

- Anthony Comegna: [00:20](#) Here's a bit of confession to start us all off for the week. I'm an historian, and an Americanist at that, but I try to stay away from the 20th century as much as possible. Basically, that's because it's just so awful. It's the historical peak of death and destruction, statism and violence. It's the age of totalitarian states and bureaucratic dystopia. It's the height of slavery and forced labor in all of world history. It's the era when governments began holding the globe hostage with nuclear weapons and erected welfare states to keep us all from grumbling too much about it.
- Anthony Comegna: [00:58](#) And here in the U.S., so much of this awfulness began or quickened pace with FDR and his New Deal. Professor David Beito recently joined us here in Arlington to lead another Advanced Topics discussion, this one, Liberty, the Welfare State, and the New Deal. Here is my main takeaway from this set of readings on the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt. The New Deal was just absolutely ridiculous. It was just complete, like cartoonish, almost like a graphic novel in its over-the-top nonsenseness. It was just completely ridiculous, and this reader is sort of cram-jam full of New Deal legislation and political speeches and court cases adjudicating all of this stuff. It's just page after page, it struck me how crazy all of this was.
- Anthony Comegna: [02:02](#) I wonder if you have any commentary on that.
- David Beito: [02:05](#) Weil, yeah. I think that that gives you some indication. But, I mean, there's a lot going on here behind the surface as well, which I think there's a lot of evidence that the New Deal administration was engaging in a lot of shady practices, repressive practices, so we add that attitude to the equation as well. And part of the craziness of the period, of course, is all this money was spent, all these agencies were created, all these rules were brought in, and you have the longest depression in American history, which is lengthened, I think the evidence is pretty strong, it's lengthened by Roosevelt's policies during this period. It's a failure by all sorts of different standards, and I don't think that Roosevelt is a very attractive historical character for numberless reasons, and the New Deal is certainly high up on the reasons.
- Anthony Comegna: [03:12](#) I mean, just it kept leaping out to me that so much of this was ... It's the equivalent of casting oracle bones or something or making a blood sacrifice for a good harvest. It just makes absolutely no sense as a method of real recovery from a depression. It's just huge, huge amounts of power delegated to

the central government in one field after another. It's just hard to believe, to me. Maybe you can give us an insight on this. It's hard to believe people were taken in by that.

David Beito: [03:54](#) Well, there are ideas that are floating around that Roosevelt is able to tap into. One idea that's very big and goes way back is kind of a underconsumptionist idea. You hear this kind of thing in some form today by people on the left, that there is this imbalance, there is this maldistribution, unequal distribution of wealth. And sort of the crudest version of this that you still get in the history textbooks is that the Great Depression is caused by the fact that the workers don't have enough and they can't spend. They don't have enough to spend to keep the economy going, so that this economy is very much out of whack, according to this theory.

David Beito: [04:49](#) And Roosevelt is building on that. I think that he's influenced by those kinds of ideas. I think he's very influenced by his background, by his cousin Teddy, who he very much looked up to, who gave the bride away at his wedding. Because Franklin was an inbred family because Franklin married his cousin Eleanor, and then she was in turn the niece of Teddy Roosevelt. He very much admired him.

David Beito: [05:21](#) Another man he admired was Woodrow Wilson. And Roosevelt was involved in all of this wartime mobilization, centralization, and I think he had a real nostalgia for this, and I think he's trying to kind of recreate all of this. I don't think he had much understanding of business. Roosevelt was born to wealth, and he was inherited wealth, and he dabbled in business in the 1920s. He was never very successful in business. I don't think he had really a good understanding of those things. Interestingly enough, the 1920s he was teaming up with none other than Herbert Hoover. They were involved in these various associations trying to fight what they called waste. So the competitive process, to a great extent, is viewed by Roosevelt as wasteful, as duplicative, as chaotic, always seeing it that way, as not planned. And he wants to plan. He wants to do the planning.

