

Up From the Dust Full Historical Background

Life on the Southern Great Plains

Until the arrival of European and American settlers in the late nineteenth century, the Southern Plains of the United States were predominantly grasslands, the home and hunting grounds of many Native American tribes and the range of untold millions of bison. In the late 1860s and 1870s, with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, the United States government forced most of the Great Plains Indians onto reservations, and opened the region to homesteaders. One strip of land south of Kansas and north of Texas remained unclaimed by either state, since it fell nearby the Indian Territory that would become Oklahoma. Known as “No Man’s Land,” it eventually became the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas, home to some of the largest cattle ranches in the country. In 1885-1886, severe winters killed most of the herds, ending the massive cattle drives and “Beef Bonanza” on the southern plains; only the largest ranches survived. The land was not ideal for agriculture, as extremely cold winters, high winds, dry hot summers, and unreliable precipitation plagued the region. A severe drought in the 1890s pushed most of the homesteaders off the land.

Life on the plains began to change in the early twentieth century as federal laws, farm mechanization, rainfall, and demand for wheat all aligned, encouraging farming on the Plains. In 1909, Congress passed the Enlarged Homestead Act, offering cheap public land in the Southern Plains that attracted farmers to the region. At the same time, farm mechanization increased dramatically. The number of manufacturers of farm tractors rose from six in 1905 to one hundred sixty in 1920, and generous bank loan programs put tractors within financial reach for many family farmers. The period from 1912 on through the 1920s saw above-average rainfall across the Great Plains, and during World War I the government guaranteed high wheat prices as demand for wheat rose. Production in the region increased dramatically, quadrupling the number of acres planted in wheat between 1910 and 1930. After the war ended, wheat prices remained high, and farmers continued to purchase land and equipment on credit to increase their production. This created a speculative bubble among Great Plains farmers that would burst with the onset of the Great Depression.

The Start of the Great Depression

On “Black Thursday”—October 24, 1929—the Wall Street stock market crashed. Throughout the 1920s, the government, through the Federal Reserve Board, had fueled Wall Street’s frenzied speculation by keeping interest rates low. Cheap money spurred the building boom of the 1920s, but it also enabled many investors to buy huge amounts of stock “on margin.” In effect, they had borrowed against the shares’ value and had used that borrowed money to purchase additional shares. While the market soared, investors made tremendous profits; but when it declined, brokerage firms called in their loans and investors lost their entire investments. The Federal Reserve eventually raised interest rates, but only after the crash. Although the vast majority of Americans owned no stock, few escaped the social impact of the 1929 market crash. Unemployment skyrocketed from fewer than 500,000 workers to more than four million between October and December 1929. Millions more could find only part-time work. Average real wages fell 16 percent in just two years.

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The effects of the stock market crash spread beyond the borders of the United States. As the center of world capitalism, the Wall Street crash sent tremors throughout the shaky system that had emerged after World War I. Banks failed and unemployment soared throughout the industrial world. Within the United States, high interest rates after the crash put enormous pressure on the banking system, especially on unstable rural banks and ethnic savings and loans that farmers, merchants, and tradesmen relied upon for easy credit. Uninsured by either state or federal authorities, more than 5,000 of these smaller financial institutions failed during the first three years of the Great Depression. Nine million people lost their savings accounts when banks closed.

How the Depression Impacted Farmers

In rural America, a terrible drought compounded the miseries of the Depression. In 1932, a drought hit the Great Plains; normal rainfall did not return for nine years. Wheat prices sank 50%, causing farm income to plummet. Many farmers did not even bother to harvest the crops they had planted. Although farm families could provide some of their own food, they earned too little cash to meet mortgage payments, service equipment loans, or pay their taxes. Hundreds of thousands of families lost their farms. With the drought came a series of terrifying dust storms. Clouds of dirt reaching to 8,000 feet rolled across the Plains states, sometimes accompanied by thunder, lightning, and powerful winds. A March 1935 storm carried off twice the amount of dirt excavated in building the Panama Canal, in the process destroying half the wheat crop in Kansas and the entire harvest in Nebraska. Dust made its way into homes, beds, food, clothes, and destroyed crops, livestock, and a whole way of life. The worst-hit area was dubbed “the Dust Bowl.”

