. Identifying with the ordeals of the radio heroines, female listeners gained at least temporary escape from their own difficulties. As one put it, “I can get through the day better when I hear they have sorrows, too.”

The movies were also extremely popular in depression America, when most people could still afford the twenty-five-cent admission. In 1939, 65 percent of Americans went to the movies at least once a week. The motion picture, declared one Hollywood executive, had become “as necessary as any other daily commodity.”

A few movies dealt realistically with such social issues as labor unrest and the sharecroppers’ plight. Two New Deal documentaries, *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, on the origins of the dust bowl, and *The River*, dealing with soil erosion and floods in the Mississippi valley, evoked the human and environmental toll of westward expansion.

Warner Brothers studio (which had close ties with the Roosevelt administration) made a series of movies in 1934–1936 celebrating the New Deal. And in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), director Frank Capra, the son of Italian immigrants, offered the idealistic message that “the people” would ultimately triumph over entrenched interests.

The gangster movies of the early thirties, drawing inspiration from real-life criminals like Al Capone and John Dillinger, served up a different style of film realism. Films like *Little Caesar* (1930) and *The Public Enemy* (1931) offered gritty images of urban America: looming skyscrapers; menacing, rain-swept streets; lonely bus depots and all-night diners; the rat-tat-tat of machine guns as rival gangs battled. When civic groups protested the glorification of crime, Hollywood simply made the police and “G-men” (FBI agents) the heroes, while retaining the violence. The movie gangsters played by Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney represented variants of the Horatio Alger hero struggling upward against adversity. Their portrayals appealed to depression-era moviegoers facing equally heavy odds.

Above all, Hollywood offered escape—the chance briefly to forget the depression. The publicist who claimed that the movies “literally laughed the big bad wolf of the depression out of the public mind” exaggerated, but cinema’s escapist function in the 1930s is clear. Musicals such as *Gold Diggers of 1933* (with its theme song, “We’re in the Money”) offered dancing, music, and cheerful plots involving the triumph of pluck over all obstacles. When color movies arrived in the late 1930s (see Technology and Culture: Sound, Color, and Animation Come to the Movies), they seemed an omen of better times ahead.

The Marx Brothers provided the depression decade’s zaniest movie moments. In comedies like *Animal Crackers* and *Duck Soup*, these vaudeville troupers of German-Jewish immigrant origins created an anarchic world that satirized authority, fractured the English language, and defied logic. Amid widespread cynicism about the economic and social order that had collapsed so spectacularly in 1929, the Marx Brothers’ mockery matched the American mood.

Thirties’ movies dealt with African Americans, if at all, largely in stereotypes. Hollywood confined black performers to such roles as the scatterbrained maid played by Butterfly McQueen in *Gone with the Wind* and the indulgent house servant played by tap dancer Bill Robinson and patronized by child star Shirley Temple in *The Little Colonel* (1935). Under the denigrating screen name Stepin Fetchit, black actor Lincoln Perry played the slow-witted butt of humor in many movies.
In representing women, Hollywood offered mixed messages. While many 1930s’ movie heroines found fulfillment in traditional marriage and subordination to a man, a few films chipped away at the stereotype. Joan Bennett played a strong-willed professional in *The Wedding Present* (1936) and Carol Lombard emerged as a brilliant comedienne in *My Man Godfrey* (1936). Mae West, brassy, openly sexual, and fiercely independent, mocked conventional stereotypes in *I’m No Angel* and other 1930s hits. Toying with would-be lovers and tossing off double entendres, West made clear that she was her own woman.

**The Later 1930s: Opposing Fascism; Reaffirming Traditional Values**

As the 1930s drew to a close, many Americans viewed the nation with a newly appreciative eye. It had survived the economic crisis. The social fabric remained whole; revolution had not come. As other societies collapsed into dictatorships, American democracy endured. Writers, composers, and other cultural creators reflected the changed climate, as despair and pessimism gave way to a more upbeat and patriotic outlook.

International developments and a domestic political movement known as the Popular Front influenced this shift. In the early 1930s, as we have seen, the U.S. Communist party attacked Roosevelt and the New Deal. But in 1935 Russian dictator Joseph Stalin, fearing attack by Nazi Germany, called for a worldwide alliance, or Popular Front, against Adolf Hitler and his Italian fascist counterpart, Benito Mussolini. (Fascism is a form of government involving one-party rule, extreme nationalism, hostility to minority groups, and the forcible suppression of dissent.) Parroting the new Soviet line, U.S. communists now praised Roosevelt and summoned writers and intellectuals to the antifascist cause. Many noncommunists, alarmed by developments in Europe, responded to the call.