Anthony Comegna: [06:33](#) It seems pretty ironic, I suppose is the right word, the kind and gentle way of putting it. It's a little ironic today that such a systematizer and a planner who was against the supposed chaos of the free market would come up with such a slew of alphabet soup programs that all kind of trip and tumble over each other and bewilder the viewer with their staggering

numbers. I mean, we have one list of ... It might be complete, but I'm not so sure. There's certainly a list of these, but we have a list of New Deal acronyms in our reader that includes 44 different programs or administrations. I mean, I would read through them all, but I think you get the idea. It's just letter after letter after letter. The chaos of it is really what, again, leaps out to me here.

- David Beito: [07:35](#) Yeah. And I think Roosevelt did want more centralization, more sort of personal direction. You get that, especially in his second term, where he's trying to do these various government reorganization plans to kind of centralize the process more, but in some ways, he thrives out of that chaos and that bureaucratic competition because he can kind of play people off against each other. He can sort of get his way through a process like that.
- David Beito: [08:10](#) And Roosevelt is very good. He's very different than Trump. Whatever you think of Trump, Trump just sort of blunders in and says what he wants to do. He's the guy running everything. Roosevelt was kind of content to be a behind-the-scenes operator and to really let others take the heat. As a matter of fact, he's quite successful on that. A lot of times, people will blame other people in the administration for various mistakes because Roosevelt was very good at kind of staying in the background.
- David Beito: [08:47](#) But I think his ultimate ideal is to centralize the process. But he's in, 1933, he's pushing as fast as he could to push for more governmental control and he has to work with Congress. He's got all these people that have these ideas, so he's tapping into that. That explains, I think, some of the chaos. But I think some of it is helpful to him.
- Anthony Comegna: [09:17](#) Oh, well, it sounds like an awful lot of it was helpful to him, and not least of which are all these different bills that just grant huge amounts of power directly to the president or to cabinet officials. I'm thinking of the Agricultural Adjustment Act, and-
- David Beito: [09:34](#) Or the NRA, which over and over again it says, "The president shall do this. The president shall determine this, the president." And it leaves incredible discretion to the president. I don't know if Obamacare quite did that the same way, personalized it in that sense. But, of course, even though it says, "The president should have this power," Roosevelt, like I said, is very good if something goes wrong to kind of get a little bit, seem a little bit above the fray.

- Anthony Comegna: [10:08](#) Now the melodrama of the different programs in the New Deal seems to fit with me in the general scheme of the period, which is that this is the era of bigness, bigness all around, big business, big labor, and big government all teaming up together and coordinating their efforts together so that we don't have to have revolution in the streets or something like that. All these big organizations get together and, of course, they kind of crush out anybody who's too little to have a voice at the table. Roosevelt, like you said, steps in and makes himself chairman of the board right there of the little gang that he's got running. He's in charge of the big government. He's in charge of setting standards for big business and for big labor.
- David Beito: [11:02](#) Well, he is. And you made a little comment there that I would like to pick up on about revolution. Roosevelt certainly depicted himself that way. He would say things like, "My goal is just to save capitalism. I'm really a conservative." And other historians have picked up on that and kind of made the argument that, well, you don't like the New Deal, but it was necessary because look at the rise of national socialism, look at the rise of communism and all of this stuff. Roosevelt is able to save the system, so he's the ultimate conservative. Actually, people say that.
- David Beito: [11:46](#) One complaint I would have about the choice of readings for the conference is it doesn't include a very interesting speech that Roosevelt gives only days before the election, and he gives speeches like this many times. It's called the Pittsburgh Speeches in Pittsburgh, and it's not well known. In fact, I had my students read it and I had to download the original newspaper printing of the speech. And what it is, it sounds like he's some, oh, I don't know, some free market budget cutter.
- David Beito: [12:18](#) He's attacking Hoover's spendthrift policies. He's saying, "I agree with the Democratic platform, the goal which said government spending should be cut 25%." That's pretty radical stuff. He's attacking bureaucracy. When he runs in 1932, he's not running on what we think of as a New Deal agenda. It's very kind of trying to please everybody, but he is definitely saying a lot of stuff that more conservative, classical liberal people could take hope in, attacking Hoover from the Right in some ways.
- David Beito: [13:00](#) The argument that the U.S. is anywhere near a revolution in 1932, I just don't buy into it. Roosevelt runs a fairly conservative, fairly conventional campaign. Are the people demanding a New Deal in 1932? I don't see it. Is there a danger