Dry weather had caused the Dust Bowl, but the destructive way in which farmers also had been cultivating the land compounded the weather’s effects. When farmers began settling in the southern plains in the 1890s, they plowed up the grasses that had held the topsoil in place. The region had experienced droughts before, but the dry spell that hit in the 1930s, combined with the new cultivation patterns, generated a human-made ecological catastrophe. This coincided with a massive exodus of residents of the southern plains, known as the “Okie” or “Dust Bowl” migration to California. John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (and the popular film made from it) reinforced the mistaken view that everyone who migrated was fleeing the dust. In fact, while 16,000 farmers did flee the Dust Bowl, many more (about 400,000) migrated west overall for a variety of reasons. They came from a wider area of the Southwest and moved not only because of the drought, but also because agricultural prices had dropped so low and the growing mechanization of midwestern agriculture eliminated the need for a large rural labor force.

Joblessness and Homelessness Nationwide

In the months following the stock market crash, joblessness spread across the country. Unemployment struck hardest in large cities, in single-industry towns, in the Northeast and the Midwest, and among male blue-collar workers, both black and white. Material deprivation was only part of the human cost of the Depression. The psychological strains were severe, too. Almost everyone felt insecure. Those who had jobs feared losing them; those without work

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worried about what would become of their families. In the early years of the Depression, people generally blamed themselves for their troubles. This great crisis forced Americans out of their homes and onto the road. Many people fell behind on their rent or mortgage payments and lost their homes. By 1932, a quarter-million youths under age twenty-one (as well as many of their older counterparts) had left home in search of work or shelter, hitching rides or hopping freight trains in what one government agency called a “migration of despair.” Across the country, homeless Americans built squatter camps out of scrap lumber and metal, and called them “Hoovervilles” as a testament to President Hoover’s inadequate response to hard times.

As millions of men lost their jobs, working women, especially if married, faced increased job discrimination. People assumed that married women worked only to make “pin money.” Most cities banned married women from teaching. Even the American Federation of Labor, which had hundreds of thousands of female members, proposed that “preference of employment” be given to “those upon whom family or dependency rests,” by which they meant men. When women could find jobs, employers routinely paid them less than men, even for the same work.

Women were by no means the only group facing joblessness and discrimination. Many employers insisted that native-born white workers receive preference in employment. Mexican Americans were among the foremost victims of this revived racism. Nearly 500,000 Mexican nationals and their U.S.-born children returned to Mexico either voluntarily or by force during the Depression. Several states encouraged emigration by barring noncitizens from employment on public works projects, and many local governments and private relief agencies offered free rail fare to the Mexican border for those who were willing to leave. Separately, the Great Depression worsened the plight of African Americans, who often were already poor. African-American workers tended to work in the industries that were most affected by the economic downturn—unskilled manufacturing, construction, mining, and lumber. White workers displaced black ones in many of these difficult, low-status jobs, reversing much of the progress African Americans had made in moving into industrial work. In the South, where three-quarters of the African American population still lived, the drought compounded the misery that was engendered by rock-bottom cotton and tobacco prices. White landowners, fearful that African-American day laborers would refuse to pick the cotton if there was any other way to put food on the table, refused to allow relief programs before the fall harvest.