The high-water mark of the Popular Front came during the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. In July 1936 Spanish fascist general Francisco Franco launched a revolt against Spain’s legally elected government, a coalition of left-wing parties. With military aid from Hitler and Mussolini, Franco won backing from Spanish monarchists, landowners, industrialists, and the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

In America, the cause of the anti-Franco Spanish Loyalists (that is, those loyal to the elected government) rallied support from writers, artists, and intellectuals who backed the Popular Front. The novelist Ernest Hemingway, who visited Spain in 1936–1937, was among the writers who support the Loyalists. In contrast to his disillusioned novels of the 1920s (see Chapter 23), Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) told of a young American volunteer who dies while fighting with a Loyalist guerrilla band. Looking back on these years, Hemingway recalled, “The Spanish Civil War offered something which you could believe in wholly and completely, and in which you felt an absolute brotherhood with the others who were engaged in it.”

The Popular Front collapsed in August 1939 when the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a nonaggression pact and divided Poland between them. Overnight, enthusiasm for working with the communists under the banner of “antifascism” faded. But while it lasted, the Popular Front helped shape U.S. culture and alerted Americans to threatening developments abroad.

The New Deal’s programs for writers, artists, and musicians, as well as its turn leftward in 1935–1936, contributed mightily to the cultural shift of the later 1930s as well. The satirical and cynical tone of the 1920s and early 1930s now gave way to a more hopeful view of grass-roots America. In John Steinbeck’s best-selling novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), an uprooted dust-bowl family, the Joads, make their difficult way from
Movies were a familiar part of the U.S. cultural landscape by the 1930s, but this decade brought technological advances that vastly increased their popularity. In 1920 movies were silent and black-and-white. By 1940 they had been transformed by sound, color, and animation.

From the earliest days of motion pictures, filmmakers had struggled to bring sound to the medium. Thomas Edison experimented with synchronizing phonograph recordings with the action on the screen. Warner Brothers, a new film studio in the 1920s, explored the commercial possibilities of this technology through a subsidiary company called Vitaphone. This method was complicated, and coordinating sound with the moving image proved difficult. Nevertheless, the most-famous early “sound” movie, Warner Brothers’ *The Jazz Singer* (1927) starring Al Jolson, used the Vitaphone technology. *The Jazz Singer* was actually a silent film with a few recorded songs and snatches of dialogue. But audiences sensed an important breakthrough and cheered when Jolson suddenly and prophetically declared: “Wait a minute, wait a minute. You ain’t heard nothin’ yet.” The first film featuring sound from beginning to end, Warner Brothers’ *Lights of New York* (1928), also used Vitaphone recordings.

Meanwhile, as early as 1900 an inventor had secured a patent for a different technology that involved adding a soundtrack to the film itself by means of a photoelectric cell. Development lagged until 1923, when radio pioneer Lee DeForest invented a technique he called Phonofilm. Fox film studio acquired Phonofilm, rechristened it “Movietone,” and introduced sound films far superior to those using Warner Brothers’ Vitaphone system.

Movies of the 1930s were a cacophony of sound: spoken dialogue, orchestras in musical extravaganzas, and squealing tires and explosive gunfire in gangster films. The Wurlitzer theater organs that had accompanied the silent movies gathered dust; stars of the silent era whose voices did not match their appearance faded. The coming of sound initially made movies more stilted and artificial by forcing actors to stand motionless near microphones hidden in trees, lamps, and flower pots, but this problem was soon solved. Another unanticipated consequence was to slow the export of U.S. films to non-English-speaking countries.

Color came more slowly, even though experiments with tinting motion-picture film dated to the 1890s. In 1915 two Americans, Herbert Kalmus and Daniel Comstock, developed a more advanced system, which they called Technicolor. It involved a camera with two film tracks and two apertures, one with a red filter and the other with a blue filter. The two films were then bonded
together in the production process. The first film made by this method was *Toll of the Sea* (1922).

This primitive technology was not very satisfactory, but the Technicolor company made improvements, notably a movie camera that could film the same scene simultaneously in the three primary colors, red, blue, and green, with the three films later combined into one. Two hit movies of 1939, *Gone With the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz*, introduced color to the masses. The latter had a particularly powerful effect because the opening scenes, set in Kansas, were black-and-white. When Dorothy awakens in Oz, the movie bursts into color.