of revolution? Don't really see it. Communist Party was a bust. Socialist Party didn't do that great. People want change. They're dissatisfied. They're repudiating Hoover, but does this mean they want a revolution? I don't see the evidence for it. But that's an argument that you often hear as to why Roosevelt was some essential figure.

- Anthony Comegna: [13:48](#) Yeah. I was going to say that we have at least two or three different historiographical strands running through the readings here, I think, at least for our secondary sources. The first one is, just like you mentioned, I think this comes across in our bits from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who folks might know as sort of the court historian from the Kennedy administration and he really made his mark on the history profession by writing about Jacksonian America. His argument there was that he basically drew a straight line that was nice and pretty between Andrew Jackson and Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal, so Jackson is sort of magically made into a New Dealer a good amount of time [crosstalk 00:14:35].
- David Beito: [14:34](#) Yeah, he was a hero to the left. He was a hero to the left during that period. He was someone they looked up to. Interesting change.
- Anthony Comegna: [14:43](#) Yeah.
- David Beito: [14:43](#) Yeah.
- Anthony Comegna: [14:45](#) That's how Schlesinger made his career as a historian, and he sort of comes right out with this portrayal of a horrible, depressing, downright dangerous state of American life in the early depression years. He says, "There are unemployed veterans armies marching on Washington. The people are ready to install some communist or fascist dictator at a moment's notice. It just really depends on who's ready to offer the swiftest relief program." And for Schlesinger, it's like the entire world is about to be swallowed up in this kind of nihilism and infighting between radical groups.
- Anthony Comegna: [15:22](#) And then in waltzes FDR, swift and smooth, promising a New Deal to save liberalism, and he does it. You've given us your thoughts about that point of view, but then there are other folks represented in the reader like Henry Cabot Lodge and John T. Flynn and then the ever present villain here to Roosevelt's hero. That's Robert Taft. Maybe you could go ahead and tell us a bit about their point of view on that question.

- David Beito: [15:52](#) Well, I mean, there was a strain of, I guess you'd call it anti-statism, that was out there. I wrote a book about this many years ago called *Taxpayers in Revolt*, which discussed the importance of tax resistance. During the early 1930s there was a massive tax strike in Chicago. Pretty much shut down the tax system. The taxes were kind of uncollectible for a while. A lot of these people are just saying. "We think the problem here is the politicians are spending too much. They're getting fat, their salaries. I've had to cut back. Why shouldn't they have to cut back?" You do have that strain of opinion that's out there.
- David Beito: [16:42](#) Now I do think that something that has happened, I think Roosevelt does have tremendous charisma. It was undeniable. I think he, of any president, I think he ranks up there maybe at the top. And people want action in 1933. They're perfectly happy, I think, to take action in the form of a budget cutter, I think, because you have budget cutters running for governors and doing quite well. But Roosevelt chooses to use that charisma and that sense of desperation, and there is a sense of desperation, not revolution, but, my God, look at all these problems. People are worried about things like that, so they're willing to turn to somebody like that who seems to offer that kind of leadership and he pushes an agenda of big government.
- David Beito: [17:38](#) And I think he's able to popularize that agenda, to a great extent, through just the force of his personality, but also we're creating a dependent class. There's some very interesting work that was done during the period and Republicans like Taft were very worried about this and just didn't know what to do about it. In various elections, including 1936 election, there's very good evidence that Roosevelt is able to make effective use of government money to win elections, to carry states. In fact, much of the money he spends in '36 goes to swing states for relief, not states that were the most desperately poor states like a lot of the southern states. They get short shrift because they're secure, solid Democratic South, and without the South, by the way, Roosevelt wouldn't have gotten nearly as far as he did. That's his base initially.
- David Beito: [18:47](#) But, I mean, any case, he is able to use that, and it's frustrating to a lot of these Republicans. Then if you see the Republican response, it tends to be a little bit weaker than maybe some of us would like, classical liberals, partly because Roosevelt does prove effective in getting more people dependent on these programs. And as the depression goes on year after year after year, that level of people just saying, "Gee, we need this stuff,"