President Hoover’s Response to the Crisis

When the Depression struck, few Americans expected the federal government to take dramatic action. The government had barely 750,000 civilian and military employees (compared to more than five million today). The Post Office was the government agency that touched the lives of most Americans. There was no military draft and no aid for cities, schools, farmers, or the unemployed. Faced with America’s economic collapse, President Hoover thought that the primary role of the federal government should be to coordinate private, state, and local relief and recovery efforts rather than to launch major national initiatives. The key to recovery, he believed, was restoring business confidence, which meant keeping the budget in balance and avoiding any direct effort to regulate business or stimulate consumer demand. Hoover assured Americans the US economy itself was “on a sound and prosperous basis” and would soon

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recover. He set about encouraging the kind of voluntary cooperation among businessmen, farmers, and local governments that he had championed during World War I, and his years as commerce secretary in the 1920s. At his request, some major corporations held off wage cuts to maintain consumers' spending power. Charitable giving reached record levels, though never enough to alleviate mass unemployment. Hoover responded to the crisis of the agricultural economy, which preceded the stock market crash, by winning passage of the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1929. That legislation made available \$500 million for loans to marketing cooperatives to foster efficiency, limit surpluses, and raise prices. But the unprecedented government effort to bring order to the agricultural sector foundered on Hoover's voluntarist philosophy: the Marketing Act failed to provide the government with the authority to limit production, so farm prices continued to fall.

While Hoover made some attempts to increase government spending on public works and assistance to banks and farmers, these programs failed to have much of an impact. He refused to commit federal funds to supply basic needs, arguing that local entities should provide relief to suffering citizens. In 1932, only eight American states had any form of unemployment compensation, and few workers received retirement pensions from their employers. When provided, relief often took the form of "food orders" that could be used only to purchase groceries, with little or no money for rent, clothes, or medical care. Most recipients found this system demeaning. By 1932, only about one-quarter of the jobless received aid.

Organized Responses to the Great Depression

Communists and socialists played a large role in mobilizing discontent and turning the attention of the American people to the federal government as a solution to their problems. Radical activists in both groups thought that the inequality and exploitation that were endemic to capitalism had precipitated the Great Depression. In 1930 and 1931, under banners reading "Work or Wages" and "Fight, Don't Starve!" communists and socialists organized scores of demonstrations of the unemployed in major cities across the country. Communist-led Unemployed Councils often clashed with police when landlords or banks tried to evict families from their apartments or houses. Radicals often led the crowds that moved families and furniture back into their homes, and these disruptive violations of the law forced many landlords to think twice before putting a family on the street. Family farmers took militant direct action as well. By 1932, more than one-third of the farmland in states were scheduled for sale at auction because the farm owners had fallen behind on taxes or mortgage payments. Neighbors often aborted these sales by intimidating potential bidders, buying the farm themselves at a token price, and returning it to its original owner. In Alabama, communists organized the Sharecropper's Union in an attempt to protect agricultural workers who were especially vulnerable to falling cotton prices and unjust landlords.

Communists also organized "hunger marches," protest rallies demanding "work or wages" from local and state governments, during the early years of the Great Depression. A dozen states witnessed such marches in 1931, and national hunger marches took place in 1931 and 1932 with marchers descending on Congress demanding relief and unemployment insurance. While they failed to bring about new legislation, the marches brought increased public attention to the

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plight of the unemployed. In June 1932, a veterans' march on Washington, DC, had an even greater impact on the nation. After World War I, Congress had passed a bill promising each veteran a cash bonus to be paid in 1945. But the vets needed the money immediately, and in May 1932, a group of veterans from Portland, OR set out for Washington to press their case. Twenty thousand former servicemen soon set up camp in the capital. Prodded by Army Chief of Staff General Douglas MacArthur, who considered the Bonus Army a "mob" driven by the "essence of revolution," Hoover called out the regular army, which launched a tank and cavalry assault on the Bonus Army encampment, burning down their temporary shelters. Millions of citizens were horrified by images, reproduced in newspapers and on newsreels, of an army driving off a ragtag collection of men who had faithfully served their country and were now desperately seeking help. These early Depression protests helped workers and farmers to turn their attention beyond their neighborhoods and employers and to demand help with their problems from the state. They wanted more from the government, and they had the voice and votes to win it.