Film animation, too, has a long history. *Gertie the Dinosaur*, an animated cartoon by Winsor McCay, a New York newspaper cartoonist, appeared in 1908. In the 1920s movie bills included simple cartoons featuring comic-strip characters such as Felix the Cat. The animation process was slow and labor-intensive, involving individual photographs of hundreds of drawings. A key breakthrough was “cel” animation, by which the moving parts could be sketched on celluloid sheets without redrawing the entire character.

By the late 1920s animation technology became more sophisticated, and theaters presented more and more cartoons. Walt Disney (1901–1966), a Chicago art student, moved to Los Angeles in 1923 to make animated cartoons. His most famous character, Mickey Mouse, first appeared in *Plane Crazy* in May 1928 and made his sound debut later that year in *Steamboat Willie*. *Three Little Pigs*, an all-color animated cartoon, delighted audiences in 1933. Donald Duck made his debut in *Orphan’s Benefit* (1936). Along with his technical genius, Disney rationalized the animation process and, like Henry Ford, put it on a mass-production basis. With *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), he moved from short cartoons to feature-length films. His *Fantasia* (1940), featuring imaginative and colorful visual sequences accompanying well-known musical works, was a watershed in animation history.

The cultural (and economic) impact of these technological developments was great. Thanks to sound, color, and animation—along with marketing innovations such as double features (1931) and drive-in theaters (1933)—the movie industry not only survived but prospered in the hard times of the 1930s. Movies provided cheap entertainment, and the technical innovations of these years added to their appeal and novelty.

The addition of sound, bringing spoken dialogue, music, and sound effects to the screen, was especially important. A series of musicals with elaborate dance routines choreographed by Busby Berkeley, such as *Footlight Parade* (1933), proved highly popular. Dancers Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers wove together music and dance in *Flying Down to Rio* (1933) and other films. Disney integrated music in many of his animated films.

The added realism that sound brought to films added to the alarm of the Catholic Legion of Decency and other conservative groups concerned about the moral effect on the young of sexual suggestiveness in romantic movies and brutal violence in gangster films. To forestall a movement to boycott or censor objectionable movies, Hollywood in 1934 adopted a production code that imposed strict rules on what could be shown on the screen.

The new technologies also affected the fortunes of the film industry. The high costs involved in converting to sound and color encouraged consolidation and mergers, reducing the number of smaller producers. As the studios borrowed heavily to acquire the new technologies, Wall Street gained an increasingly important behind-the-scenes role in the industry. The rise of corporate economic power in Hollywood had a subtle but distinct effect on film content, encouraging escapist, predictable formula films most likely to turn a profit, and discouraging riskier work and critical explorations of the darker corners of American society.

**Focus Questions**

- In what specific ways did the coming of sound, color, and animation increase the box-office appeal and entertainment value of movies in the depression decade of the 1930s?
- How did these new technologies affect the economics of the film industry itself?
Oklahoma to California along Route 66. Steinbeck stressed not only the strength and endurance of ordinary Americans in depression America, but also their social cooperation and mutual support. As Ma Joad tells her son Tom, “They ain’t gonna wipe us out. Why, we’re the people—we go on.” Made into a movie by John Ford, and starring Henry Fonda, *The Grapes of Wrath* stands as one of the most memorable cultural products of the 1930s.

In 1936 journalist James Agee and photographer Walker Evans spent several weeks living with Alabama sharecropper families while researching a magazine article. From this experience came Agee’s masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941). Enhanced by Walker Evans’s unforgettable photographs, Agee’s intensely personal work evoked the strength and decency of Americans living on society’s margins.

The new cultural mood also found expression on the stage. Thornton Wilder’s play *Our Town* (1938) portrayed a New England town in which everyday events become, in memory, infinitely precious. William Saroyan’s *The Time of Your Life* (1939) affectionately celebrated the foibles and virtues of a colorful collection of American “types” gathered in a San Francisco waterfront bar.

Composers, too, caught the spirit of cultural nationalism. In such works as *Billy the Kid* (1938), Aaron Copland drew upon American legends and folk melodies. George Gershwin’s 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*, adapted from a play by Dubose and Dorothy Heyward, portrayed black street life in Charleston, South Carolina.

Jazz surged in popularity thanks to swing, a flowing, danceable style originated by the pianist Fletcher Henderson and popularized by the big bands of Count Basie, Benny Goodman, Duke Ellington, and others. The Basie band started at Kansas City’s Reno Club, where, as Basie later recalled, “We played from nine o’clock in the evening to five or six the next morning, . . . and the boys in the band got eighteen dollars a week and I got twenty one.” Moving to New York in 1936, Basie helped launch the swing era.