is increasing. If you look at the '36 Republican platform, their rhetoric sounds very classical liberal, but then when you look at the specifics, not that much different on a lot of basic issues, on the welfare and regulatory states.

Anthony Comegna: [19:39](#)

Now, of course, we know that the depression, that the New Deal did not end the depression and historians recognize at least two New Deals, and there's at least some that say there's a third New Deal involved and that Roosevelt really discovered how useful war can be when you want to, at least in appearance, relieve an imposing depression. It seems to me that this element of World War II is just absolutely critical in securing FDR's legacy and really the legacy of the New Deal, too. Because the opponents, at least from what we read here, these folks never seemed to really, had serious doubts that the American people and the American way of life would survive. They had no doubts that there would be temporary setbacks, but we would certainly survive and we would triumph no matter what was thrown in our way. Henry Cabot Lodge kind of laughs off the idea that another power could ever seriously threaten us.

Anthony Comegna: [20:54](#)

Herbert Hoover embarrassingly declares in '38 or '39 or something that Europe is at peace and seems like it's going to stay that way and everything's fine. Flynn and Taft are certainly aghast at how massive the New Deal has made the central government, but nonetheless, here comes the giant central government to help defeat fascism in World War II. Suddenly, once everybody's employed by the Army, unemployment's not much of a big deal, and it gets conflated with New Deal success.

David Beito: [21:31](#)

Yeah. And it is not ... I mean, you said conflated is the right word because this is a standard line that you're going to see in American history textbooks and the standard belief, well, gee whiz, maybe the New Deal, I mean more [inaudible 00:21:45] did really work in the sense of ending the depression. However, that was only because we didn't spend enough money, the government didn't, and when we finally did spend enough money in World War II, we see prosperity return.

David Beito: [22:05](#)

Well, as historians such as Robert Higgs have pointed out, that's not quite right. World War II economy is not a time of prosperity. It's a time of deprivation many ways, rationing, more accidents on the job, shoddy products. It's called the duration. If you look at old movies in the '40s when they talk about the duration, they're talking about a period of extreme sacrifice.

- David Beito: [22:36](#) Really, the recovery doesn't begin until long after Roosevelt dies, a genuine recovery, which really occurs after demobilization in '46, '47, that period, after you cut back this warfare state, which has been created during this period. Anyway, yeah, I mean, Roosevelt becomes Dr. ... He changes from Dr. New Deal to Dr. Win the War, and he's able again to create a kind of new mythology around himself that has solidified, solidifies his power but also solidifies the high regard that historians have for him.
- Anthony Comegna: [23:24](#) Now I'm curious to know. Mussolini had these amazing ... As part of the melodrama of fascism that he created, he had these amazing building-size portraits of himself in this bizarre artistic style, sort of futuristic style. And Roosevelt has the Tennessee Valley Authority and other gigantic government monuments like that. Now I'm wondering, what do you think are the most over-the-top, melodramatic chunks of New Deal legislation?
- David Beito: [23:58](#) Oh, boy, that's a very good question. I think the Tennessee Valley Authority, I'd have to put that very, very high up on the list.
- Anthony Comegna: [24:18](#) Which, by the way, as one professor in grad school pointed out to our students, that's really the one true, pure example of socialist enterprise in American history, at least one of very few.
- David Beito: [24:33](#) I had a professor at University of Wisconsin who was kind of a classical liberal type. He was an adjunct. And he said, "Everybody talks about the TVA." The guy who ran it wrote a book called ... I think it was called Grassroots Democracy. And his argument was that this is an example of democracy. The guy said, "Yeah, sure democracy if you have to have an aqua lawn to keep your land," because a lot of land was taken, was seized. And an aspect of the TVA and also rural electrification in general that some people don't look at.
- David Beito: [25:11](#) You would think some advocate to renewables and environmentalists might appreciate more is it really is a means to, in some ways, eliminate alternatives to the grid. They're just sort of coming in there, providing all of this electric power, underselling more decentralized local alternatives and so forth. The TVA has a lot of, of course, a lot of the dam building and so forth, so there's a lot of environmental distraction and centralization of power production and that kind of thing that's going on there that people haven't paid enough attention to, but certainly raised at the time by people that were the victims

