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# Scaffolding the New Deal: Exploring the Legislative Roots of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Fireside Chats

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Scaffolding the New Deal:

Exploring the Legislative Roots of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Fireside Chats

by

Christopher Brockman

A Thesis

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Scaffolding the New Deal: Exploring the Legislative Roots of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Fireside Chats

Christopher Brockman

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May 2014

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## **Abstract**

The historiography of President Franklin Roosevelt's fireside chats, up until this point, have focused on FDR's ability to radiate confidence via these captivating and extremely popular radio addresses. When examined more closely, a clear outline of the New Deal takes shape, suggesting FDR's true intentions behind the fireside chats: to educate the public of the administration's legislative endeavors. Roosevelt's second fireside chat, delivered on May 7, 1933, provides a vision for how the New Deal would correct the agricultural and industrial ills of the Great Depression and, in turn, revitalize the United States. In order to connect the fireside chat with Roosevelt's legislative agenda, documents from key advisors and Roosevelt himself are considered in connection with the creation of the second fireside chat. More importantly, a collection of letters written to FDR in reaction to this specific fireside address are examined, exposing a passionate public response to the New Deal.

I am eleven years old and go to public school and expect to graduate next year. Last night I was very anxious to listen to our President, Mr. Roosevelt, in his radio talk. But my regular bedtime is 9 o'clock and I was so sleepy I just couldn't say up until almost 11 o'clock to listen.

- Seymour Rubin, May 8, 1933<sup>1</sup>

So often the youth of America represents, with incredible grace and simplicity, the theme of a nation in crisis. This note, the first section of a letter to the *New York Times*, represented optimism, hope, and excitement encapsulated within just a few lines, but also the innocence of youth that was quickly disappearing in America. When Franklin D. Roosevelt arrived in Washington, bleak would not describe the situation vividly enough. David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War*, paints a harrowing comparison of America in 1929 with the situation FDR inherited as he delivered his inaugural address. By 1933, seven billion dollars of account deposits were wiped out due to bank failure. Over that time, one-third as many automobiles were produced in American factories, and the income of American farmers sank from six billion dollars to almost two billion. Most of all, 1933 brought a devastating 25 percent unemployment rate—Americans were cold, starving, and desperate.<sup>2</sup> Roosevelt arrived in Washington as a stark contrast to this situation—a shining symbol of hope riding the musical coattails of “Happy Days are Here Again” and insisting from the first day of his presidency that fear

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<sup>1</sup> Seymour Rubin, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 163-165.



was America's greatest problem.<sup>3</sup> The mystique of an American savior grew quickly.

Roosevelt's radio presence added to this aura. His first fireside chat, delivered on March 12, 1933, barely a week after his inauguration, connected the president's voice and personality with the public's renewed hope for recovery. Samuel Rosenman, frequently a speechwriter for Roosevelt, went as far to suggest that FDR's first year in office, radio deliveries included, completely eliminated the paralyzing fear rampant across the country on inauguration day.<sup>4</sup> Contemporary and historiographical analysis of Roosevelt's fireside chats tell the same story—gentle rhetoric, conversational tone, and a famed radio presence equipped Roosevelt with the weapon of increased confidence to fight the depression. Robert Swallow Fine's *Roosevelt's Radio Chatting: Its Development and Impact during the Great Depression*, an early study of the chats, argues that Roosevelt “establish[ed] a presidential monopoly over the major electronic medium of his time.” A study of how Roosevelt employed the medium during his presidency, Fine employs the fireside chat as a vehicle to explain “the first professional use of radio by an American president.”<sup>5</sup> While Fine's dissertation does provide some timely analysis of Roosevelt's concern for public opinion and the president's perspective on radio in general, *Roosevelt's Radio Chatting* is still

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Edward Smith, *FDR* (New York: Random House, 2008), 268-269.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, *Working With Roosevelt* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), 96.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Fine Swallow, “Roosevelt's Radio Chatting: Its Development and Impact during the Great Depression (PhD diss., New York University, 1977), iv-v.

only a cursory examination of the conversations Roosevelt held with the public, rather than a critical examination of their content or significance to the administration overall.

When looking at the fireside chats in a more specific manner, historians have pointed to the first of these addresses, delivered on March 12, as the strongest sampling of the president's radio use in creating a fundamental connection between the "people and the president."<sup>6</sup> Several authors have upheld the historical significance of the first fireside address for its rhetorical ability to improve American confidence during the Great Depression, best represented by communications scholar Amos Kiewe's *FDR's First Fireside Chat: Public Confidence and the Banking Crisis*. Kiewe's observation of the first chat as "an intersection between rhetoric and economics" is on the mark, as he discusses the address with regards to its language, tone, and rhetorical mechanisms.<sup>7</sup> Rhetorically speaking, the analysis of FDR's speeches frequently center on an effort to banish fear from the minds of the American people. The metaphor of fear as a disease, one curable through the care of "Dr. Roosevelt," became commonplace within New Deal rhetoric. Kiewe also identifies a second metaphor which portrays fear as a "phantom"—an intangible feeling that logic cannot always

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<sup>6</sup> The phrase "people and the president" is a key conceptual phrase of Lawrence and Cornelia Levine's study of letter writing and the fireside chats entitled *The People and the President: America's Conversation with FDR* (Boston: Beacon Hill Press, 2002). This study does an excellent job providing a glimpse into the potential responses by the American public to each of the chats, but does not tease out Roosevelt's legislative agenda.

<sup>7</sup> Amos Kiewe, *FDR's First Fireside Chat: Public Confidence and the Banking Crisis* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 15.

explain, and thus should not concern the American people.<sup>8</sup> Kiewe's observations provide a general summation of how positive rhetoric has explained the chat's success: "confidence was the operative word for the duration of the banking crisis, and confidence was the rhetorical currency necessary for resuming a normal and stable banking industry."<sup>9</sup>

Another communications scholar, David Ryfe, takes a broader focus. Ryfe examines the rhetorical qualities of the chats in "Franklin Roosevelt and the Fireside Chats," asserting how these qualities helped shape the addresses into a set of the most profound media events of the twentieth century. Ryfe argues that the strong rhetorical quality of the chats allowed audiences to "live the drama" of their situation during the Great Depression. According to Ryfe, Roosevelt used anecdotal stories to help listeners easily envision themselves in the situation the president painted.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Ryfe argues that FDR adopted multiple roles throughout the chats, from the audience's friend, to "counsel" for the American people, and even further as spokesperson for the legislative programs of the New Deal.<sup>11</sup> Those roles became even more believable when studying the vocabulary Roosevelt used; personal pronouns such as "you" and "we" became central to Roosevelt's speeches.<sup>12</sup> While Ryfe focuses on the rhetorical elements of the chat, his work, albeit indirectly, identifies a connection between Roosevelt's

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<sup>8</sup> Kiewe, 91-92.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>10</sup> David Ryfe, "Franklin Roosevelt and the Fireside Chats," *Journal of Communication* 49, no 4 (1990): 95.

<sup>11</sup> Ryfe, "Franklin Roosevelt," 94.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 92-93.

speeches and his legislative agenda. Arguing that audiences “linked themselves in an intimate fashion to government recovery efforts,” Ryfe suggests that rhetorical techniques would “tie New Deal policies to Roosevelt’s personal veracity.”<sup>13</sup> From Robert Fine’s general account of Roosevelt’s radio delivery to Kiewe and Ryfe’s more modern analysis on tone, language, and the targeted goal of restoring confidence, a strong argument can be made for President Roosevelt’s use of the fireside chats as model of success.

Let us, however, return to Seymour Rubin, the passionate grammar school student. On the surface, as historians and communication experts past and present have argued, the legendary voice of Franklin Roosevelt was the motivating factor for listening in. When the rest of the letter is considered however, Roosevelt’s performance and technique is only part of the story:

Couldn’t the president speak at an earlier hour so that the children who will be grown up citizens some day could listen to him? I do so much wish I could hear his own live voice explain what he is doing in these trying times. Or maybe if he can’t make all of his speeches earlier—because I know he must be awfully busy—don’t you think he could make just one speech even around 6 o’clock for the children? I would be very happy if Mr. Roosevelt could talk when I could hear him.<sup>14</sup>

For Seymour, the fireside chat also represented a learning curve—the ability to discover what FDR had planned, how these plans would unfold, and where individual citizens would fit into the rebirth of American society. Here, Seymour

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<sup>13</sup> Ryfe, “Franklin Roosevelt,” 94-95.

<sup>14</sup> Seymour Rubin, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, May 10, 1933.

Rubin saw these radio addresses as an avenue for civic education—a window into the mind that would solve the Great Depression.

Several of Roosevelt’s closest advisors recount the chats’ influence on achieving legislative goals. Samuel Rosenman, political advisor and speechwriter, addressed in his memoir, *Working with Roosevelt*, the use of the radio as a weapon for legislative programs while Roosevelt was governor of New York—issuing proposals that would force the hand of the state legislature by generating pronounced support from the public.<sup>15</sup> Raymond Moley, one of FDR’s closest advisors during the election and the administration’s first term, discussed the banking situation by reflecting upon the genesis of the plan for reform, not the construction of a rhetorical masterpiece that would sell the plan to the public.<sup>16</sup> Rexford Tugwell, later slated as assistant secretary of Agriculture, summed up the significance of the chats when reacting to a congressman’s comments:

The house was burning down, he [Republican Burt Snell] said: let the president put out the fire. The effect of the speech was magical; but no one knew better than Roosevelt that he had to produce more than reassurance. The magic was temporary.<sup>17</sup>

New Deal legislation would become not only the foundation of the administration’s policy, but also the backbone of the fireside chats.

Scholarship has, to this point, assessed these speeches as almost exclusively bent on improving confidence, less than a delivery of an

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<sup>15</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, *Working With Roosevelt*, 39.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Moley, *The First New Deal* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 196.

<sup>17</sup> Rexford Tugwell, *Roosevelt’s Revolution: The First Year, A Personal Perspective* (New York: MacMillan, 1976), 64.

administration's ideals. Legendary New Deal experts James Macgregor Burns, Frank Freidel, and William Leuchtenburg, in constructing their landmark studies of the Roosevelt administration, mention the chats only in passing. Each of these experts emphasize the rhetorical style of these speeches, celebrating the chat's ability to raise confidence over the potential to promote the president's program to Americans. To be fair, their treatment of the chats often aligns with the purpose of the monographs themselves. William Leuchtenburg's *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*, billed as the "best one-volume synthesis of the New Deal" by Freidel, mentions the chats only three times: once in connection to increasing bank deposits after the first chat, a sentence in passing regarding the June 1938 chat on divisions within the Democratic party, and a short summary of Roosevelt's brilliant rhetoric over the radio within the book's conclusion.<sup>18</sup>

Frank Freidel's *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal* discusses the chats six times, four of which connect to the second chat; the larger focus of this work. When addressing the fight for the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), Freidel's work does allude to the bridge between the second chat and its impact on the impending legislation, albeit in passing: "Roosevelt had helped prepare the nation for it [NIRA] through trial balloons in the press and his address to the Chamber of Commerce and Fireside Chat."<sup>19</sup> While mentioning key

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<sup>18</sup> William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (1963; repr., New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 44, 330-331.

<sup>19</sup> Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and Launching the New Deal*, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 444. Even when potentially connecting the Fireside Chat to the broader New Deal program, the Fireside Chat ranks behind newspaper coverage and a closed door session with the United States Chamber of Commerce.

legislative concepts such as government partnership and experimentation, Freidel's account of the speeches continuously return to Roosevelt's "warm, friendly explanation of what he was trying to achieve," instead of placing the speeches in context of a rapidly developing New Deal program.<sup>20</sup> James MacGregor Burns' *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, is described by the author as a "political biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt" and a "study of political leadership in American Democracy."<sup>21</sup> Here, sound bites of the chats frame Roosevelt's political aptitude in the radio arena—occasionally illustrating the fireside chat as a political weapon against dissent. Burn's best emphasis of the chat's political nature can be seen in Roosevelt's 1938 "Copperhead" address, the same chat mentioned by Leuchtenburg, emphasizing FDR's counterattack against the advances of conservative Southern Democrats. Burns depiction of Roosevelt's aggressive tone over the radio, making clear the president's disdain for radicals within the party ranks, clearly connects with the rhetorical argument for the chat's success. Still, in a speech about political dissent, the source of conflict is a matter of legislation and the Democratic Party platform, demonstrating the recurring appearance of Roosevelt's New Deal agenda within the chats.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Freidel, 433-434, 437-438, 444.

<sup>21</sup> James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (1956; repr., New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1984), ix.

<sup>22</sup> Burns, 360-361.

It is important to emphasize the truth to Roosevelt’s legendary voice, addictive charm, and infectious confidence in the American people, especially when placed in the context with the arguments of these foundational works on the New Deal. That being said, these works do address legislative goals first and foremost, and thus should be complemented by a broader use of the fireside chats. Leuchtenburg insists the purpose of *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* is to trace “the devastation wrought by the depression and the remarkable improvisation of new political and social institutions to cope with it.”<sup>23</sup> Many of the fireside chats, especially the second chat broadcasted on May 7, 1933, feature an introduction of such “social institutions” to the American people. Freidel’s title, *Launching the New Deal*, suggests the importance of agenda and program to the story of Roosevelt’s presidency. The opening pages of this monograph, in recounting FDR’s early political career, consistently return to FDR’s desire to help “the man at the foot of the ladder,” to quote Roosevelt himself. There is no better connection between destitute Americans and Roosevelt himself than the fireside chats, a description of reform from the president himself that generated a mountain of letters, many of which responded directly to the president’s ideas. Still, the fireside chats are peripheral parts of these monographs—used as short sound bites to trace the development of a program as opposed to emphasizing these speeches as an integral part of the program itself.