Benny Goodman, of a Chicago immigrant family, had played the clarinet as a boy at Jane Addams’s Hull House. Challenging the color line in jazz, Goodman included black musicians like pianist Teddy Wilson and vibraphonist Lionel Hampton along with white performers in his orchestra. A turning point in the acceptance of jazz as a serious musical form came in 1938, when Goodman’s band performed at New York’s Carnegie Hall, a citadel of high culture.
In Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture (1998), historian Lewis Erenberg links swing to the politics of the later 1930s. In its optimism, innovativeness, and “democratic ethos,” he argues, swing “expressed in cultural form many of the themes of . . . the New Deal.”

The later 1930s also saw a heightened interest in regional literature, painting, and folk art. Zora Neale Hurston’s novel Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), exploring a black woman’s search for fulfillment, was set in rural Florida. In Absalom, Absalom! (1936) William Faulkner continued the saga of his mythic Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi. Painters Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri (a descendant of the nineteenth-century senator of the same name), John Steuart Curry of Kansas, and Grant Wood of Iowa struck strongly regional notes in their work.

Galleries displayed Amish quilts, New England weather vanes, and paintings by colonial folk artists. A 1938 show at New York’s Museum of Modern Art introduced Horace Pippin, a black Philadelphia laborer whose right arm had been shattered in World War I. In such paintings as John Brown Going to His Hanging, Pippin revealed a genuine, if untutored, talent. In 1939 the same museum featured seventy-nine-year-old Anna “Grandma” Moses of Hoosick Falls, New York, whose memory paintings of her farm girlhood enjoyed great popularity.

The surge of cultural nationalism heightened interest in the nation’s past. Americans flocked to historical re-creations such as Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village near Detroit and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, restored by the Rockefeller Foundation. In 1936–1939 Texans restored the Alamo in San Antonio, the “Cradle of Texas Liberty.” Historical novels like Margaret Mitchell’s epic of the Old South, Gone with the Wind (1936), became best-sellers. These recreations and fictions often presented a distorted view of history. Slavery was blurred or sentimentalized at Colonial Williamsburg and in Mitchell’s novel. “Texas Liberty” had a different meaning for the state’s African American, Indian, and Hispanic populations than it did for the patriotic organizations that turned the Alamo into a tourist shrine.

Streamlining and a World’s Fair: Corporate America’s Utopian Vision

The visual cultural of late 1930s’ America was also shaped by a design style called streamlining. This innovation originated in the 1920s when a group of industrial
designers, inspired by the romance of flight, introduced rounded edges and smoothly flowing curves into the design of commercial products. Streamlining appealed to American business in the 1930s. It made products more attractive to consumers—a vital consideration during the depression. When Raymond Loewy streamlined Sears Roebuck's Coldspot refrigerators, sales surged. Streamlined products also helped corporate America rebuild its tarnished image and present itself as the benevolent shaper of a better future. Products ranging from house trailers to cigarette lighters emerged in sleek new forms. Pencil sharpeners evolved into gleaming, aerodynamic works of art poised for takeoff. The streamlined service stations that Norman Bel Geddes designed for Texaco, he boasted, would make oil changes "a stimulating experience" rather than a boring necessity.

Under the theme "The World of Tomorrow," the 1939 New York World's Fair represented the high point of the streamlining vogue and of corporate America's public-relations blitz. The fair's instantly famous logo was the Trylon and Perisphere: a seven-hundred-foot needle and a globe that seemed to float on a circular pool of water. Inside the Perisphere, visitors found "Democracy," a revolving diorama portraying a thriving, harmonious city of the future.

The hit of the fair was Futurama, the General Motors exhibit designed by Norman Bel Geddes. Visitors entered a darkened circular auditorium where, amid piped-in music and a resonant recorded narration, a vision of America in the distant year of 1960 majestically unfolded. A multilane highway network complete with cloverleaf exits and stacked interchanges dominated the imagined landscape. A brilliant public-relations investment by GM, Futurama built support for the interstate highway system that would soon become a reality.

Also featuring such wonders as television and automatic dishwashers, the World's Fair did, indeed, offer a glimpse of "The World of Tomorrow" as a smoothly functioning technological utopia made possible by the nation's great corporations. A business magazine editorialized, "If there are any doubters left, a visit to the New York World's Fair should convince them that American business has been the vehicle which carried the discoveries of science and the benefits of machine production to the doorstep of American consumers." The fair epitomized corporate capitalism's version of the patriotism and hopefulness that pervaded American culture as the 1930s ended.

