

# Franklin D. Roosevelt, The New Deal, and Social Security

**Context:** When America hit rock bottom, Americans expected bold leadership. Herbert Hoover was perceived as doing nothing to help when the nation was in its darkest hour. When the votes were tallied in 1932, Americans made a strong statement for change, and sent Franklin D. Roosevelt to the White House.

Before his first term expired, Roosevelt signed legislation aimed at fixing banks and the stock market. He approved plans to aid the unemployed and the nation's farmers. He began housing initiatives and ventures into public-owned electric power. New Deal programs aided industrialists and laborers alike. The New Deal sparked a revolution in American public thought regarding the relationship between the people and the federal government.

**Directions:** Historiography is defined as the study of historical writing. Historiography is therefore an important component of the historian's skillset. In a larger sense, historiographical debates force students to confront the difficult questions of interpretation, the existence of "truth" in history, and the different ways historians use evidence. Today, you will analyze two secondary historical interpretations of the New Deal and Social Security Administration and use three primary sources to determine which of the two interpretations you believe is more accurate.

Read through both of the historical interpretations highlight/underline what you perceive to be the sentence which explains the author's main argument. You will then analyze three primary sources and complete the guiding questions (two for each). Ultimately, you will write a five sentence paragraph in response to the following prompt: Which historical account of Social Security is more accurate, Degler's or Bernstein's? You are welcome to work together; however everyone must submit unique and complete work.

- Sentence one: Thesis statement (direct response to the question)
- Sentence two: Evidence and explanation
- Sentence three: Evidence and explanation
- Sentence four: Evidence and explanation
- Sentence five: Concluding sentence (how does all your evidence prove what you argued with your thesis?)

## Historical Interpretation One: Carl Degler

Historian Carl Degler argued that the New Deal was revolutionary. He believed that the New Deal represented a drastic change in how Americans viewed government and its role in the economy. Rather than expecting economic troubles to be solved by market forces (a faith in "laissez-faire economics"), Americans began to expect the government to act in times of economic trouble and intervene to help make things better.

Degler saw Social Security as a piece of this change, signaling that Americans viewed the government as responsible for ensuring that older Americans would live decent lives. This was a shift from thinking that this responsibility lay only with individuals and families. The American public was ready for a change after experiencing the severe conditions during the Great Depression, when banks were failing, industries were faltering, and people were unemployed. Degler argued that the New Deal constituted a permanent shift in the American public's expectations: they now wanted the government to be an active player in the economy.

**Summarize Degler's argument in your own words:**

## Historical Interpretation Two: Bart Bernstein

Historian Barton Bernstein, writing in the late 1960's, argued that the New Deal was no revolution, and that the changes suggested by Degler and others had been exaggerated. The New Deal was a narrow program of limited reform that excluded millions of Americans. Bernstein saw the New Deal as fundamentally a conservative program partly motivated by a fear of more radical ideas.

Specifically, Bernstein saw the Social Security Act as more symbol than substance. Workers had to contribute to their old age pensions and could not depend on government contributions: thus, it was a limited kind of aid. More than one out of every five workers was excluded from the pension plan, including those who worked on farms and as domestic help, and this workforce was disproportionately black or female. Bernstein argued that while the New Deal reduced suffering, it did not deserve the praise for revolutionizing America that others lavished upon it.

**Summarize Bernstein's argument in your own words:**

### Document 1: President FDR Speech on Social Security

*Source: President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave this speech on August 14, 1935 when he signed the Social Security Act.*

Today a long-held hope is largely fulfilled. The civilization of the past 100 years, with its startling industrial changes, has made life insecure. Young people have come to wonder what would happen to them in old age. The man with a job has wondered how long the job would last.

This social security measure gives some protection to 30 million of our citizens who will receive direct benefits through unemployment compensation, through old-age pensions, and through increased services for the protection of children and the prevention of ill health.

We can never insure 100 percent of the population against 100 percent of the ups and downs of life, but we have tried to pass a law which will give some protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age.

This law, too, represents a cornerstone in a structure intended to lessen the force of possible future depressions. It will act as a protection to future Administrations against the necessity of going deeply into debt to help the needy. It is, in short, a law that will take care of human needs and at the same time provide the United States a sound economic structure.

#### **Guiding Questions:**

1. **Sourcing:** Who gave this speech and when? Who is the intended audience? How might that influence the content and tone of the speech?
2. **Close Reading:** What four programs are included in the Social Security bill? How does Social Security represent FDR's program of "relief, recovery, and reform"? For one of the three words, write one quote (textual evidence) or example that illustrates connections.

## Document 2: NAACP Testimony

*Source: President Roosevelt sent his Social Security bill, named the "Economic Security Act," to Congress in January 1935. Congress held committee hearings on the bill. Here, a representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a group dedicated to advancing the rights of African Americans, testified before Congress about how the bill excluded certain groups of people.*

Mr. Houston: The point that I am making is that in order for a person to qualify for Social Security, taxes must be paid on behalf of this person before he turns 60.

Now, for the benefit of Negroes, I want to ask, who would be left out by that rule?

First, and very serious, Negro sharecroppers and cash tenants would be left out. We all know that the Negro sharecropper and the Negro cash farm tenant are at the bottom of the economic scale. He is not employed.

There is no relation of master and servant by which he gets wages on which a tax could be collected. Therefore this population is left out from the old-age annuity, and that represents approximately 490,000 Negroes. Next, domestic servants are excluded from the act because the system of employing domestic servants is so loose.

In addition to that, this old-age annuity does not provide for unemployed persons. I do not need to argue to the committee that Negroes have suffered from unemployment more than any other class of the community.

### Guiding Questions:

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1. **Close Reading:** What four groups does Houston say are excluded from Social Security?
2. **Corroboration:** What would NAACP representative Houston say about FDR's speech (Document 1)? Select a line from Document 1 and explain how Houston might disagree.

## Document 3: Stealing (Modified)

*Source: Americans sent thousands of letters to the White House during FDR's presidency and many were addressed to Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady. On average, more than 5,000 letters arrived daily. This letter refers to the "forgotten man," the title of a radio address that FDR gave on April 17, 1932. The "forgotten man" became a phrase adopted by many Americans.*

Jan 18, 1937

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

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

Personally, I had my savings invested so that I would have enough money for old age. Now thanks to the President, I cannot be sure of anything, being a stockholder. After business has survived his merciless attacks (if it does), insurance will probably be no good either.

Believe me, the only thing we want from the president is for him to balance the budget and reduce taxes.

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

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

M.A. [female]

### Guiding Questions:

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1. **Close Reading:** What was M.A. counting on to support her in old age? And why has she lost faith that this will support her?
2. **Contextualization:** How does this author generally feel about the New Deal? How does her phrase “security at the price of freedom” capture those feelings?

## Debating History: Which interpretation is more accurate?

Using information from the three documents, write one paragraph (see the directions for the outline and format) in response to the following question: ***Which historical account of Social Security is more accurate, Degler's or Bernstein's?***