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<sup>23</sup> Leuchtenburg, xii-xiii.



To suggest the speeches only exude confidence because of a masterful voice sells these ground breaking addresses short. Other historians have made the connection between the fireside addresses and Roosevelt's agenda, such as David Kennedy's artful comments in *Freedom from Fear*:

Roosevelt had, in fact, been building up to that [second presidential] campaign for more than a year in a remarkable series of addresses, including several Fireside Chats broadcast nationally on the radio. Despite the frequently repeated accusation that the New Deal lacked a coherent philosophy and that Roosevelt had no capacity for ordered thought, those addresses taken together, etched at least the outlines of a structured and durable social philosophy that constituted the ideological heart of the New Deal.<sup>24</sup>

Kennedy's examination goes beyond the chat's rhetoric, arguing that Roosevelt used the fireside chat to explain, support and even advance New Deal programs to the people nationwide. It is a small difference from other New Deal histories, but a difference of paramount importance to understanding the fireside chats—obviously these speeches could be used to tell the story of the New Deal, but to state that FDR used the chats to further New Deal programs is completely different. This analysis is seldom found (if at all) in other narratives, and is used more frequently and effectively by Kennedy. For example, when discussing the development of the National Recovery Administration (NRA), Kennedy cites the third chat of June 1933 as a key discussion of the Blue Eagle campaign for industrial compliance:

Roosevelt declared that "those who cooperate in this program must know each other at a glance. That is why we have provided a badge of honor for this purpose, a simple design with a legend, 'We do our part,' and I ask that

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<sup>24</sup> Kennedy, 244.

all those who join with me shall display the badge prominently... There are adequate penalties in the law.”<sup>25</sup>

Kennedy’s use of the chats as Roosevelt’s sounding board for administration policies continues throughout the narrative, as illustrated here in the fifth chat, which discussed the Emergency Relief Appropriations Bill: “The need for relief would continue ‘for a long time to come,’ he [Roosevelt] added in his Fireside Chat of June 28, 1934. ‘We may as well recognize that fact.’”<sup>26</sup> While only a very small portion of the overall work, *Freedom From Fear* comes the closest to framing the fireside chats within the White House’s legislative agenda, employing snippets of the addresses as it beautifully outlines the New Deal and its impact on the American people.

Depression era histories, *Freedom from Fear* included, build from the tradition established by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in the foundational series *The Age of Roosevelt*. Kennedy’s use of the fireside chats, in this way, is no different. Schlesinger’s second volume in the series, *The Coming of the New Deal*, addresses all six of the first fireside chats, often concentrating on the chats content and connection to New Deal programs. Like most other New Deal historians, Schlesinger does use the first fireside chat to discuss the use of plain language, the restoration of confidence, and the role Roosevelt’s expression had on saving the banking system.<sup>27</sup> However, *The Coming of the New Deal* seldom returns to

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<sup>25</sup> Kennedy, 184.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>27</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), 12-13.

descriptions of rhetoric moving forward. One example is Schlesinger's use of the third fireside chat of June 1933, a speech that announced Roosevelt's approval of NRA "blanket agreements" that set up industrial controls nationwide.<sup>28</sup> Towards the end of the work, Schlesinger emphasizes Roosevelt's use of the fifth and sixth fireside chats to defend the accomplishments of the New Deal. This can be seen specifically within Schlesinger's treatment of Roosevelt's fifth chat in June 1934, leading up to formation of a Democratic platform for the upcoming election:

Roosevelt's fireside chat in late June had set the keynote for the democratic campaign. "The simplest way for each of you to judge recovery," he said "lies in the plain facts of your individual situation. Are you better off than you were last year? Are your debts less burdensome? Is your bank account more secure? Are your working conditions better? Is your faith in your own individual future more firmly grounded?"<sup>29</sup>

As with Kennedy, Schlesinger's work connects to the idea that Roosevelt used the chats as a way to broadcast decisions and priorities of the administration, but lacks the detail to fully explore the chat's potential to forward the president's agenda. In this way, FDR's outline of his legislative agenda for the public—packaged within the fireside chat and delivered to the American people via the radio—remains elusive within the historiography of the New Deal.

Thus, it is paramount to change lenses when looking at these speeches. While secondary and primary literature abound with references to Roosevelt's tone and rhetorical strength when delivering the fireside chats, few focus on the content of these addresses, and not one broadly considers the chats as an

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<sup>28</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 114.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 503.

introduction of the New Deal to the American people. A detailed study of the connection between the legislative agenda of the Roosevelt White House and the desperate American people via the fireside chats is warranted: a study that examines each of the chats' place in the New Deal program as it unfolded over the course of the Great Depression. Many of the president's advisors, while commenting on the importance of Roosevelt's tone and speaking ability to radiate confidence, also underscore the importance of legislative content in discussion of the New Deal. The legendary voice of the president echoes throughout media studies because of his tone and clarity, but it is equally important to examine the content of these addresses in connection to their groundbreaking delivery: a delivery of policy that would frame FDR's New Deal to the public. Historians, particularly Schlesinger and Kennedy, have suggested the connection between program and these public addresses, but do not deliver an analysis solidifying the chats within the overall mission that became Roosevelt's New Deal program. This is not to discount the importance of Roosevelt's mastery of the spoken word via the radio, or its magical ability to induce confidence. FDR's radio presence was not limited to the creation of optimistic presentations for a downtrodden people, but was also the language of the New Deal defined by advisors, speechwriters, and the president himself. Certainly Roosevelt sought to evoke a sense of strength, security, and above all, confidence at a time that saw misery, fear, and destitution. However, Roosevelt used those speeches not simply as an

elixir to revitalize the American spirit, but more importantly as a blueprint designing a new era for a people desperate for answers.

The fireside chats, when examined as speeches designed primarily to bring the president's program to life within the homes of the American people, take a position of newfound importance within the legacy of the New Deal program. When viewed as a portfolio of FDR's legislative agenda, the fireside chats add to the historiography of the New Deal, creating a more complete picture of the legislative priorities of the Roosevelt Administration. In this way, two essential steps must be taken to convey FDR's educational intentions within the fireside addresses. First, it is critical to trace the themes of change in American industry, agriculture, and other key areas of reform dominant within FDR's program, and connect these themes to content delivered by the chats. Only here can the fundamental ideas that shaped New Deal policy, typically hidden behind Roosevelt's artful use of rhetoric, come to life. Secondly, a detailed look into the public's response to these speeches is warranted, not in search of confirmation for Roosevelt's mastery of the radio, but their evaluation, for better or for worse, of the New Deal program. The March 12 fireside chat, although the first and perhaps most memorialized, does not seek to communicate the ideas of the New Deal, but instead to explain a bank holiday crafted by outgoing Hoover officials as much as the incoming Roosevelt administration. The speech of May 7, FDR's second fireside chat, transmits the policy of Roosevelt's New Deal: solidifying a message crafted first and foremost to instruct the American people of changes that

would defeat the “emergency.” Serving as an example for the remainder of the New Deal era, Roosevelt’s second fireside chat provided a vision of what the first hundred days and beyond would look like—speeches carefully crafted to conceptualize for listeners the administration’s goals in fighting the war on the Great Depression.

### **Blueprint for Recovery – May 7, 1933**

The May 7 address serves as the best example of how the fireside chats of Franklin Roosevelt’s first two terms broadcasted the president’s legislative agenda to the American people. In the midst of the famed hundred days, the fireside chat is built in a sequence of five sections to reflect legislative priorities of the administration, crafted to combat the Great Depression.<sup>30</sup> As if he were the professor at the front of a classroom, Roosevelt first returned to the subject of his first address, providing an overview of a country “dying by inches” from financial disasters, foreclosures, and the stoppage of banking operations across America. Here, Roosevelt suggested that his administration had a choice—allow the country to straighten itself out, or take action. The second section of his speech insisted that his administration could not stand by and watch America suffer through the current situation, and thus the New Deal was born. After ensuring the American people that the power of Congress had not been compromised, FDR identified the

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<sup>30</sup> Segmentation of the speech is a result of research and culminating construction of this work—although newspapers typically reported on the speech in sections such as this, there was no enumeration by FDR in presenting the speech itself.

first, and perhaps most scrutinized, group of New Deal agencies. Roosevelt mentioned by name the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), alluded to the creation of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) from the Farm Bill in Congress, outlined plans for the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), and National Industrial Recovery Act, and finally provided for bills in railroad development and the repeal of Prohibition. Third, Franklin Roosevelt identified what his administration saw as the key problem prolonging the Depression: surplus. Here Roosevelt discussed not only the failing market structure of American agriculture, which had forced farmers to sell their products at “prices ruinously low,” but also the similar fate of American industrial sectors: businesses that produced a surplus far beyond the possibility for consumption by Americans or abroad. The accentuation of surplus transitioned naturally into the speech’s fourth section: government partnership. This idea not only dominated newspaper headlines across America, but also shaped the progression of the New Deal. The fifth and final section of the speech discussed the president’s decision to abandon the gold standard, and explained how his administration sought to prevent the “flight” of gold from the country.<sup>31</sup> As always, Roosevelt concluded the speech by thanking the American people for their support and the broadcasting companies for hosting the communication. In

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<sup>31</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933. *Franklin Delano Roosevelt Speech Collection*. Coral Springs, Florida: The Historical Archive, [CD-ROM], 2007. Russell Buhite and David Levy, *FDR's Fireside Chats* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 11-17. The analysis of the chat itself was completed at first using an audio recording of the speech, supplemented via the use of the Buhite and Levy transcription.

this speech, less than twenty minutes in length, Roosevelt outlined an array of government programs to combat the Depression, exposed the roots of the Great Depression from surplus production, provided for a revolutionary connection between the government and the people, and extended the government's control over the monetary machinery at the heart of the economic debacle. The scaffolding for the New Deal was complete: a frame of ideas that represented the coalescence of Roosevelt's personal ideology with the president's Brains Trust, producing a vision that the American people could believe in and an education about how their government would remake the United States.

### **Agricultural Theory**

How do we ascertain the thoughts of a newly elected Franklin Roosevelt? The simple answer might be campaign speeches, but in this case, there is a more sophisticated possibility. *Looking Forward*, a collection of Roosevelt's campaign speeches edited and published as essays, recounts not only the candidate's take on the issues that surrounded the campaign, but represent a handpicked selection of content that best represents the platform of the incoming president. Published by the John Day Company in March 1933 as a "presentation of his theories of government and the broader phases of his policies," *Looking Forward* was, according to the *New York Times*, put into motion by publishing consultant Richard Walsh. After receiving a request from Walsh to develop a book, Roosevelt replied with "a pile of material 18 inches high" that might be



considered for publication. Walsh's review of the material resulted in an outline designed to advise the president-elect, and from there Roosevelt assembled the book personally.<sup>32</sup> Reviewed in the *Times* on March 19, 1933, *Looking Forward* is praised not only as an introduction to the major areas of reform targeted by the New Deal, but as an "outline for the New Deal" itself:

As President Roosevelt takes up the task of translating into terms of action his conception of the "new deal" there comes from the press this book in which he sets forth his convictions as to why a new deal is necessary and as to the character it must assume. In piecemeal form the book's contents are already known to the public, for it is compiled from articles and speeches which millions have listened to or read. Assembled between covers, and welded together by the instruction of connective material, these separate parts achieve a unity which enables the reader to obtain a comprehensive view of the bases on which the president plans to build his administration.<sup>33</sup>

*Looking Forward* achieved broad distribution almost immediately, and stood at the top of the *New York Times* "Best Seller" list for non-fiction the week after its publication. The book remained a top-selling work in non-fiction for another three months in at least one metropolitan city across the country, and would be accessible to Americans across the country—the very audience FDR looked to reach during the fireside chats.<sup>34</sup> In conjunction with these speeches turned essay,

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<sup>32</sup> "Book Notes," *New York Times*, November 11, 1932 and "Roosevelt Pamphlet Grows," *New York Times*, March 16, 1933.

<sup>33</sup> "An Outline For the "New Deal:" In "Looking Forward" President Roosevelt States His Objectives," *New York Times*, March 19, 1933.

<sup>34</sup> The publication success of *Looking Forward* is traced through the "Best Seller" list, also called "Best Sellers Here and Elsewhere," published weekly within the *New York Times*. The list provided the top three fiction and non-fiction texts that sold in several major metropolitan cities that week, often including cities from both coasts. *Looking Forward*, after debuting in the top spot for non-fiction in New York, Washington, and Philadelphia, remained as a top three seller in at least one metropolitan city until June 19, 1933.

Roosevelt's famed Brains Trust should be considered, which provide a bottomless dialogue directly connected to the construction and pursuit of the New Deal's legislative agenda. In this way, *Looking Forward*, in combination to the papers and memoirs of the first New Deal advisors, constructs a viable summation of a solid legislative agenda, a program flying in the face of suspicion that Roosevelt had no plan whatsoever. It is this plan that evolves as the heart of the fireside chats, enveloping dialogue with the ideas of slashing surplus crop production, local cooperation with government initiatives and the support of struggling farmers.