FDR and the New Deal

In his inaugural address, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt responded to these mass protests, acknowledging, "The nation calls for action, and action now." Roosevelt indeed took immediate action with a wide array of programs—collectively known as "the New Deal"—designed to restore production and stability in banking, agriculture, and industry. But Roosevelt was not a radical, nor were the overwhelming majority of his key appointees. Even as the government took on new responsibilities, Roosevelt sought to conserve as much of the nation's existing economic and social arrangements as possible.

Between Roosevelt's election in November 1932 and his inauguration in March 1933, the economy dipped to the lowest point of the entire Depression. A master of the use of radio, he assured the nation in his inaugural address that "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Roosevelt's enormous self-confidence, combined with paternal warmth and a plain, friendly manner, gave hope to millions. He later broadcast a radio series of "fireside chats" in which he explained his programs to the public, using easily digestible anecdotes. From the start, Roosevelt had come to embody the state as friend and protector.

Roosevelt's first task was to restore confidence in the financial system. Two days after taking office, he declared a national bank holiday and then called Congress into special session. The Roosevelt administration pushed through an Emergency Banking Act that regulated the banks, empowering the government to lend money to troubled banks, reorganize failed ones, and stop the hoarding of gold. Additional laws established the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, which guaranteed the security of most family savings, and the Securities and Exchange Commission, which required what FDR called "truth telling" in the stock market. To provide funds for the unemployed, Congress set up the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which immediately began spending \$1 billion a year—roughly 2% of the national income. Congress also approved the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). During the decade of its existence, the CCC provided temporary work for three million young men, who lived in military-style camps, constructed recreation facilities, and carried out conservation projects

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under the direction of army officers. Later in 1933, Roosevelt launched the Civil Works Administration (CWA), which quickly hired four million of the unemployed and put them to work on four hundred thousand small-scale projects, mainly road building and repair work. These emergency work relief programs employed more than ten million Americans. By putting real money in the pockets of the poor, they offered tangible evidence that the New Deal could touch the lives of ordinary Americans.

To restore prosperity to farmland America, the Roosevelt Administration pushed through an Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) to regulate production and prices for farmers, who made up one-quarter of the US population. Agriculture had been in a crisis for years because of low prices and chronic overproduction. Passed by Congress in the spring of 1933, the AAA used federal funds to pay farmers to reduce the size of their crops in order to force up commodity prices. To finance the payments to farmers, the government taxed food processors, who generally passed the new levy on to consumers in the form of higher costs. Separate government agencies promoted soil conservation and made loans at favorable rates to farmers who reduced their cultivated acreage. Since the planting season had already begun by the time the AAA became law, farmers who wanted benefit payments had to destroy crops and livestock. The destruction of food and fiber in the midst of Depression-bred want created a furor, because it highlighted the larger irrationalities that were embedded in the government's market-taming program. But the AAA boosted farm income by fifty percent within four years. Large commercial farmers benefited most, since they could make the greatest reductions in their crops and thereby receive the largest payments. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers found themselves worse off under the AAA. Legally, landowners were obligated to share their crop reduction payments with those who rented their land, but they commonly evaded the responsibility, often by taking tenant lands out of production, evicting the occupants, and pocketing the federal payments. The impact of the AAA on these small farmers soon provoked a new wave of protest. In 1934, Arkansas sharecroppers and laborers—both black and white—organized the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU), which sought to pressure federal officials to stop the evictions and give tenants and sharecroppers their fair share of government price-support payments. The union, which soon grew to 10,000 members, came under attack from planters and local authorities. Although this reign of terror forced the STFU underground, the union still managed to organize cotton pickers' strikes in five states in 1936. Black tenant farmers became some of the union's most effective organizers.

