

An Essay Review on William E. Leuchtenburg's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (1932-1940)*

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Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (1932-1940) was William E. Leuchtenburg's critique on the political and social issues of the 1930s. It began with the end of Herbert Hoover's presidency and the nation in unrest due to industrial downfall, stock market crashes, and massive unemployment. The country looked to Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal with the American people. Leuchtenburg analyzed the various relief efforts and legislation in a very meticulous way. The story ended with war approaching and Franklin Roosevelt successfully winning his third run for the presidency, an unprecedented feat.

William Leuchtenburg took the most historically accurate approach to the creation, execution, and outcome of the most revolutionary legislation in the twentieth century. He neither overwhelmingly supported nor contested the New Deal; he simply wanted the reader to understand its causes, affects, and most importantly, its significance. Conjointly, Leuchtenburg focused on Roosevelt's "recreation of the modern Presidency" (327). His pleasant personality, positive attitude, persistent nature, and courageous character made the White House a more meaningful place to run. Leuchtenburg continually mentioned Roosevelt and his appointees writing and proposing legislation, fighting for relief measures and ultimately changing how America would view its government. The federal government would become an economic facilitator for the nation, an agent of assistance for the destitute, and a defender for the rights of the American worker.

Leuchtenburg approached this piece of American political history in a very reasonable way, simply because of the massive research that was achieved. Various manuscripts, diaries, memoirs, newspaper articles, journals, and private interviews were

used to obtain the vast amount of information to critically analyze this moment in history. The chronological structure allowed the reader to maintain understanding throughout the work. Pictures are placed in the middle of the book to strengthen its appreciation. Many insights were made by Leuchtenburg in his ability to explain how these forms of legislation came to be. He described the economic and social situations that would trigger the various reforms. The contentions over the bills and acts are well elucidated, and finally the results of the propositions were illustrated through well-measured effects.

The primary strength of *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* was its scrupulous nature. Every cause and effect was conveyed in a manner that felt more like reality than a story. For example, the second and third chapter clearly demonstrated just why the country's attitude was able to turn around so quickly after the election of Roosevelt. The beginning looked so bad for the new executive; "thirty eight states closed their banks on inauguration day," the New York Stock Exchange shut its doors, and the country had over ten million unemployed (39). Leuchtenburg showed that it was more than just Roosevelt's inauguration speech of "There's nothing to fear but fear itself." Roosevelt actually used some of Hoover's fiscal advisors to create a banking measure to reopen the banks within eight days. It was so successful that people were depositing more cash than they were withdrawing (44, 45). A few days later, Roosevelt asked for the end of prohibition. In a month, it was done, and the sale of alcohol rejuvenated the country's "spirits." Yet, Leuchtenburg's analysis revealed that this turn around was more emotional than economical. The measures Roosevelt used were actually more deflationary than Hoover's (47).

Another one of Leuchtenburg's strengths was his ability to tie in all the factors, variables, supporters, and detractors of a given piece of legislation. His aptitude in thorough research enabled the reader to better understand how the system truly worked. Leuchtenburg's breakdown of the Social Security Act was a prime example. He began by stating that Roosevelt was answering an outcry of both the unemployed and the elderly for unemployment compensation and old-age pensions (130, 131). Roosevelt desired to begin his measure with a solid foundation, so he formed a cabinet committee entitled the Committee on Economic Security. Instead of saying that the committee eventually came to a consensus, Leuchtenburg dug deeper and revealed that the unemployment compensation issue was split on whether to create a national system with consistent standards or to follow Wisconsin's "joint national-state system" (130). The written measure that the committee would approve would not necessarily be approved because it had assuaged their concerns but because the President favored it, and the fact that it was written by a Justice's daughter meant that it should more easily have passed through the courts (130).

Six months after the committee was formed, the President sent it to Congress, allowing Senators who had lived harder lives to argue for the bill. Dissenters to the measure would inevitably be the conservatives, who thought that this act "violated the traditional American assumptions of self-help, self-denial, and individual responsibility" (131). However, Leuchtenburg also expounded that much of the opposition would come from those who thought the act was too conservative and even somewhat stingy.

Leuchtenburg continued to divulge the execution and effects of the Social Security Act. Not only did the act establish old-age insurance and unemployment

compensation, but it also built a framework that would aid the crippled, and blind (132). His analysis concluded that the act was virtually inept, causing more “economic turmoil, denying those who truly needed it, and not setting up any national standards” (132). Conversely, he then stated that the act was a landmark in the history of the U.S., changing the old view that once shirked social responsibility.

A general weakness of the work was that it did not demonstrate thoroughly many of the long-term effects of the New Deal legislation. Many of the liberal measures during that time have changed the Democratic Party’s position in American politics. A reason for this drawback was found in its time of authorship, this being 1963. Over forty years have passed and books continue to be written about the influence of the New Deal. One could also argue that it was not part of his thesis to do so. Again, his primary goal was to present the issues from 1932-1940, explaining their significance at that time.

As noted earlier, Leuchtenburg did his work before writing this condensed volume of political events. A fourteen-page bibliography detailed the research accomplished. Here he revealed the manuscripts and published works used, and designated them under twelve different topics. The manuscripts for Franklin Roosevelt alone came from over seven universities and two libraries (including the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library and the Library of Congress). The two foremost published works used were Schlesinger’s three volume work entitled *The Age of Roosevelt (1957-60)*, and Perkins’, *The Roosevelt I Knew (1946)*. Unfortunately Frank Freidel’s authoritative biography on Roosevelt had not been completed. To prevent major biases, Leuchtenburg used books like *After Seven Years*, a conservative critique on the New Deal. The footnotes were full of newspaper, magazine, and journal citations. *Time*, *Business Week*,

The New York Times, and *Literary Digest* were just a few examples. The scope of his investigation was expansive enough to believe that Leuchtenburg may have been one of the most knowledgeable men concerning Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal.

Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal concluded with five basic ideas. Franklin D. Roosevelt “recreated the Presidency” (327). Throughout the work Leuchtenburg supported this by showing how Roosevelt used administrative tools effectively and by revealing the President’s character. An example could be found in the relaxed way the President talked to America during his fireside chats. Secondly, Leuchtenburg revealed the tremendous expansion of the federal government, particularly its involvement in the economy. Millions in farming subsidies, union protections, and government control over utilities were just a few illustrations. Thirdly, Leuchtenburg held to the claim that the “New Deal saved capitalism” (336). It was designed to help private ventures and balance the system so that it could work. It recognized many groups that were being mistreated such as farmers, industry workers, and blacks. The goal was never to socialize, although many would claim that many of the measures were quite radical of the times. Fourthly, Leuchtenburg conceded that the New Deal did not solve many problems and even created new ones. “It never demonstrated that it could achieve prosperity in peacetime” (346). He argued that it would only pave the road to recovery, establishing a foundation to build upon. The last point Leuchtenburg made was that New Deal legislation was simply making a transitional first step. Most New Dealers agreed that there was plenty more work to be done (347).

Critiques of the New Deal have been created by both extremes. Many liberals believe that this moment in time led the way for the federal government to get more

involved in people's lives to make their nation better. Some conservatives assert that this was a detrimental occurrence that we continue to pay for in Social Security taxes, higher income taxes, and too much government infringement. Leuchtenburg has helped this writer to understand more about the circumstances that forced the hand of Roosevelt to do something. While many of his decisions may have been decidedly radical, it was a situation that needed a radical solution. The thesis Leuchtenburg provided was reasonable and revealing.

Works Cited

Leuchtenburg, William E. Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (1932-1940). New York: Harper & Row, 1963