Agriculture was, throughout the depression era, a major concern for FDR. In a letter dated March of 1932, New York governor Franklin Roosevelt responded to an angered Midwesterner accusing eastern seaboard planters of "strangling the western farmer" via market interactions. In reply, Roosevelt included two strategies tested successfully in New York that might be implemented at the national level. Roosevelt proposed that the government buy up unused farm land for conservation purposes and employ soil and crop studies "to aid farmers in balancing the[ir] production to suit market demands."<sup>35</sup> In short, Roosevelt's proposed strategy attacked the rising levels of surplus crops flooding the American market. This was markedly different from traditional agricultural reform, especially those strategies tested in the 1920s, which rested

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<sup>35</sup> FDR to G.W. Avery, March 9, 1932; Folder: FDR and Agriculture - January 1911 - March 1933; FDR and Agriculture Collection; Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, hereafter cited as Agriculture Collection, FDR Library.

on currency reform and inflationary policy.<sup>36</sup> According to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., what FDR and his Brains Trust proposed was less a specific course of action and more a general strategy—the creation, among other things, of “domestic allotment plans” that would directly attack surplus in agriculture.<sup>37</sup> This policy took shape in a campaign speech delivered in Topeka, Kansas—an address that was later reworked for *Looking Forward* entitled “What About Agriculture?”<sup>38</sup>

“What About Agriculture” makes clear Roosevelt’s plan to dramatically reform the surplus side of American agriculture. The growth of farm surplus not only created an ongoing agricultural slump nationwide, but tremendously reduced the purchasing power of fifty million farmers. The solution to these general problems focused on balancing “what the farmer sells and the things the farmer buys,” something Roosevelt insisted had not been attempted by 1933.<sup>39</sup> To a certain extent this was true—domestic allotment plans were a far cry from the

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<sup>36</sup> Roosevelt’s agricultural policy, from the beginning, featured a variety of alterations to contemporary farm operation, the largest of which became controlled production of crops and livestock. Controlling production via market exchange, both domestic and international, became a staple among supporters of the McNary-Haugen Bill during the 1920s. In fact, the farm bill passed during the hundred days would eventually include tools to adjust production *and* the entry of agricultural products into the market. See Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 39.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1957), 424, 452 and *The Coming of the New Deal*, 36-39.

<sup>38</sup> “What about Agriculture?” is exclusively based on a critical campaign speech in Topeka Kansas from September, 1932, Franklin Roosevelt, *Looking Forward* (1933; reprint, New York: The John Day Company, 1953). A good example of what contemporary and historiographical experts refer to as “ghostwriting,” this speech illustrates how Roosevelt’s campaign and presidential speeches were assembled. According to Arthur Schlesinger in *The Crisis of the Old Order*, “many hands contributed to the final text.” Schlesinger’s account identifies eight in all (423-424). “What About Agriculture” is an early example of how Roosevelt assimilated multiple viewpoints and, in taking these ideas and snippets of writing, how he implemented them into a draft that became his own. For an intensive look into ghostwriting in the Roosevelt White House, see Samuel Rosenman, *Working With Roosevelt*, 1-12 and Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts: Presidents and Their Speechwriters*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 5-30.

<sup>39</sup> Roosevelt, “What About Agriculture,” *Looking Forward*, 132.

traditional currency reform sought by Midwestern agricultural lobbyists and international market reform pushed by supporters of the McNary-Haugen bills. “What About Agriculture” accounted for the surplus debacle in two ways: a drastic misunderstanding of the problem by previous administrations and declining consumption of products abroad. Roosevelt’s plan aggressively attacked the “planned use of land” by farmers across the country, and proposed a reorganization of the Department of Agriculture that would provide alternatives to the repeated production of surplus crops. This government plan sought to employ tariffs, identify effective ways to negotiate pricing in foreign markets, and work with local administrations to deal with the problem. Such statements catered to traditionalists still hung up on overseas dumping of agricultural product. The heart of the plan, however, was to shore up the relationship between federal agencies and existing local cooperatives to help farmers deal with surplus via controlled production. Roosevelt stressed that new measures must be completely voluntary: local networks between farmers and government agencies were of paramount importance, but could not force farmers into cooperation.<sup>40</sup> Such a plan, envisioned before FDR’s inauguration, sketched the frames of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration, and, in turn, Roosevelt’s second fireside chat.

During the administration’s first hundred days, few were closer to Roosevelt than Raymond Moley and Rexford Tugwell, and they knew it. According to Rexford Tugwell, assistant secretary of agriculture, “Ray was, for

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<sup>40</sup> Roosevelt, “What About Agriculture,” *Looking Forward*, 134-135.

all practical purposes, a cabinet member in one person; and I was his second. There was no real third.”<sup>41</sup> Such influence in the early New Deal has made Moley’s analysis of those early days somewhat cavalier, but his observations remain paramount to almost every legislative endeavor of the first hundred days, agriculture included. Moley mirrors Roosevelt’s observations in *Looking Forward*—critical of a “cycle of futility” in agricultural reform. Moley takes it one step further, linking Roosevelt’s campaign promises to end surplus crop production with the promise to “raise the relative value of farmer’s income.”<sup>42</sup> The administration evaluated plans for agricultural reform from several different academic circles, but eventually settled on one designed by Tugwell and Henry Wallace, FDR’s secretary of Agriculture. This plan proved remarkably similar to ideas outlined in *Looking Forward*, emphasizing the control of surplus, the development of local agencies to administer change, and to secure voluntary cooperation from farmers.<sup>43</sup> In discussing the final version of the Farm Bill as it took shape, Moley suggested that it contained “something for everybody.” Moley labeled the bill a “domestic allotment plan,” a term quickly becoming absorbed into New Deal terminology. Such a plan, introduced at Topeka and dominant in *Looking Forward*, would reward farmers for voluntarily producing less of a particular crop.<sup>44</sup> Moley’s recollection of agricultural reform refers to several

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<sup>41</sup> Moley, *The First New Deal*, 238.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-245.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 250-252.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

aspects of the farm bill's development, and is an invaluable resource on the hundred days. Most of all, Moley narrates effectively the role surplus played in Roosevelt's line of thinking and ultimately the legislative agenda portrayed by the fireside chat.

Rexford Tugwell's account of early agricultural reform, which traced the complexities of shaping Roosevelt's ideas behind the scenes in the Department of Agriculture, also focused on dealing with farm surplus. Referring to the Farm Bill throughout its development as "unique" from previous reforms, Tugwell mirrors Moley's emphasis of government efforts: agricultural administrators would employ local channels to coax land out of production and, in turn, decrease surplus through a variety of different actions and agreements.<sup>45</sup> Such focus on surplus was not only dominant in the minds of FDR, Moley, Wallace and Tugwell, it quickly became Department of Agriculture policy as well. The headline story of *The Official Record of the United States Department of Agriculture* released in April of 1933 reports just that: "Production Must Fit Actual, Not Desired, Markets, Says Tugwell." Here, Tugwell argues that farming trends must fit the "country's needs," and produce to a market that actually exists, thus addressing the elements of overproduction that destroyed farmer's income and price points.<sup>46</sup> Such points were not only made clear via this departmental

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<sup>45</sup> Rexford Tugwell, Unpublished Diary Entry; Folder: "The Hundred Days"; Diary: 1932 - May 1933; Rexford Papers of Rexford Tugwell; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, hereafter cited as Rexford Tugwell Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>46</sup> Rexford Tugwell, "Production Must Fit Actual, No Desired, Markets, Says Tugwell;" Folder: The Official Record of the United States Department of Agriculture; Rexford Tugwell Papers, FDR Library.

newsletter, but over the radio to emphasize the idea, as Tugwell sat as a guest on the National Farm and Home Hour two weeks before the newsletter was published.<sup>47</sup> Like Moley, surplus production remained a foundational issue of New Deal reform, as Tugwell recounted in *Roosevelt's Revolution*:

The immense surpluses were a problem neither he nor others could ignore. So, in spite of his reluctance, he listened to the arguments of those of us who felt that heroic—and perhaps costly—measures must be undertaken. It was the first necessity, we insisted, for general recovery. If farm people—made up nearly half the population then, counting owners, tenants, sharecroppers, laborers and villagers—could not sell, they could not buy; and if they could not buy, no one need supply the goods and services they would like. Thus, closed factories, unemployment, general paralysis!<sup>48</sup>

In this way, despite Roosevelt's reluctance to increase spending in the early years of the New Deal, the central issue of agricultural reform remained the problem of surplus, and “voluntary domestic allotment” plans that sought to reduce cultivation across America became the weapon of choice by most New Dealers. As this focus became the ideological basis for the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), it in turn became a key focus of the fireside chat as well.<sup>49</sup>

Tugwell's recollections on agriculture also reference other areas of New Deal reform independent of the crusade against surplus. One such idea dominant throughout Tugwell's memoirs are the negotiations with regional power bases in agriculture during the formation of administration policy. As suggested in *Looking Forward*, and recounted by Moley, Roosevelt placed a heavy emphasis

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<sup>47</sup> Rexford Tugwell, “Address for the Farm and Home Hour,” Folder: National Farm and Home Hour 3/21/33; Rexford Tugwell Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>48</sup> Tugwell, *Roosevelt's Revolution*, 32.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

on voluntary participation and local cooperation—an impossibility unless farmers saw the benefit of reform. Thus, Secretary Wallace and Assistant Secretary Tugwell were charged with meeting agricultural leaders from across the nation, representing cooperatives, union organizations and colleges.<sup>50</sup> Such a meeting represents FDR’s concern for public support at the local level, a key to success for the unborn AAA. This idea resonates within the fireside chat alongside the crusade against surplus production.

Henry Wallace was not considered an academic goliath or a part of the celebrated brain trust, but nonetheless had a hand in developing key policy measures. Wallace did not see the agricultural programs as temporary remedies for the Great Depression, but as the building blocks for a stronger agricultural community. As early as March of 1933, Wallace pushed for a more permanent policy to help the destitute farmer. Arguing that overproduced commodities could take three to four years to completely wash out of the glutinous market, Wallace insists that programs be semi-permanent, especially in the face of hostile European markets. In addition, it would take at least that long for workers displaced from farms across America to find jobs in other recovering industries, and they must be supported in some way until unemployment was addressed more readily.<sup>51</sup> By examining the contributions of key administration policy makers,

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<sup>50</sup> White House Press Release, March 11, 1933; Folder: FDR and Agriculture - January 1911 - March 1933; Agriculture Collection, FDR Library.

<sup>51</sup> Henry Wallace to Franklin Roosevelt, March 15, 1933; Folder: FDR and Agriculture - January 1911 - March 1933; Agriculture Collection, FDR Library.



critical ideas brought to fruition by the Farm Bill—surplus control, locally driven reform, added support for impoverished farmers—all return to the original ideas of *Looking Forward*, in some cases as a verbatim list of qualifications for reform. These ideas, developed within the interworking of the Roosevelt administration, came to fruition as part of the Farm Bill and the AAA, and were delivered to the American people by Roosevelt via the second fireside chat.

With tremendous change, however, came public suspicion of autocratic domination from the White House. Realizing this, FDR included early on in the radio message a disclaimer regarding the growth of such power, insisting that Congress had not lost the power to legislate to the White House, but instead a “well grounded, well rounded plan” was being implemented throughout multiple branches of the United States government. This plan, as it relates to agriculture and industry, specifically referenced agricultural efforts to reduce surplus and encourage local cooperation with federal programs—the same ideas put so plainly in Roosevelt’s *Looking Forward* as well as the papers and memoirs of key administrative staff. In describing the Farm Bill, Roosevelt emphasizes the program that evolved into the AAA:

The Farm Relief Bill seeks by the use of several methods, alone or together, to bring about an increased return to farmers for their major farm products, seeking at the same time to prevent in the days to come disastrous overproduction, the kind of overproduction that so often in the past has kept farm commodity prices far below a reasonable return.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.

In broadcasting the importance of the Farm Bill, Roosevelt's address made clear the connection between surplus production and falling agricultural income, an idea key to the Administration's assessment of the agricultural problem.

Roosevelt went on to thank the people for their support of programs that attack the root cause of the Great Depression—surplus production:

I feel very certain that the people of this country understand and approve the broad purposes behind these new governmental policies relating to agriculture and industry and transportation. We found ourselves left with more agricultural products than we could possibly consume ourselves and with surpluses which other nations did not have the cash to buy from us except at prices ruinously low.<sup>53</sup>

This short but nonetheless key section of the speech affirms the administration's concern for surplus production in America, and clearly connects Roosevelt's legislative agenda to a radio speech designed to drum up support for a revolutionary agricultural program.

The Farm Bill was, however, one of the few acts covered intensely by the media leading up to the fireside chat. That said, it is easy to become skeptical of the legislative significance of Roosevelt's speech with regards to agriculture. In addition, looking back on the hundred days, there is the question of Roosevelt's sincerity—did he really need public support generated by a radio broadcast? While possible to look back on the hundred days as being defined by a rubber stamp Congress, there is good reason to believe that no program was a sure bet.