The \$3.3 billion Public Works Administration (PWA), set up in 1933, produced dozens of government-financed dams, airports, courthouses, and bridges. In California alone, the PWA helped to finance the world's largest dam at Shasta; the longest and most expensive suspension bridge, between San Francisco and Oakland; and the nation's first freeway, from downtown Los Angeles to Pasadena. Following the Long Beach earthquake of 1933, the PWA rebuilt the entire school system of Los Angeles County. In 1933, the New Deal launched its most ambitious and celebrated experiment in regional planning: the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). The TVA was a government-owned corporation that was designed to carry out the comprehensive redevelopment of an entire river watershed spanning seven southern states. A separate government entity, the Rural Electrification Administration, brought running water and

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electric lights to remote farmhouses nationwide by making cheap, government-backed credit available to hundreds of electric power cooperatives.

Industrial recovery was the greatest task confronting the New Deal. How could the downward cycle of falling wages, prices, profits, and employment be stopped? Roosevelt pushed through the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), which mandated a government-sanctioned system of business self-regulation, coordinated by a National Recovery Administration (NRA). Like the AAA, the NRA used government power to regulate the market, raise prices, and increase wages. The NRA generated more than five hundred industry wage and price codes, but trade unionists, New Dealers, and some businessmen recognized that industry self-regulation required a strong labor movement. Section 7a of the NIRA proved an important and controversial part of each industry code. It gave employees “the right to organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing . . . free from the interference, restraint, or coercion of employers.” American trade unions tripled their membership during the 1930s, and increased their political and economic power in a dramatic fashion.

As revolutionary as Section 7a of NIRA was, however, southern planters and western growers used their clout to exclude agricultural workers from its new federal protections. California’s commercial agriculture depended on a multi-ethnic workforce. Three of every four of the state’s 200,000 farm laborers were Mexican Americans, but workers of Filipino, Armenian, Chinese, and Japanese descent, as well as “Okie” migrants from middle America, also sweated in the cotton fields and fruit orchards. Nearly 50,000 workers, the vast majority of them Mexican Americans, conducted more than forty agricultural strikes in 1933. During these tense conflicts, whole communities organized for a long and bitter struggle. Led by the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, these uprisings of the migrant poor continued in 1934, spreading from the Imperial Valley on the Mexican border to the Santa Clara Valley near San Francisco. Almost all these work stoppages ended in violence and defeat. Many strike leaders were arrested, tried, and jailed under California’s draconian criminal syndicalism act, which made it a crime to belong to a group that sought a change in industrial ownership by force. An entire generation would pass before Cesar Chavez and other unionists sought to improve the lot of California agricultural workers.

Opposition to the New Deal from the Right and Left

By the end of 1934, the New Deal had acquired a powerful set of enemies. Since FDR’s inauguration, national income had risen by one-quarter, unemployment had dropped by two million, and total factory wages had leapt upward. But the nation’s annual output remained only slightly more than half of what it had been in 1929. Ten million workers were trying to survive without jobs, and almost twice that number depended at least partially on relief. The NIRA came under particularly fierce attack. Many farmers, small businessmen, and consumer groups argued that NRA price and production controls had been written primarily by and for large corporations; their effect was to prop up prices, stifle competition, and slow economic expansion. Business criticism of the NIRA spilled over into a more general conservative criticism of the New Deal. Most businessmen feared that federal jobs programs would lead to higher taxes and a spirit of working-class defiance.