The hopefulness was mixed with muted fear. The nation had survived the worst of the depression, but danger loomed beyond the seas. The anxiety triggered
The menacing world situation surfaced on October 31, 1938, when CBS radio aired an adaptation of H. G. Wells's science-fiction story *War of the Worlds* directed by Orson Welles. In realistic detail, the broadcast reported the landing of a spaceship in New Jersey, the emergence of aliens with ray guns, and their advance toward New York City. The show sparked a panic as horrified listeners concluded that the end was at hand. Some jumped in their cars and sped off into the night. Others prayed. A few attempted suicide. Beneath the terror lay a more well-founded fear: of approaching war. For a decade, as Americans had coped with the depression, the international situation had steadily worsened. By October 1938 radio news bulletins warned of impending war between Germany and England.

The panic triggered by Orson Welles’s Halloween prank quickly changed to sheepish embarrassment, but the fear aroused by the real dangers looming on the horizon only escalated. By the time the New York World's Fair offered its vision of “The World of Tomorrow,” the actual world of 1939 had become very scary indeed.

**Conclusion**

**Readings**

Economists trace the Great Depression to weaknesses in the U.S. and world economies of the 1920s. These weaknesses, masked by the glow of prosperity, ranged from low farm prices and uneven income distribution to trade barriers, a glut of consumer goods, and problems in the money supply. The depression affected all facets of American life, from individual families to movies and radio programs that entertained millions. It also shaped the outlook of writers and other culture creators. From an initial mood of despair, the cultural climate by the end of the 1930s had become far more hopeful and affirmative.

The depression and the New Deal affected different groups in different ways. For residents of the Tennessee Valley and across the West, hydroelectric projects and other public works brought electric power and other major changes. For Native Americans, the era brought legislation restoring the legal status of tribes, laying the groundwork for economic revitalization and treaty claims in the future. For Mexican farm laborers, these years brought both the threat of deportation and strikes for better wages and working conditions. Women in the 1930s faced pressure to stay out of the workplace, so that men could find jobs. Many resisted these pressures, however, and the female labor force continued to grow.

The New Deal that so dominates the 1930s was hardly an unqualified success. Some New Deal programs failed, and full recovery proved elusive. As late as 1939 more than 17 percent of the labor force remained jobless. Only in 1943, as war plants boomed, was full employment finally achieved. And the New Deal had its blind spots. Apart from symbolic gestures, it only hesitantly addressed the issue of racism. While African Americans benefited economically from New Deal programs, black leaders sharply criticized the administration’s failure to address lynching and racial discrimination.

The New Deal shifted course over time. Initially Roosevelt focused on relief and economic recovery and welcomed big business in his depression-fighting coalition. In 1935, however, the New Deal adopted a more class-based approach. This “Second New Deal” addressed the plight of the poorest Americans, including sharecroppers and migrants; pursued tougher business regulation and higher taxes for the wealthy; and championed such fundamental and long-lasting legislative reforms as the Social Security Act, laying the groundwork of the welfare state, and the Wagner Act, guaranteeing workers’ right to unionize.

As the New Deal moved from fighting the depression to shifting the balance of power in American politics and advancing the well-being of those whom Roosevelt once called the “forgotten” Americans—a commitment that involved an unprecedented level of governmental involvement with social and economic issues—it set a new standard of what citizens could expect of their government. In its five-year span, the New Deal radically redefined the nation’s political agenda, the role of the federal government, and the nature of the presidency. For decades after, national political campaigns and public-policy debates would be shaped by differing opinions about the New Deal’s legacy.

Any evaluation of the New Deal must confront Franklin D. Roosevelt. Neither saint nor superman, he could be calculating and devious, superficially genial, and breezily casual about details. But for most Americans of the 1930s—and most historians since—his strengths outweighed his liabilities. His open, experimental approach served the nation well in a time of crisis. He once compared himself to a football quarterback, deciding which play to call after seeing how the last one worked out.

Above all, Roosevelt’s optimism inspired a demoralized people. “We Americans of today . . . ,” he observed to an audience of young people in 1939, “are characters in the living book of democracy. But we are also its
author. It falls upon us now to say whether the chapters that are to come will tell a story of retreat or a story of continued advance.”

## For Further Reference

### Readings


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For additional works please consult the bibliography at
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