Raymond Moley, despite his highhanded recollection of the Administration as

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<sup>53</sup> Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.

fragmented and unplanned ideologically, rejects this claim, suggesting that the Seventy-Third Congress would not be “stampeded or cajoled.”<sup>54</sup> When examining the press releases of the administration early on, there was a consistent call for the Farm Bill to be passed in time for the rapidly approaching growing season.<sup>55</sup> In short, while emergency banking legislation sailed through, agricultural reform of this level, and other reform measures, would be opposed to some degree. As an analysis of Roosevelt’s perspective on public opinion will demonstrate later in this work, the administration projected a tremendous value upon public support. While impossible to ascertain the degree to which the fireside chat and interconnected public support had on passage of the farm bill a mere five days later, there was no better medium for the President to tap public motivation for the Farm Bill than by speaking directly to the American people. In this way, the agricultural ideas of the early New Deal show through brilliantly via Roosevelt’s use of the radio.

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<sup>54</sup> Moley, *The First New Deal*, 234, 338. It is critical to consistently compare Moley’s reflection upon the administration to other sources. While Moley was indeed FDR’s strongest influence during the hundred days legislatively, and thus a figure of paramount importance, his resignation from the administration several years later embittered his perspective on much of what was accomplished.

<sup>55</sup> For the long path navigated by the Roosevelt Administration in pursuit of a Farm Bill, as well as the urgency to pass the bill before the approaching season, see the January 1911–March 1933 folder of the FDR and Agriculture Collection and correspondence between Henry Wallace and FDR from the President’s Official File 1–The Department of Agriculture, both collections from the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

## Guiding the “Great Economic Machine”

Unlike his progressive take on agriculture, Roosevelt’s vision for industrial reform had not taken shape into a comprehensive bill by the time radios were switched on for the fireside chat on May 7. This, however, does not mean Roosevelt’s ideas were underdeveloped in writing, nor does it mean they were completely separated from agricultural policy. FDR’s “Need For Economic Planning” essay in *Looking Forward* argues for a dramatic increase in government involvement, framing economic reform as a calculable endeavor achieved through measurement and planning: “our present condition can be expressed, in every industry and profession, by statistics, by charts, by graphic reports. Our hopes for the future might be shown the same way.”<sup>56</sup> In that essay, Roosevelt insists that American society needs assistance from the government in controlling surplus production in agriculture and industry, citing the need for programs to produce a better balanced economy.<sup>57</sup> Throughout the Roosevelt campaign, reforming the operation of American business was a dominant theme, suggesting that American industrial leaders need to consider how change might help the country, a challenge to “think less about the producer and more about the consumer.”<sup>58</sup> Because government intervention runs so very counter to the idea

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<sup>56</sup> “Need For Economic Planning” was based exclusively on a critical campaign speech at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia in May, 1932. See Roosevelt, *Looking Forward*, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Roosevelt, “Need for Economic Planning,” *Looking Forward*, 47.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

of laissez faire competition infused throughout American economic theory since the nineteenth century, FDR links legislative reform with experimentation:

The country needs, and unless I mistake its temper, the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it; if it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something. The millions who are in want will not stand by silently forever while the things to satisfy their needs are within easy reach.<sup>59</sup>

Experimentation may be what was rewarding about the New Deal, and it is an important theme of Roosevelt's program. However, the overhaul of industry's relationship with the government centered on a concern at the heart of New Deal reform: the control of surplus.

Hugh Johnson was at the center of this reform, taking control of the newly minted NRA in the months following the second fireside chat. In turn, Johnson was exclusively connected to the development of industrial codes designed to revolutionize industry's relationship with Washington. The driving purpose behind many of these codes became, like agriculture, the control of surplus and new attention towards the condition of the workforce. Both of these themes are evident in Johnson's memoir, *The Blue Eagle: From Egg to Earth*, specifically an opening chapter describing the state of American industry during the Depression entitled "Balanced Economy v. Rugged Individualism." Here, Johnson argues that the "great economic machine had no governor," which under normal circumstances aligned with the American laissez-faire model of industrial

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<sup>59</sup> Roosevelt, "Need for Economic Planning," *Looking Forward*, 51.

progress.<sup>60</sup> But, in an era when industrial progress had fallen apart, a new mantra was required, and “balance” was the answer according to Johnson: “Always the answer is balance—balance of supply to demand, balance of prices at fair exchanged parity throughout the whole economic structure, and balance of benefits among great economic areas.”<sup>61</sup> Johnson attacked the problem of American industry in two very familiar areas: overproduction, leading to surplus material, and the condition of the workers, often lost within the great cogs of the American industrial machine. As with agriculture, avoiding surplus production is also a dominant theme of industrial reform. According to Johnson, avoiding surplus called for the development of economic systems that will produce to demand, not the other way around—a critical aspect of creating a balanced economy. In addition, Johnson suggested that balancing the profit margins of all the classes would certainly produce a positive effect on industry as a whole. Johnson is thinking here of the working class, suggesting that protection from wage driven poverty is critical; otherwise the fate of this class will produce a “downward drag” on the progress of an entire society.<sup>62</sup> Both of these themes fit Roosevelt’s overall plan to create a working relationship between American industry and its government.

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<sup>60</sup> Hugh Johnson, *The Blue Eagle: From Egg to Earth* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1955), 160.

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, *The Blue Eagle*, 169.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

As with agriculture, Raymond Moley and to a certain extent Rexford Tugwell both discussed industrial reform of the administration's first year. In *The First New Deal*, Moley makes clear his involvement with multiple parties in Washington that had their hand in industrial reform.<sup>63</sup> In this vein, Moley adds to our understanding of industrial reform in two ways. First, Moley recounts the influence of business leaders unafraid of supporting change to traditional industrial models. Interaction with the business community brought another theme to the reform ideology—competition. Moley recounts the role of “cutthroat competition” as a key symptom of a sickly American economy. This was amid the belief, recounted earlier by Wallace and Tugwell, that the farm community could evolve into a healthy market for American industrial products, but like the labor market, would not be ready for at least a year following intense government reform. Thus, cut-throat competition among industrial powers might destroy any progress in industry before it began. Right in the middle of this process was Henry Harriman, president of the National Chamber of Commerce, who suggested “conferences” to develop agreements in economic planning in hopes that such competition might be checked.<sup>64</sup> When examining the writing and recollections of key individuals connected to industrial reform at this stage of the New Deal, terms such as “cutthroat competition,” “living wage,” and most

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<sup>63</sup> Moley, *The First New Deal*, 284.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

definitely “overproduction” became synonymous with reform, emerging as an integral part of the fireside chat.

The highly touted “brains trust” certainly receives the most attention of all contributors to the early New Deal, but as G. William Domhoff and Michael Webber argue in *Class and Power in the New Deal*, influential groups outside of the administration played a vital role in forming several key New Deal programs. Domhoff and Weber’s work recount the influence of “corporate moderates” on the development of the NRA—industrialists who found encouragement in working hand in hand with the government in resolving the industrial crisis, and in some cases proposing changes to policy.<sup>65</sup> At the very least, the influence of such individuals is felt in the development of the fireside chats. Domhoff and Weber discuss plans for industrial cooperation developed by Harriman and Gerald Swope of General Electric, both of whom fit the ideological mold of the administration’s industrial policy.<sup>66</sup> It is no secret that Roosevelt’s advisors supplemented the president’s already voracious reading of newspapers with separate clippings on specific issues.<sup>67</sup> Buried deep within the President’s Personal File in Hyde Park, folders marked “speech material” provide some insight as to what type of

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<sup>65</sup> G. William Domhoff and Michael Webber, *Class and Power in the New Deal: Corporate Moderates, Southern Democrats, and the Liberal-Labor Coalition* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011). While Domhoff and Webber’s argument that these power groups proposed the ideas that eventually morphed into key New Deal pieces of legislation may unfairly discount the role of the administration in developing what would become landmark accomplishments, the influence of these groups cannot be ignored in industry or agriculture.

<sup>66</sup> Domhoff and Webber, *Class and Power in the New Deal*, 107.

<sup>67</sup> David Welky, *Everything Was Better in America: Print Culture in the Great Depression* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 2008), 21.



information FDR used when designing his speeches, including the fireside chats; records that abound with quotations from Harriman and Swope. The folder contains frequent excerpts from the *Washington Star* recounting the record of the Chamber of Commerce, often led by Harriman, as quoted here on May 1, 1933: “The president is seeing in every way to assist industry. Industry must bestir itself. Up to the present, there has been cooperation on the part of the Government and not so much on the part of industry.” The folder is dominated by references to the Chamber of Commerce, and to display the influence of Harriman and Swope, one memo quoted the *Star*’s summation of their collaboration: “Under their [Harriman and Swope’s] ideas, trade associations would submit programs or agreements to the government for industry control, price control, wage control in cooperation with labor, hours of labor and allocation of production among the units within industry.”<sup>68</sup> Such notes serve as examples of information the president could have used when reviewing and redrafting his addresses, illustrating the influence of other power bases outside the administration.

The same folder also contained items dated much later than the first hundred days. In one memo entitled “Development of the N.R.A.,” the unnamed author recounts the development of the NRA during the hundred days, further connecting the fireside chat specifically to the NRA: “On May [10], 1933, after

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<sup>68</sup> Folder: Business v. New Deal; Presidents Personal File 1820; Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY, hereafter cited as Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

the President addressed the radio audience of America, it was realized for the first time by the public that some sort of regulatory legislation was planned.”<sup>69</sup> Such an observation, although via reflection several years later, demonstrates that the May 7 fireside address is likely the very first time the American people were informed of such legislative plans. In this way, not only are the ideas that evolved into the NRA present in the radio address, but this controversial New Deal administration might trace its announcement to the public back to the fireside chat in the first place.

The fireside chat, delivered before the passage of the NIRA, could not delve into the specifics of policy still being assembled by the administration leading up to May 7. Even so, the radio speech was designed to inform America of the administration’s legislative agenda, not a bill in Congress. The address frames the administration’s actions ideologically in connection with industry, as described by Roosevelt’s *Looking Forward*, Johnson and Moley’s memoirs, and

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<sup>69</sup> Folder: National Recovery Act; Presidents Personal File 1820; Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, NY. The 10<sup>th</sup> of May appears in brackets here because it may indicate a typographical error by the author. Whomever wrote the memo was clearly referring to the fireside chat (“the president addressed the radio audience of America”) but nothing of any significance with regards to the NRA seems to have occurred on the 10<sup>th</sup>. While possible the author was addressing a speech to the Chamber of Commerce aired in some areas over the radio days before (May 4), the fireside chat represents an explanation that is closer chronologically to May 10 and is recognized by media outlets across the country. (See Press Conference #70, May 4, 1933, from *Selected Press Conference Transcriptions Released to the Press*, Stephen Early Papers, FDR Library) Still, the date used represents a mystery, as the chat was delivered on a Sunday evening, and was widely covered the next day (May 8) by newspapers. Roosevelt delivered a press conference dealing with this content far before May 10 (May 8, as well). (See Press Conferences of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933-1945, FRANKLIN Digital Collection, FDR Library). Although puzzling, this memo certainly links the birth of the NRA with the fireside chat.

even speech reference material. This address zeroes in on surplus production and developing a balanced economy with (as opposed to against) agriculture:

Well-considered and conservative measures will likewise be proposed, within a few days, that will attempt to give to the industrial workers of the country a more fair wage return, to prevent cutthroat competition, to prevent unduly long hours for labor, and at the same time to encourage each industry to prevent overproduction.<sup>70</sup>

This section, following directly after Roosevelt accents the importance of the Farm Bill, not only links agriculture and industry together via the prevention of surplus, but also identifies other themes dominant within Moley and Johnson's narrative of the hundred days: "cutthroat completion," a more reasonable wage, and superior systems for scheduling of labor. To be sure, the recognition of these issues became paramount for Johnson, soon to be named director of the NRA.

Using the radio a month later on June 16, 1933, roughly a week before FDR's third fireside chat, Johnson continued to include such ideas in his own speech, mirroring the second fireside chat when expanding upon the goals of the NRA:

First, to carry out our primary purpose, which is to put men back to work at decent living wages in the shortest possible space and time, and second, those provisions which you [the industry] find it absolutely necessary to include to protect the willing and the forward-looking among your members from the racketeers and the price-cutters and those willing to take advantage of the unselfishness and public spirit of other men.<sup>71</sup>

These ideas become the mantra of not only Johnson and the NRA, but also of the public's support of the New Deal.

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<sup>70</sup> Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.

<sup>71</sup> Radio Address, Hugh Johnson; Folder: Radio Address, June 16, 1933; Hugh Johnson Papers; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

FDR wished to make clear in these addresses that while not liberal or reactionary, that these ideas were new, and that the administration would test such measures in order to best meet the “emergency.”<sup>72</sup> Such transparency was a breath of fresh air for Americans, and produced several key quotations in connection to the spirit of experimentation from Roosevelt’s essay on government planning in *Looking Forward*: “I do not deny that we may make some mistakes of procedure as we carry out this policy [of government investment in industry]. I have no expectation of making a hit every time I come to bat. What I seek is the highest possible batting average, not only for myself but the team.”<sup>73</sup> While perhaps the most frequently quoted line from the chat, it also connected to the theme of experimentation made clear by Roosevelt in *Looking Forward*. Newspaper editors and public responses alike celebrated the baseball analogy to embolden the process of trial and error, including Will Rogers, whose timely “dispatch” to Americans selected the remark as one of three reasons to celebrate the president’s speech.<sup>74</sup> While this quotation was certainly the talk of the nation, it paled in comparison to the boldfaced idea of the talk: government partnership.