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At the same time, a populist quest for even more far-reaching reforms became evident in the 1934 congressional elections. The Democrats won a two-thirds majority in the Senate and over three-quarters of the seats in the House. Most of the newly elected Democrats strongly backed the New Deal or stood to its left, seeking to implement an even more radical legislative agenda. So as the nation moved to the left, the New Deal came under attack from all sides. Huey Long, elected governor of Louisiana in 1928, rose to power by attacking corporate interests and portraying himself as a champion of the common man. In 1934, Long proposed the “Share Our Wealth Plan,” a system of confiscatory taxes on large fortunes and incomes that would enable the government to provide every family with “enough for a home, an automobile, a radio, and the ordinary convenience,” plus a guaranteed annual income. Long set up thousands of Share Our Wealth Clubs and developed a large national following. In California, novelist Upton Sinclair resigned from the Socialist Party in 1933 to form the End-Poverty-in-California (EPIC) movement and run for governor within the Democratic Party. Sinclair proposed that the state turn idle farmland and factories into self-sustaining cooperatives of the unemployed and impose high taxes on corporations and the rich. Attacked as a Communist and a crackpot, Sinclair lost the governorship but received well over one-third of the votes. Other critics of the New Deal took their cues from Charles E. Coughlin, a Catholic priest from the suburbs of Detroit whose weekly radio broadcasts sometimes reached an audience of forty-five million listeners. Like Long, Coughlin at first supported Roosevelt but quickly grew disillusioned. He blamed the Depression on “Wall Street” and “international bankers” and called for class harmony, “living wages,” and social legislation to combat the evils of industrialism. The possibility that these populist anti-Roosevelt movements might join forces and enter national politics in 1936 deeply worried Roosevelt and his advisers.

By the spring of 1935, the New Deal was in a state of disarray, and its main industrial recovery agency, the NRA, was falling apart. The final blow came on May 27, when, in *Schechter v. United States*, the Supreme Court declared the NIRA unconstitutional. The Court ruled that in allowing the NRA to write legally enforceable codes, Congress had unlawfully delegated its own authority and, by applying the codes to local businesses, had unconstitutionally extended the federal power to regulate interstate commerce. This decision signaled that the Court would strike down much of the New Deal’s most far-reaching legislation.

The Second New Deal

Although production had risen by almost 30 percent since early 1933, unemployment remained high in 1935. New Dealers blamed “underconsumption”—a chronic weakness in consumer demand caused by low wages, an inequitable distribution of income, and a capitalist system that was no longer growing. In a burst of reform that historians have since come to call the “Second New Deal,” FDR and most Democrats pushed for measures that would help workers by creating government-paid jobs, a system for unemployment and old-age insurance, and the right to organize labor unions.

New Dealers tackled the unemployment issue directly. In the spring of 1935, Congress passed the \$5 billion Emergency Relief Appropriations Act, which funded new agencies designed to

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provide useful and creative employment to millions. The National Youth Administration initiated work projects for more than 4.5 million students and young workers, and the Resettlement Administration aided the rural homeless, agricultural tenants, and owners of small farms. But the Works Progress (later Projects) Administration (WPA) was the most important of these new programs. Unlike the Civil Works Administration, the WPA provided productive jobs, not relief. WPA workers built or improved more than 2,500 hospitals, 5,900 schools, 1,000 airport landing fields, and nearly 13,000 playgrounds. WPA employees saw themselves as workers and citizens, not as welfare cases.

The Social Security Act was a second major piece of New Deal legislation passed in the spring of 1935. Funded by equal contributions from employers and employees, the act provided minimal payments to unemployed workers, the aged, and dependents of deceased breadwinners. This was a social, collective insurance program designed to protect the American people from the turmoil that was always present in a capitalist economy. A major weakness of the original Social Security Act was that it did not cover agricultural or domestic workers, who were largely African-American and Mexican-American. But in providing ongoing social protection to most citizens, including unemployment insurance and aid for poor families, the law represented a fundamental break with traditional notions that the poor and the unemployed were to blame for their condition. The old-age insurance and unemployment programs won nearly universal support. Most Americans saw these entitlements not as relief for the poor, but as insurance that was purchased with taxes deducted from their own paychecks.