of a lot of this stuff, the dam building and massive subsidies to agriculture and so forth.

Anthony Comegna: [26:12](#)

Of course, one of the other more ridiculous proposals from the New Deal, and thank God it was only a proposal, is FDR's court-packing scheme. One of my favorite quotes from the entire reader that we have here is from the Senate Judiciary Committee's report on the court-packing scheme. They, of course, soundly rejected the proposal, but they concluded with a statement that some might say is pretty firm. They said, "It is a measure which should be so emphatically rejected that its parallel will never again be presented to the free representatives of the free people of America," which is a pretty damning condemnation.

David Beito: [26:52](#)

Yeah, and in some ways, I think that we can sort of poo-poo people during the period and say FDR has all this power, and he does in many ways, but one aspect of the 1930s where I think we've gone [inaudible 00:27:09] is that we've got the red and blue team mentality. And people sort of dig in their heels and aren't willing to cross party lines if injustice is occurring or buses are occurring in their own party. And Roosevelt in 1936 wins the biggest landslide just about ever in American history. He's got veto-proof majorities, easily veto-proof majorities in both the House and the Senate, and he really is seeking out a third New Deal.

David Beito: [27:46](#)

I think that that's an accurate ... He's got ambitions. He says to one of his advisors, "I'm really radical now." And the court-packing is really the necessary first stage for him because he sees this as a way ... Even though he's eventually going to get control because these justices are going to die or retire, but he sees this as a way to eliminate the last check on what he wants to do in his term. And he is blindsided by the opposition and really Democrats are leading the opposition, including a lot of New Deal types. The Republicans are just a romping, just a very small group, and they adopt a very wise strategy of just sitting back and letting the Democrats fight it out.

David Beito: [28:37](#)

And I can't imagine that happening now with a Democratic president. We have a significant segment of his own party saying, "This court-packing stuff is enough. We cannot support this. This is going too far." And it really is quite remarkable, the rebellion that occurs. And this prevents his third New Deal. He gets some things, but really, he had many, many defeats in the two years after that election in '36. In '38, he loses big time. He

loses a lot of seats and at that point, he's not going to get a third New Deal. It just isn't going to happen. But he has a massive majority. He's not able to get it. Because really quite encouraging, these are very left-wing Congressmen that come in, in many cases very left, that come in in '36, but they rebel. A lot of them rebel.

Anthony Comegna: [29:33](#) I kept thinking with every Supreme Court case that struck down legislation or talking about Congress warring with the president, every time, I thought, "My God, people. Don't you see what you're doing? Don't you realize who's going to be president in 2019? Don't do it. Don't do it." But they did it. They did it anyways.

David Beito: [29:57](#) But there are some people, and I see that on FDR's efforts, through other research I've done on civil liberties and privacy issues, there are people, a significant segment of people on the left, Democrats in many cases, who are willing to speak out on these issues even against a president of their own party. And I just don't think that's the case anymore, and it's unfortunate. I think in some ways, people in the '30s are a little bit more independent and a little less focused on our side versus their side, maybe. Or at least there's this big segment of opinion.

Anthony Comegna: [30:46](#) Our greatest thanks to Dr. David Beito, both for his excellent discussion reading and his time on the podcast. For those of you out there enjoying the show, help us spread the word with a rating and review, and, of course, your social media shares. I'll talk to you all again next week, and until then, keep the progress coming.