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<sup>72</sup> FDR used “the emergency” in each of the first two fireside chats to refer to the Great Depression.

<sup>73</sup> Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.

<sup>74</sup> Will Rogers, “Will Rogers Dispatch,” *Boston Globe*, May 9, 1933. Rogers’ commentary regarding the legislative content is hard to decipher. On one hand, Rogers remarks on May 9 that Roosevelt “read the minutes of the last meeting” and “forgot to mention what might be in his mind for the future.” This however, is not to say that Rogers missed the importance of FDR’s plans, as on May 10 he suggested that he would “lick any of ‘em” in Congress regarding the issues of the day. While perhaps the mouthpiece of America, Rogers may just be writing what will get him the biggest reaction.

## Engineering a Government Partnership

The May 7 fireside chat best encapsulates the administration's vision for an agricultural and industrial partnership between the private sector and the federal government. While a definitive break from laissez-faire ideology, it is an idea reflected within Roosevelt's plan for economic reform. As with industrial and agricultural policy, the idea of government partnership is present in Roosevelt's introduction to *Looking Forward*, which makes plain FDR's desire to prevent industrial and agricultural dysfunction through planning. In addition, Roosevelt insists such planning would coincide with government intervention—interaction that should continue far past the conclusion of the “emergency.”

I shall not speak of an economic life completely planned and regulated. That is as impossible as it is undesirable. I shall speak of the necessity, wherever it is imperative that government interfere to adjust parts of the economic structure of the nation, that there be real community interest—not only among the sections of this great country, but among the economic units and the various groups in these units... The plans we make during the present emergency, if we plan wisely and rest our structure upon a base sufficiently broad, may show the way to a more permanent safeguarding of our social and economic life.<sup>75</sup>

It is tempting to account for this idea as a way for the Roosevelt administration to account for the success of early New Deal agencies, many of which involved intense interaction between the government and industry. However, this is not the case—such ideas were prevalent long before FDR's inauguration, as suggested by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in *The Crisis of the Old Order*:

Roosevelt's preconvention speeches, culminating with his address at Oglethorpe, had foreshadowed, unmistakably if vaguely, a conception of

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<sup>75</sup> Roosevelt, “Introduction,” *Looking Forward*, 13.

an organic economy in which government, accepting the drive of modern technology towards bigness, would seek to reorganize the chaotic business order into a system of national integration.<sup>76</sup>

In this way, the idea of government partnership should be seen as a critical idea to Roosevelt before the presidency, not as a rationalization for new government agencies. Government partnership quickly became wrapped up in the actions and ideas of Roosevelt's key advisors as well—whether they approved or not.

It is difficult to discern when Raymond Moley started to break with the Roosevelt administration's core theories—a break certainly complete by the beginning of the administration's second term. Moley's memoirs, openly supportive or critical of most policies, do not take a position here on Roosevelt's ideas of government partnership. Still, the inclusiveness of Moley's recollection points to the fact that this theme of cooperation between government and private industry is not simply a passing phrase, but a central tenant to Roosevelt's ideology, as evidenced by the aforementioned essays and introduction of *Looking Forward*. In constructing an early draft of the speech, Moley recalls Roosevelt's identification with the word “partnership” as a key term to be used in the fireside chat. When coupled with “planning,” an idea rooted throughout Roosevelt's agricultural and industrial writings, Moley remarks that it became a key part of the legislative agenda: “The key words here are ‘partnership’ and ‘planning.’ They meant partnership in planning by government in collaboration with private

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<sup>76</sup> Schlesinger, *The Crisis of the Old Order*, 415. Again, it is important to note that the Oglethorpe address was the foundational text for the “Need For Economic Planning” essay contained in *Looking Forward*.

interests. This was, it seemed to me, a very important matter of policy.”<sup>77</sup> Here, in contributing to the fireside chat, Moley emphasizes the idea of government partnership not only as a way to create a connection between the New Deal and the people, but in constructing New Deal policy itself. This, however, does not mean that Roosevelt took such change lightly. In working with Roosevelt throughout the editing process, Moley pointed out the critical change of policy that the administration would be making—gone would be the days of laissez faire economics, replaced with a government relationship that might be viewed, at best, as controversial.<sup>78</sup> Moley recalled the president’s response:

F.D.R. looked graver than he had been at any moment since the night before his inauguration. And then, when he had been silent a few minutes, he said, “If that philosophy hadn’t proved to be bankrupt, Herbert Hoover would be sitting here right now, I never felt surer of anything in my life than I do of the soundness of this passage.”<sup>79</sup>

Schlesinger and Freidel both quote this specific section of Moley's memoirs, giving credence to not only FDR’s decision to include such dialogue in the fireside address, but to the importance of government partnership in practice.<sup>80</sup> In addition, Schlesinger’s *The Coming of the New Deal* accounts for the differing visions of industrial planning, summarizing the views of Moley, Tugwell, Harriman, Swope, and other New Dealers as to how they would affect the

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<sup>77</sup> Moley, *The First New Deal*, 291.

<sup>78</sup> Moley, *After Seven Years*, in Lawrence W. and Cornelia R. Levine, *The People and the President: America’s Conversation with FDR* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 64-65.

<sup>79</sup> Raymond Moley, *After Seven Years* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), 189. This passage seems to be the most commonly quoted reference to the second fireside chat, quoted by Schlesinger, Freidel, Burns and Kennedy.

<sup>80</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 98 and Freidel, *Launching the New Deal*, 433-434.

president's viewpoints.<sup>81</sup> Thus, the idea of government partnership was not developed to explain the operation of New Deal efforts, it *was* the New Deal—a central tenant to solving the crisis that was the Great Depression.

The idea of government partnership brings together ideas for industry and agriculture, revealing not only their importance to New Deal reform, but also clarifying their ideological purpose to the people. FDR used the fireside chat to make clear his intentions for recovery:

It is wholly wrong to call the measures that we have taken government control of farming or government control of industry, or a government control of transportation. It is rather a partnership—a partnership between government and farming, a partnership between government and industry, and a partnership between government and transportation. Not a partnership in profits, because the profits will still go to the private citizen, but rather a partnership in planning, and a partnership to see that the plans are carried out.<sup>82</sup>

This section of the speech presents the intentions of partnership not as an increase to presidential power, but as a method to stabilize the American economy and profit margins. Roosevelt, keenly aware of how the demise of laissez-faire economics would affect the outlook on his administration, sought to embody the policies of the New Deal as a partnership with all the people as much as with industrial and agricultural leaders (see fig 1). Framing such partnership with industry as essential for healthy economic growth, the speech followed up with an example of applied partnership in the cotton industry. FDR took the high road

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<sup>81</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 92-94.

<sup>82</sup> Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.





Figure 1. John Knott, "Latest Portrait," *The Dallas Morning News*, May 9, 1933.

here, arguing industry followed suit and took action to correct unhealthy practices in their production, the cutthroat strategies of fewer than 10 percent would ruin production for an entire industry. According to Roosevelt, this situation should prompt government action in order to prevent such behavior.<sup>83</sup> Building the argument in this manner, Roosevelt preyed upon the public's distaste for domineering industry, giving credence to FDR's need for enhanced power in order to control the evils of corporate America instead of attracting undue attention toward the White House itself.

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<sup>83</sup> Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.

Roosevelt’s draft of the second fireside address reveals editing that further refined the ideas he intended to broadcast without undue focus on presidential power. One deleted section dealt with the Farm Bill, specifically referencing the operation of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration in limiting production: “The answer is based upon the sound principal of limiting production in the actual enforcement and operation.”<sup>84</sup> An obvious reason for this section’s removal connects to clarity—it does not meet the criteria that rhetorical studies have paid so much attention to. When looking closer, however, it may have been cut because of the information it provides. Roosevelt had already outlined a tremendous amount of government intervention within his program, and using words like “enforcement” and “operation” might have made an agricultural class, already nervous about government intervention, oppose the president’s policy. Another section removed from the final draft deals with the powers the president accepted during the “emergency:”

I have asked and have received powers that will go a long way to lift us out of the erroneous conditions of two months ago, but I want to assure the people of this country that I shall use this power to check unsound expansion as firmly as I shall use it to lift the burden of the depression.<sup>85</sup>

Again, the revisions here signify a concern over expanding presidential power.

The people, following the banking chat, seem almost unanimously behind

Roosevelt activating the power given to him. Why make it a point to discuss this

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<sup>84</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Draft of Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933, *Master Speech File*. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, NY, hereafter FDR Library.

<sup>85</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Draft of Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933, *Master Speech File*, FDR Library.

fact specifically? These revisions point out the importance of content within the chats, establishing a balance between educating the public of the administration's goals and portraying the New Deal as an aggressive yet completely legal solution to the country's economic woes.

### **Framing the New Deal Program: Power, Conservation and the Tree Army**

The headline of the *New York Times* on May 7 read "President Roosevelt to Discuss Plans for the Future," including the tagline "President Roosevelt is scheduled to summarize the work accomplished by his administration and discuss plans for future action."<sup>86</sup> Taking cues from the *Times*, the accentuation of agricultural and industrial philosophy is absolutely critical to the rhetoric of New Deal reform, but should not discount the importance of other New Deal agencies that saw their first public discussion by Roosevelt (albeit not always by name) in the second fireside address. In this address, Roosevelt introduced the newly minted Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and what would become the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). In *Looking Forward*, Roosevelt makes clear, despite a highly touted mission against overproduction, that the expansion of civil projects to create roads, develop electrification, as well as maintain America's landscape were important parts of government planning that would build progress towards national economic health.<sup>87</sup> Roosevelt continually linked both

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<sup>86</sup> "President Roosevelt to Discuss Plans for the Future," *New York Times*, May 7, 1933.

<sup>87</sup> Roosevelt, "Need for Economic Planning," *Looking Forward*, 48.

conservation projects to maintain the American landscape with the problem of unemployment, forming a direct connection between the CCC and putting Americans back to work.

In October of 1933, Roosevelt's personal confidant Louis Howe recounted conservation efforts in New York State in a letter to L.W. Robert, setting up Roosevelt's New York programs as potential precursors to the CCC. Admittedly, Howe acknowledged how comprehensive the CCC effort was: "It seems to me that there is plenty of credit due [to] everybody who saw the importance of this fine project."<sup>88</sup> The CCC undoubtedly became a central focus of the young administration, and most every advisor close to FDR had their hand in its development. Interestingly enough, the major advisors recount the birth of the CCC quite differently. Raymond Moley suggests that a conversation with Francis Perkins stimulated an idea for workers to be paid one dollar per day for work in the area of conservation. Following this discussion, Moley recounts a conversation later that day with FDR, who in turn dictated the foundational structure for the CCC.<sup>89</sup> Perkins does not deny such a discussion, but mentions her own meeting with FDR in connection to the CCC, leading to the Department of Labor's involvement in the program.<sup>90</sup> Rexford Tugwell reports a completely different origin for the corps, arguing that FDR met separately with him in order

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<sup>88</sup> Louis Howe to L.W. Robert, October 13, 1933; Folder: Civilian Conservation Corps; President's Personal File; Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

<sup>89</sup> Moley, *The First New Deal*, 269-270.

<sup>90</sup> Francis Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew* (1946; repr., New York: Penguin Group, 2011), 169.

to build the corps through the forestry service.<sup>91</sup> This matches Roosevelt's leadership style perfectly—the president, unbeknownst to his staff, repeatedly dedicated several individuals to the same project, often brewing contention within the administration.<sup>92</sup> Still, the collaboration between so many departments in the young administration suggests the importance behind this fledgling conservation agency.

Scarcely more than a week after the inauguration, FDR sent a memo to the secretaries of War, Interior, Agriculture and Labor regarding the development of the Civilian Conservation Corps—it was to be a joint venture, and the heads of these departments were to advise on the construction of such a program.<sup>93</sup> FDR requested a dialogue on public works in general, and received back a specific suggestion: separate the public works initiative into separate bills, complete with specific requirements for each. Overall, the cabinet advisors became concerned with government control over labor in an urban setting, recommending that the CCC be exclusively restricted to soil and conservation work in order to avoid competition with the private sector. In addition, the creation of centers for conservation employment in the countryside might prevent tremendous migration

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<sup>91</sup> Tugwell, *Roosevelt's Revolution*, 78.

<sup>92</sup> Robert Schlesinger, *White House Ghosts*, 5-13. Schlesinger uses the development of the inaugural address through speechwriters Moley, Rosenman, and Howe to illustrate the competitive nature of speechwriting for FDR. Such competition can be seen throughout the administration, especially regarding new legislation.

<sup>93</sup> FDR to Secretaries of War, Interior, Agriculture, and Labor, March 14, 1933; Folder: Civilian Conservation Corps; President's Official File; Papers of Franklin D. Roosevelt; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York, hereafter FDR Library.

to urban areas in pursuit of government work.<sup>94</sup> It is possible that Roosevelt's cabinet was influenced by the very real fear that massive numbers of Americans would soon travel extreme distances in search of work, and rural assignment of such camps might prevent widespread transiency among the idle poor. These concerns, as well as the overarching plan for the Civilian Conservation Corps, evolved to become a key section of Roosevelt's fireside address.