Undoubtedly the most radical and far-reaching piece of legislation that was passed during Roosevelt's "second hundred days" of 1935 was the National Labor Relations Act, known as the Wagner Act, for its sponsor, New York's Senator Robert Wagner. The Wagner Act guaranteed workers the right to freely organize their own unions and to strike, boycott, and picket their employers. It banned "unfair labor practices" by bosses, including the maintenance of company-dominated unions, the blacklisting of union activists, the intimidation or firing of workers who sought to join an independent union, and the employment of industrial spies. The new law also established a National Labor Relations Board, which would hear employee complaints, determine union jurisdictions, and conduct on-site elections. Whenever a majority of a company's workers chose a union, management had a legal obligation to negotiate with the union over wages, hours, and working conditions.

New Deal Culture

Just as mass production typified American industry in the 1930s, mass culture characterized entertainment, journalism, and the arts during that era. Fifty million Americans went to the movies each week. Radio entered almost every home, and news magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* brought East Coast reportage to even the most remote rural areas. And for the first time, the federal government employed writers, photographers, actors, and artists on a massive scale. Late in 1933, New Deal relief and public works agencies began to fund public arts projects, employing thousands of artists to produce more than fifteen thousand murals, oils, watercolors, and prints. As part of the Works Progress Administration, employees of the Federal Art Project created murals for the walls of federal and state buildings and established public art

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centers in remote communities. WPA projects for writers and musicians gave important and creative work to thousands of unemployed white-collar workers. Federal Writers' Project employees published guidebooks, collected folk songs, and recorded interviews with ex-slaves, cowboys, and immigrants. The United States had only eleven symphony orchestras in the early 1930s; the WPA music project created thirty four more, not just in the biggest cities of the East and West Coasts, but in Oklahoma and Utah as well. The government supported dramatic arts through the WPA's Federal Theatre Project, which hired actors, writers, and directors from the relief rolls. It produced classics by Shakespeare, Molière, and Marlowe, as well as socially avant-garde works such as the "Living Newspaper" plays and Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*. Many plays were produced in multiple versions, with African-American, Spanish, and Yiddish casts.

One of the most outstanding contributions to the nation's cultural awareness came from the New Deal photojournalists. To build broad public support for its programs, the Roosevelt administration encouraged the directors of New Deal agencies to document the human suffering caused by the Depression. The WPA, the Department of Agriculture, and the Farm Security Administration (formerly the Resettlement Administration) hired amateur and professional photographers to travel the Depression-ravaged country. Their "social-realist" photos—particularly Dorothea Lange's haunting portraits of poor farm women, Arthur Rothstein's shots of dust storms, and Walker Evans's despairing images of sharecroppers—became icons of the Depression. These photos circulated widely in the popular press, including *Time*, *Look*, and *Life* magazines, and they appeared in major museum exhibits and best-selling books.

The End of the New Deal & the Great Depression

By 1937, a remarkable economic recovery convinced administration policymakers that the Depression was nearly over; indeed, rising prices now seemed the real threat. So despite continued high unemployment, FDR cut WPA expenditures, laying off 1.5 million relief workers. This premature effort to balance the federal budget sucked purchasing power out of the economy, as did the \$2 billion tax increase required by the new Social Security program (the pension checks would not begin flowing until 1941). But the sharp recession of 1937 and 1938 also had more ominous causes. American capitalism was still an unstable system; none of the New Deal reforms transformed its fundamental character.

If the New Deal was stymied at the end of the 1930s, it nevertheless left an enormous legacy that reshaped the nation for more than two generations to come. Economic recovery was actually the least of the New Deal's achievements. It was in many respects an economic failure. None of Roosevelt's recovery programs ended mass unemployment or restored long-term economic growth. World War II military spending and half a decade of continued Cold War government spending would be required to eradicate mass unemployment and restore economic growth to the United States. The New Deal and the new unions constituted a cultural triumph because they transformed Americans' vision of themselves and of their nation. With widespread public support, the federal government constructed a welfare state that became an active presence in citizens' lives. As World War II approached, the nation would be more unified

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than ever because its patriotism arose from a pluralism that was far more genuine than that of earlier—or later—times.