Discussed towards the beginning of the chat, it is clear that FDR wished to introduce the already established CCC as a partial resolution to the unemployment crisis. Still, the themes suggested by the cadre of advisors in March show through, as the Corps is portrayed as an important conservation endeavor as well:

We are giving opportunity of employment to a quarter of a million of the unemployed, especially the young men who have dependents, to let them go into forestry and flood prevention work... And in creating this Civilian Conservation Corps we are killing two birds with one stone. We are clearly enhancing the value of our natural resources, and at the same time we are relieving an incredible amount of actual distress.<sup>95</sup>

By suggesting that the CCC would be focused on conservation work, Roosevelt belayed concerns of urban listeners perhaps worried that the program would compete with industrial workforces. In addition, Roosevelt concluded his discussion of the Corps with a guarantee that it was not an army in the regular sense of the term, but a "tree army" that would transform America's landscape.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Secretaries of War, Interior, Agriculture, and Labor to FDR, March 15, 1933; Folder: Civilian Conservation Corps; President's Official File, FDR Library. The other programs discussed are FERA and PWA, but precedence is clearly given to the CCC.

<sup>95</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.

<sup>96</sup> The use of the term "tree army" does not refer to any one source, but the combination of the military and conservation aspects of the Corps. For an early use of the term, see Frank Ernest Hill, "The CCC Marches Toward a New Destiny," *New York Times*, February 21, 1937.

This great group of men, young men, have entered upon their work on a purely voluntary basis; no military training is involved, and we are conserving not only our natural resources, but also our human resources. One of the great values to this work is the fact that it is direct and requires the intervention of very little machinery.<sup>97</sup>

Roosevelt's discussion of the CCC serves as an excellent example of how the fireside chat was used as an educational tool: an explanation of what programs define the administration's agenda as well as a discussion of what the programs are and are not designed to do. The presentation also had a defense mechanism below the surface—insisting that such measures were not to increase presidential power, but to attack the depression well within legitimate executive authority.

Like the CCC, the Tennessee Valley Authority had its roots in *Looking Forward*. Roosevelt explored the topic of energy production in the essay “The Power Issue,” a good example of the president's mistrust of private utility companies and their propensity to create monopolies. Roosevelt, in turn, suggested the development of public utility companies for a “yardstick comparison:” a general idea of how much electricity should cost in the given area. Yardstick comparisons became common within the Senatorial debates on energy production in the 1920s, often centered around Senator George Norris of Nebraska, who worked tirelessly to develop the poverty stricken area of the Tennessee Valley.<sup>98</sup> With this public-private relationship in mind, FDR suggested that Boulder Dam in Colorado and Muscle Shoals along the Tennessee River be

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<sup>97</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.

<sup>98</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 320-323.

developed for just this purpose.<sup>99</sup> Raymond Moley adds to this reflection, using Roosevelt’s campaign speech in Portland (the same speech that formed the basis of the “The Power Issue” in *Looking Forward*) to gauge Roosevelt’s perspectives on Muscle Shoals and the formation of the TVA. Here, Moley recalls Roosevelt’s intense distrust of power companies as a motivation for the TVA, and recalls Roosevelt’s vision for the project a semblance of “industry, agriculture, forestry, and some flood control.”<sup>100</sup> That said, public response to the fireside chat seemed to personally link Roosevelt to the development of Muscle Shoals even before the birth of the TVA, an observation the president certainly relished in and perhaps used to his benefit in securing legislation for rural electrification.<sup>101</sup>

It was clear as well that the public followed the development of the Tennessee Valley in conjunction with the New Deal, as letters from the public show. Edwin Davis of Washington D.C., representing the Chamber of Commerce in Lewisburg, Tennessee, wrote to FDR supporting his campaign ideas to modernize the Tennessee Valley and use political support to help the program along locally.<sup>102</sup> JL Austin of Chattanooga wrote to warn the administration of lobbyists in Washington who would stop at nothing to derail the project, even

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<sup>99</sup> “The Power Issue” exclusively based on a critical campaign speech in Portland, Oregon in September, 1932. See Franklin Roosevelt, *Looking Forward*.

<sup>100</sup> Moley, *The First New Deal*, 324, 328-329.

<sup>101</sup> Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal*, 323-324 and selections of clippings from Tennessee Valley Authority Folder; President’s Official File, Franklin Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>102</sup> Edwin Davis to FDR, March 3, 1933; Folder: Tennessee Valley Authority; President’s Official File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.



including a newspaper clipping.<sup>103</sup> Such enclosures were extraordinarily common in this correspondence, as newspaper coverage of the new president's plan for the Tennessee Valley brought questions from the public. Oliver Thompson wrote in hopes that the administration's future plans to develop the Valley would provide jobs, ideas he gleaned from the newspaper.<sup>104</sup> There were even suggestions on how the administration would get the word out about such a program, as Bostonian Robert Paine suggested to Louis Howe that a motion picture be made about the project for educational purposes.<sup>105</sup> In sum, the multitude of correspondence leading up to the fireside chat not only illustrates the importance of the Tennessee Valley project early on in the administration, but also represents the demand by the public to hear about FDR's legislative agenda in some concrete form.

The most interesting of such requests came from two men, William Davis and William Cheek, who represented the newly founded Tennessee Valley Association. Founded in anticipation of New Deal legislation to modernize Muscle Shoals, the association sought to assist Roosevelt as the president saw fit. With the idea of cooperation between Washington and the local chamber of commerce in mind, Davis and Cheek both wrote to Roosevelt in late April with

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<sup>103</sup> JL Austin to FDR, May 3, 1933; Folder: Tennessee Valley Authority; President's Official File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>104</sup> Oliver Thompson to FDR, March 14, 1933; Folder: Tennessee Valley Authority; President's Official File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>105</sup> Robert Paine to Louis Howe, April 5, 1933; Folder: Tennessee Valley Authority; President's Official File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

hopes that he would use the radio to inform the committee of his administration's plans.<sup>106</sup> Stephen Early, FDR's press secretary, replied with the all too common response that the president's schedule could not accommodate requests of this nature; there was just not enough time in the day.<sup>107</sup> Cheek responded in turn, stating "we hoped that the organization[al] meeting of the Tennessee Valley Association might be the occasion for the President to make a radio address on the subject of his plans for the Tennessee Valley and the country," ultimately concluding with the more reasonable request that FDR "send a wire to be read at meeting."<sup>108</sup> What makes this situation remarkable is one of the next responses in turn—from FDR himself. Despite the fact that FDR's telegram was transmitted the day after the fireside chat, Roosevelt seldom answered such requests himself. The short message thanking the association for their work, including a snippet of his fireside speech, produced an enthusiastic response.<sup>109</sup> Two conclusions can be made from this rapid correspondence. First, it became clear how critical the TVA was to the new president, as he took time to personally wire a message to a local organization. Secondly, it confirms the public's desire for a legislative agenda

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<sup>106</sup> William Ross to FDR, April 21, 1933 and Will Cheek to FDR, April 24, 1933; Folder: Tennessee Valley Authority; President's Personal File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>107</sup> Stephen Early to Will Cheek, May 2, 1933; Folder: Tennessee Valley Authority; President's Personal File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>108</sup> Will Cheek to Stephen Early, May 4, 1933; Folder: Tennessee Valley Authority; President's Personal File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>109</sup> FDR to Will Cheek, May 8, 1933; Folder: Tennessee Valley Authority; President's Personal File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

delivered via the radio—something the second fireside chat, as well as those throughout the Great Depression, would deliver effectively.

During the chat itself, Roosevelt discussed the benefits of developing the area surrounding Muscle Shoals, accenting the importance of power development as an example of government action for the public good. The chat focused first on Muscle Shoals, already a government owned property, and then moved on to suggest the progress of the entire area:

I have requested the Congress and have secured action upon a proposal to put the great properties owned by our government at Muscle Shoals to work after long years of wasteful inaction, and with this goes hand-in-hand a broad plan for the permanent improvement of the vast area included in the whole Tennessee Valley. It will add to the comfort and to the happiness of hundreds of thousands of people and the incident benefits will reach the entire nation.<sup>110</sup>

Here, Roosevelt makes official the development of the Tennessee Valley as part of his administration. A brief statement with a critical theme: Roosevelt insists there is nothing radical about this change, as it is the modernization of government land that will benefit millions in Tennessee and across the nation. This is the essence of the fireside chat—a portfolio of programs that, delivered collectively via the radio, illustrate the majority of the New Deal program to the American people.

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<sup>110</sup> Franklin Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 7, 1933.

## The Public Reacts

So much is written of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal and the president's drive to make his liberal New Deal agenda stick. As Roosevelt's program grew, it became clear to supporters and opponents alike that the New Deal was designed not only to raise a people from the depths of depression, but to revolutionize governance in America as well. In this way, part of this story must be told through the psyche of Roosevelt himself, where he believed the importance of these programs and their accompanying speeches lay. Of course, FDR did not leave memoirs on this subject, one reason a collection of New Dealers have made up a considerable part of this work. But regarding the president's personal outlook on his programs, one advisor seems to rise above the rest: Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins. Perkins remained one of the few New Dealers to serve the entire duration of Roosevelt's presidency, and as a recruit from his administration as Governor of New York, few people in Washington knew Roosevelt's temperament better. Perkin's memoir, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, talks of a Roosevelt not only in need of a direct connection with the people, but recounts the ebb and flow of FDR's legislative agenda in connection to public response. Such observations put the fireside chats in a new light:

If a great many people are for a certain project, is it necessarily right? If the vast majority is for it, is it even more certainly right? This, to be sure, is one of the tricky points of democracy. The minority often turns out to be right, and though one believes in the efficacy of the democratic process, one has to also recognize that the demand of the many for a particular

project at a particular time may mean only disaster. Roosevelt knew and felt these things, but he was always tempted to go with the majority.<sup>111</sup>

This short homily on democracy explains the importance of the fireside chat. If Roosevelt believed he could convince America that the New Deal initiatives were the correct action, would that make them inherently right? As longtime confidant and legal scholar Felix Frankfurter suggested, Roosevelt “took the nation to school” during these addresses: “you are also making the people feel—and nothing is more important for a democracy—that in a true sense of the word it is their government, and that their interests and their feelings are actively engaged.”<sup>112</sup> In this way Roosevelt must have believed there was convincing to do regarding changes made by the New Deal, and the fireside chat became the model for this agenda. With this in mind, armed with a commanding sense of urgency, Perkins portrays a legislatively minded Roosevelt and his surrounding cabinet:

The speedy enactment of the program that came to be known as the New Deal revived the faith of the people. It put us back on the upgrade. It gave us the knowledge of industrial processes and complications which had never been in the possession of the government before. It constituted an education for the American people and their government.<sup>113</sup>

Perkins testimony establishes Franklin Roosevelt’s desire to be in touch with the pulse of America with a matching goal: to build a program that would be acceptable to the masses suffering under the Great Depression. How would this program be delivered to the people? Roosevelt could not leave this to the

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<sup>111</sup> Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, 149.

<sup>112</sup> Felix Frankfurter to FDR, May 9, 1933; Folder: Frankfurter, Felix 1932 - April 1933; President’s Personal File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>113</sup> Perkins, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, 167.

newspapers, magazines or word of mouth. The fireside chat became the most successful mode for outlining his program, beginning exclusively on the evening of May 7, 1933.

How do we, however, gauge FDR's success in using the radio? Letter writing is the best look into the public's reaction to the speeches, containing not only praise for Roosevelt's rhetorical leadership as historians have suggested, but also in the legislative agenda that dominated the speech. The Roosevelt administration, in direct connection with the first presidential library in Hyde Park, New York, catalogued letters in response to each address made by the president. In *Dear FDR: A Study of Political Letter-Writing*, Leila Sussman develops meaningful observations about the letter writers themselves that help reveal the important connection between Americans and the fireside chats. Sussman argues that radio culture helps shift not only the rationale for political letter writing, but its demographic as well. With regards to overt political issues, Sussman insists that educated white collar Americans far out wrote the blue collar laboring constituency. The radio, however, helps recreate the culture of letter writing in America. Radio programs consistently requested commentary through the mail, and such practice was continued when Roosevelt came on the air, creating a more balanced socioeconomic slice of public opinion.<sup>114</sup> Like other

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<sup>114</sup> Leila Sussman, *Dear FDR: A Study of Political Letter-Writing* (Totowa, N.J.: The Bedminster Press, 1963), 139-141. Although Sussman's sampling compares "Roosevelt letter writers" in 1934 to a survey of letter writers in general from that same year, the examples that will be used here provide good reason to believe this pattern extended well beyond the 1934 sample. Although

authors, Sussman provides a cursory look at FDR’s “radio presence,” establishing the chats as defining events of the presidency that created an “atmosphere of dialogue” with the people.<sup>115</sup> With regards to the policy issues addressed within the letters, Sussman acknowledges the subject of policy and their potential importance to the administration’s communication with the nation. In speaking about the fireside chats specifically, Sussman suggests that “Gaining support for his policies was never far from his [FDR’s] mind.”<sup>116</sup> Sussman also points out that, in studies of Congressional mail, Roosevelt’s radio presence served as an inspiration for constituents to write their Congressman—support New Deal measures or run the risk of political defeat at the polls.<sup>117</sup> Sussman, however, departs from these subjects quickly, leaving behind an underdeveloped connection between the administration and the people via the radio.

There is, in this way, work to be done with these letters. As seen throughout the foundational works on the New Deal, the historical record has underrepresented the valuable connection to Roosevelt’s program embedded within the fireside chats—a program no doubt intended to forge a bond between the people and the president.<sup>118</sup> Sussmann’s examination of the letters proves no

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measurement of status is not the purpose of this work, it is important to note that the letters considered represented a wide scope of professions and socioeconomic stations.

<sup>115</sup> Sussmann, 112-113.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>118</sup> The foundational works referenced here are Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s *The Coming of the New Deal*, James Macgregor Burns’ *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*, Frank Freidel’s *Franklin D. Roosevelt: Launching the New Deal*, and William Leuchtenburg’s *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal*.

different, leaving the story of this invaluable resource incomplete. While important to recognize the overwhelming majority of people who commented on the speaking style of Roosevelt, it is also important to evaluate the percentage of writers who were impacted from a policy standpoint. Of the over seven hundred letters received making specific reference to the second fireside address, more than 20 percent discussed the legislative agenda directly: whether it be a commentary of Roosevelt's agricultural, industrial, or financial programs or key components of the address such as "government partnership," "cutthroat competition," and "living wages." 20 percent is not a majority, but a segment of the population that can hardly be ignored. The interconnected themes of Roosevelt's legislative agenda reappear not only in the mailroom but in the newspaper editorials, commentary and the like. Newspapers often touted FDR's speech as an overview of legislative endeavors, as the *Chicago Tribune* reports: "[Roosevelt] is going on the air tonight for the express purpose of reporting to the people on the accomplishments of his administration since March 4 and to tell them what further action may be expected from the special session of Congress."<sup>119</sup> This combination of newspaper response and letters from the American public show a distinctive pattern: Americans used the fireside chat to understand Roosevelt's legislative agenda, and made their judgments clear to the administration through these two mediums.

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<sup>119</sup> "Roosevelt will Address Nation Tonight on Air," *Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 1933.



Writers answering Roosevelt's second fireside chat responded overwhelmingly to his commentary connected to "cutthroat competition." R.H. Adams of Minneapolis wrote specifically about the intentional sale of goods far below wholesale prices, making businesses in all fields of economic competition suffer greatly.<sup>120</sup> C.F. Torbert of Birmingham suggested the same effect, and provided in his letter that 5 percent of merchant businesses in his town alone operated unfairly, leading to people throughout the community to become "busted."<sup>121</sup> Quite a few letters echoed Roosevelt's observation that a comparative few were behind the struggling economy, some of whom referred directly to the example dealing with the cotton industry. Lynn Wood Heel of Keene, New Hampshire suggested that Roosevelt "hit the nail right on the head," insisting that "10% of the members of the trade business" competed unfairly, which further "made it impossible for that industry to operate on a profitable basis."<sup>122</sup> Perhaps John Senior of Tampa Bay best encapsulated the focus on cutthroat competition:

As an individual having extensive interests and substantial investments in the securities of an industry engaged in the manufacture of an important commodity[,] namely Portland Cement[,] I am encouraged by your Sunday night radio address to believe that you have a plan for analyzing the problems of and protecting the various manufacturing industries against the ruinous competitive practice by which they have been engaged to the end that proper prices may be realized[,] thus establishing a

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<sup>120</sup> R.H. Adams to FDR, May 9, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>121</sup> C.F. Torbert to FDR, May 10, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>122</sup> Lynn Wood Heel to FDR, May 12, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

safeguard for the best interests of the investors in and the employees of such industries...<sup>123</sup>

Clearly, Roosevelt focused on the natural tendency to suspect deceitful behavior in industry, a line of thinking that struck a chord with listeners pondering their own situation and the state of American manufacturing in general.

As with John Senior, there was a solid contingency of writers that owned businesses and wrote as industrialists or company leaders, less than as common citizens. Their responses, however, differed little in substance when compared to the common observer, and produced the same supportive tones as well. Benjamin Creskoff of Philadelphia, a leader in the Navytone men's clothing company, suggested the idea of a thirty hour week and a control over wages should help the industry overall. Creskoff suggests that the industrial leaders in his area support Roosevelt in his reform efforts, and only wish that the president would speak via the radio more frequently.<sup>124</sup> Edward Pose of Burbank sends a similar message, suggesting the operation of his laundry business had become all but impossible due to unfair competition. While Pose does not wish to burden Roosevelt with his personal struggles, he had clearly given up on government assistance with the problem, suggesting the "raising of prices must come from the White House as local, state, and national organizations have utterly failed."<sup>125</sup> Al Mathieu of

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<sup>123</sup> John Senior to FDR, May 12, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library. Due to the format of this telegram, punctuation has been added for clarity.

<sup>124</sup> Benjamin Creskoff to FDR, May 10, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>125</sup> Edward Pose to FDR, May 11, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

Albuquerque suggested that not only had government regulations failed, but the government itself had taken part in purchasing rubber at cutthroat levels as well.<sup>126</sup> To take it a step further, there were also several letters written from trade associations that represented multiple factions of an industry. W.E. McCollum's letter from Chicago, a response on behalf of several hundred companies linked through the distribution of plumbing supplies, offered a collective pledge of their cooperation for the "elimination of cutthroat competition."<sup>127</sup> Naturally, there should be skepticism when industrialists veer from the laissez-faire tradition, but as Domhoff and Weber instruct, the participation of business owners and larger industrialists were not only common but critical to the development of New Deal legislation. Whether support for Roosevelt's programs was genuine or not, these letters cement a legislative connection between Roosevelt and his listeners. The savagery of cutthroat competition clearly resonated on some level with these individuals, recounting injustice in industry and supporting Roosevelt in his crusade to destroy such industrialists, despite the likelihood that they were peers within a comparable industry.

Response from letter writers were equally supportive on the topic of a living wage. As expected, several of these letters came down hard on business owners and saw Roosevelt's plan as a way out. William Arnos of Cleveland

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<sup>126</sup> Al Mathieu to FDR, May 12, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>127</sup> W.E. McCollum to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

made clear his aversion to the current business hierarchy, warning Roosevelt that “broken promises by captains of industry aided the disorderly renowned character, “Prosperity around the corner,” to sneak away under camouflage.” Comparatively, Arnos sees hope in Roosevelt’s plan of action, one which “transforms National Policy from the ridiculous to the sublime.”<sup>128</sup> Adding to a litany of ideas mentioned in the fireside chat, JV Tarantino of San Francisco lambasted business owners, suggesting Roosevelt’s address spoke “the truth:”

You are right, Mr. President. You have said the truth, the whole truth. Cheap wages, unfair methods of competition, and cut throat prices are responsible, to-day, for all those millions of starving Americans; they are to be blamed for the economic and industrial chaos; they have poisoned, for the last four years, all the channels of commercial life in America.<sup>129</sup>

To be sure, FDR’s speech appealed to the hatred directed towards behemoth industrial corporations and their captains of industry at the helm. However, the fact that this letter refers to the key ideas of cutthroat competition and low wages is not an empty criticism of the business elite, but an outlook on industrial policy found within the New Deal. This is especially true regarding business owners themselves, who wrote to the president in support of wage legislation and raising employment numbers in cooperation with the government programs addressed during the chat. Kenneth Waldon of Atlantic City took the administration’s recommendation of wage escalation to heart, dedicating “our full

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<sup>128</sup> William Arnos to FDR, May 11, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>129</sup> JV Tarantino to FDR, May 15, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

support toward the success of this program, especially in regard to raising wages as fast as we can raise our selling prices.”<sup>130</sup> E.M. Schnadig from Chicago wrote to the employment situation, stating that they have raised their workforce by 10 percent in connection with Roosevelt’s program.<sup>131</sup> This does not, however, mean that all writers were in favor of the industrial program. While few and far between, there were detractors like Felton Taylor of San Francisco. Taylor pointed out that he was in support of the plans set forth in the second fireside chat, but also states that “it is a little inconsistent to advise employers not to reduce wages, or salaries, when at the same time you have taken steps to reduce government employee’s salaries.”<sup>132</sup> Still, all of these letters, whether written by an industrial skeptic or from inside management’s office, represent a clear interest in Roosevelt’s program as it sought to transform government, industry, and a destroyed American economy.

There was support for the ideological basis of the New Deal program embedded in these letters as well. Concern with overproduction, a prevailing idea of Roosevelt’s *Looking Forward* and the dialogue of New Dealers alike, is riddled throughout the letters. Overwhelming support rained in for the crusade against

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<sup>130</sup> Kenneth Waldon to FDR, May 7, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library. It is important to notice that Waldon is writing this letter *before* the chat, predicting its legislative nature after listening into Roosevelt’s address to the Chamber of Commerce on May 4, 1933. Such predictions further cement the desire for the public to hear about FDR’s plans to combat the Great Depression.

<sup>131</sup> E.M. Schnadig to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>132</sup> Felton Taylor to FDR, May 15, 1933; Folder: May 10, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

surplus, as New Yorker Leo Gottesman, president of an association for milliners, suggested that surplus production “has long been an outstanding evil in our industry and we do trust that your policies regarding the same are brought to a successful conclusion.”<sup>133</sup> Some letters supported Roosevelt’s actions, but made clear their nervousness and apprehension for change despite the continuing crisis. Such was the case of the Staffords, a farming couple who identified with Roosevelt’s effort to control surplus, but worried that limits curtailing production would put undue pressure on the common farmer and not monstrous companies. Still, the signature line of the Stafford’s letter reveals their ultimate dedication: “If we, who are but mice, could help gnaw the bonds which trammel our lion, it is the wish of your friends.”<sup>134</sup> That being said, some of the earliest criticism of the administration’s industrial policy can be seen through these letters as well. Richard Joslin of Oakland, California, provides an in-depth account of the speech and its interconnected legislative agenda. Beginning his letter with the harsh reality that there was no surplus for the poor, Joslin insisted that production not slow, but be redirected to fix unemployment, produce more products, and, in turn, allow the poor to escape “destitution.” Still, despite harsh pangs of criticism related to the curtailment of surplus, Joslin is still markedly supportive of New Deal policy, referring to Roosevelt’s “marvelous chess game” that included bank

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<sup>133</sup> Leo Gottesman to FDR, May 9, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>134</sup> Mr. and Mrs. J.E. Stafford to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

reform, “dictatorship,” the Tennessee Valley, capitalism, and the destruction of the gold standard.<sup>135</sup>

But Roosevelt made quite clear his desire to avoid the dictator moniker, perhaps using the language of government partnership. Public reaction to this idea as well showed through vividly in letters to the president. De Lancey Kountze of New York City, from a business perspective, welcomed the idea of partnership: “to a business men, who, with his associates and employees, has suffered, the idea of the Government looking with favor to helping industry and becoming, in a way, a partner, is most reassuring.”<sup>136</sup> Bostonian John Cutter also used the language of business, suggesting that “we also like the ‘partnership’ idea, particularly in view of the fact that there is a senior partner with a strong hand. I know the firm will prosper.”<sup>137</sup> Aside from a business standpoint, there were letters exclaiming excitement in simply being part of the solution. John Meloan wrote from Frankfort, Kentucky, that FDR’s program “meets the approval of everybody here in the capitol.”<sup>138</sup> Viola Wildermuth wrote of her “hope that all our people, and our neighbors too, will fast become members of that Great Partnership,” regretting only that “I am not now a member of the Government

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<sup>135</sup> Richard Joslin to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>136</sup> De Lancey Kountze to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>137</sup> John Cutter to FDR, May 9, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>138</sup> John Meloan to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

family of workers.”<sup>139</sup> Wildermuth’s letter offers a rare feminine outlook on participation in the workforce not found elsewhere in this group of letters, suggesting that even those at home may have valued this idea of partnership. Some even recounted the partnership idea as one that became interconnected with other sections of the chat, as A. Kiefer Mayer of Indianapolis wrote:

Your recommendation given over the radio last Sunday night in regards to industry and government joining hands to protect the profits of industry, create additional employment, increase wages, etc. is the soundest and most constructive thought that has been advanced by any president of this country for over a century.<sup>140</sup>

To say there was support for the idea of connecting the government with industrial and agricultural interests would be an understatement when considering the emotional response of these letters.

Appeal for FDR’s government partnership plan was not only covered by most newspapers, but often became the dominant idea that periodicals focused on when recapping the speech. The May 8 edition of the *New York Times* placed “a partnership between government, farming, industry, and transportation” second to only the financial concern of inflationary powers by removing the gold standard, a logical choice considering the *Times* focus on the monetary aspects of the depression. Using the heading “Reveals New Measures,” the daily recounted not only the development of New Deal programs, but also illustrated how new

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<sup>139</sup> Viola Wildermuth to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>140</sup> A Kiefer Mayer to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.



programs would employ a cooperative endeavor between industry and government to solve the ills of the great depression.<sup>141</sup> *The Boston Globe* reported the idea of government partnership in the first lines of the radio speech's summary story. Under the lead title "President Tells Plans to Nation," the first lines read "President Roosevelt outlined to the Nation tonight his ideas for a "partnership" between the Government and agriculture, industry, and transportation in a full exposition of his policies—past and future."<sup>142</sup> Such emphasis continued in an editorial close to a week later, in which James Morgan of the *Globe* recounted the speech, stating "In his radio speech last Sunday night he protested that the true objective of the several measures of his Administration is not governmental control but rather a partnership."<sup>143</sup> From these sources, the speech's landmark statement about government partnership was covered emphatically, a testimony as to the importance of the idea within the psyche of America's listeners.

This is not to say, however, that the response was unanimously positive to such a partnership idea. Several letters recounted the partnership as a degradation of traditional power bases in America—whether they stemmed from the White House or the offices of industry. New Yorker Paul Dennis wrote that the word partnership was "too weak," and that it took "ammunition" out of executive

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<sup>141</sup> "He Touches on Inflation," *New York Times*, May 8, 1933.

<sup>142</sup> "President Tells Plans to Nation," *Boston Globe*, May 8, 1933.

<sup>143</sup> James Morgan, "A Revolution by Unanimous Consent," *Boston Globe*, May 14, 1933. The quotation from this article continues on to, word for word, quote the fireside chat's section on creating a government partnership.

power.<sup>144</sup> In a contrasting nature, most criticism of the partnership idea was founded on the belief that sections of industry could not afford to lose their influence in floundering market. George Livesey of Bellingham, Washington, wrote in support of the legislative policies discussed in the chat, but added with a conservative gusto “I sincerely hope that an effort will be made to keep the government out of business as much as possible.”<sup>145</sup> Although not using the term “partnership” specifically, Leon Gutman wrote with concern for “the small manufacturer” in an environment where the government directed industry.<sup>146</sup> Gutman’s letter, in pointing out that the small manufacturer might be left by the wayside when Roosevelt’s acts take effect, can be seen as representative for many of the letters received by the administration.<sup>147</sup> These laws would produce an interconnection between the government and the economy, and each time a letter mentioned an action by the administration it seems as though the idea of partnership was an underlining factor. Complimentary or not, the idea of government partnership was a fundamental theme in these letters—actions the government would take to form a new bond with the American economy that had never existed before.

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<sup>144</sup> Paul Dennis to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>145</sup> George Livesey to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>146</sup> Oswald Chapman to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>147</sup> The case for small businesses being left behind became a central theme in Arthur Schlesinger Jr.’s treatment of the NRA. See *The Coming of the New Deal* Chapter 10, “Experimentation in Industrial Planning,” specifically 169-171.

Muscle Shoals and the development of the Civilian Conservation Corps waned as subjects in the letters, although there is passing discussion of these programs. In addition to the aforementioned Tennessee Valley Association and their desire to hear Roosevelt justify the development of their area over the radio, several letters from across the country complimented Roosevelt on his decision to bring activity to the Tennessee Valley. Georgia college student Oswald Chapman wrote in favor of developing the valley, and suggested that democracy would be well served by the project.<sup>148</sup> Edson Smith, in a telegram from Pittsburgh, praised the idea of Muscle Shoals' development, but expressed concern in its competition with private industry. Like most of the ideas addressed in the fireside chat, there were detractors against development of the Tennessee Valley as well. Albert and Edith Foster of Lansing, Michigan, in disagreeing with the Muscle Shoals program, provide a conservative critique of the New Deal with regard to financial security: "Perhaps differing with the administration is unpopular at present, but we fail to see where Muscle Shoals, reforestation, railroad aid, etc., is going to return our own money...we honestly don't see how any degree of prosperity can be attained until the basic financial foundation is made right."<sup>149</sup> Regarding conservation work, several letters referred to support for the Corps and their forestry missions in passing. H.D. Strunk of McCook, Nebraska, discussed the

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<sup>148</sup> Edson Smith to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>149</sup> Albert and Edith Foster to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

development of flood prevention and reported that the President's plan for such a program was "meeting with much favor" in his area.<sup>150</sup> Louis Haeffele of Dayton, Kentucky, also discussed flood control with regard to the Ohio River, a program that has "given us some hope for the future."<sup>151</sup> To be fair, the Tennessee Valley and Civilian Conservation Corps projects occupied a smaller proportion of the fireside chat when compared to agricultural and industrial reform, and most definitely the idea of government partnership, and so a smaller contingency of letters on this subjects seems reasonable.

The Civilian Conservation Corps, among all of the New Deal programs mentioned in the fireside address, has one unique mode that can be used to measure success: enrollment. Likely because of Roosevelt's concern for the CCC's development, personal secretary Louis Howe received memos from Duncan Major of the War Department cataloging program enrollment, beginning April 18, 1933. Enrollment grew slowly in the beginning, adding approximately one to two thousand a day, sometimes less. A little over a week after the May 7 address, a jump of close to 4,000 men occurred, and from that point forward enrollment increased exponentially, moving closer to Roosevelt's goal of 250,000 by mid-summer 1933 (see fig. 2).<sup>152</sup> As an event that dominated the airwaves, the

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<sup>150</sup> H.D. Strunk to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>151</sup> Louis Haeffele to FDR, May 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library. Date for this letter is not legible.

<sup>152</sup> Duncan Major to Louis Howe, April 18–June 5, 1933. Folder: CCC–April, 1933, May 1-15, 1933, May 16-30, 1933, June, 1933; President's Official File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

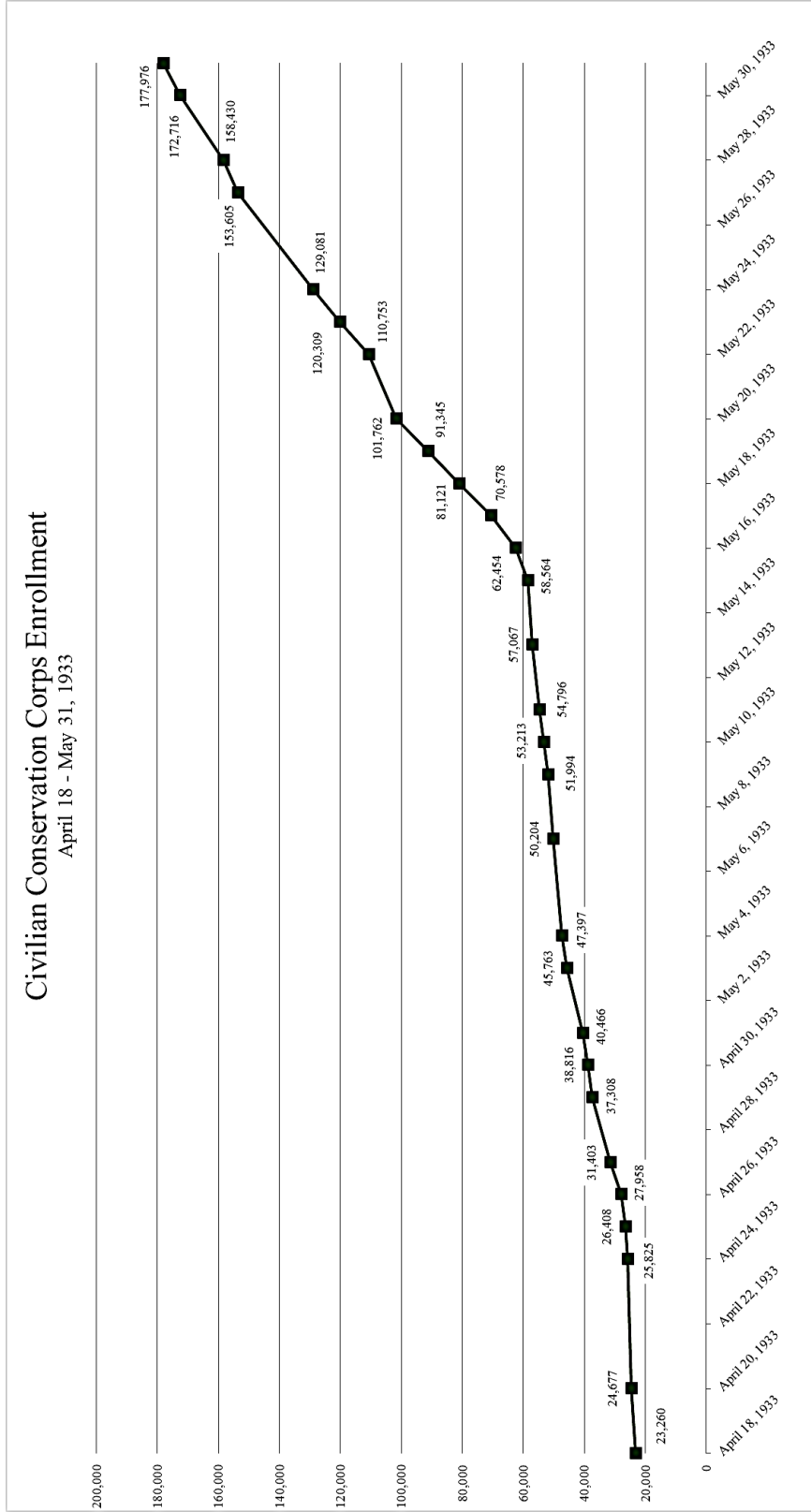


Figure 2. Enrollment numbers tabulated from the correspondence of Louis Howe, Personal Secretary to the President, and Col. Duncan Major, War Department.

fireside chat provides the best explanation for how Americans would have heard about this program. This, however, is not the only factor that should be considered to explain increased enrollment. CCC Administrator Robert Fechner did deliver a radio broadcast explaining the bill that established the Corps and a description of its general operation on May 6, the day before the chat.<sup>153</sup> Still, Fechner is not FDR, and his broadcast does not match the popularity of the fireside chat. Secondly, FDR signed into law an addendum to the original CCC legislation allowing World War I veterans to be enrolled in the Corps, thus averting potential disaster when faced with a Bonus Army in the capital.<sup>154</sup> Finally, Frank Persons of the Labor department directed several changes in the enrollment processes for the CCC on May 8, potentially speeding up the enrollment process as well. In a memo sent to Robert Fechner on May 8, Persons suggests that the Department of Labor had employed public opinion to locate and recruit members of the CCC, but there was no better connection between the administration and the world of public opinion than the fireside chat, given the previous evening.<sup>155</sup> The fireside chat, the Bonus Army addendum, and the change in enrollment procedure cannot individually explain the rise in enrollment in the CCC. Rather, the sudden jump in enrollment can be explained by several

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<sup>153</sup> Robert Fechner, Radio Address, May 6, 1933; Folder: CCC–May 1-15, 1933; President’s Official File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>154</sup> For the Press, May 11, 1933, Press Release #76; Folder: Nos. 1 to 96: March 4, 1933–May 30, 1933; Selected Press Conference Transcriptions released to the Press; Papers of Stephen Early; Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

<sup>155</sup> W. Frank Persons to Robert Fechner, May 8, 1933; Folder: CCC–May 1-15, 1933; President’s Official File; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

factors that worked in concert with each other, the May 7 address being the driving force behind educating America of the employment program.

A final issue that drew a response from letter writers was that of the Gold Standard. In these letters, concerns surrounding gold were often paired with another idea from the fireside chat, whether it was wages, unemployment, government partnership, or perhaps in connection with the first chat on the bank holiday. Historians and New Dealers alike speculate that this area captured the least of FDR's legislative talents, as most point to the influence of the Hoover administration in creating the bank holiday. In addition, Moley credits a mix of Roosevelt and Hoover advisors during the banking crisis. According to Moley, Ogden Mills, treasury secretary under Hoover, as well as William Woodin and Arthur Ballantine, Roosevelt appointees, were instrumental in creating the banking holiday framework, a set of policies that became the broad focus of the first chat.<sup>156</sup> In terms of the gold standard, Raymond Moley recounts the decision to abandon the traditional foundation for the monetary system as a political necessity to prevent the death of the Farm Bill. During the election, Roosevelt felt tremendous pressure from the Midwest "to do something about silver," namely remonetize the struggling currency. Now, according to Moley, midwestern Senators "demanded this promise be redeemed." Something needed to be done, or it might jeopardize agricultural reform, namely the Farm Bill. And so the administration supported the Thomas Amendment to the Farm Bill, which

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<sup>156</sup> Moley, *The First New Deal*, 165-172.

allowed the President to modify the value of gold and silver against the dollar, an inflationary power that drew praise and abhorrence at the same time.<sup>157</sup>

The fireside chat hoped to explain this process, and, as expected, drew a mixed response—especially from the press. *The New York Times*, a paper consistently covering the financial sector of the country, produced a curious reaction to the inflationary policy. On May 10, the *Times* ran a comment from Wall Street bankers suggesting that Roosevelt oversimplified the gold policy, and that government could have solved the economic catastrophe and still kept the value of the dollar consistent with the gold standard. However, there was no open criticism of the administration, potentially in light of Roosevelt’s overwhelming popularity at the time.<sup>158</sup> Days later, on May 13, the *Times* printed a letter to the editor entitled “Value of Gold Dollars: Changing It Seen as Likely to Work an Injustice,” which criticized the administration for controlling the supply of gold and the negative impact the policy would have on investments: “The President’s declared objective of raising commodity prices by the arbitrary method of cheapening money...means the confiscation of part of the property every man who had in gold and turned it in and every man who has a life insurance policy or a bank account of any description.”<sup>159</sup> However, not all assessments of the Administration’s gold policy were taken as an attack on property. In the years

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<sup>157</sup> Moley, *The First New Deal*, 298, 302-305.

<sup>158</sup> “News, Comment and Incidents on the Stock Exchange and in Financial Markets”, *New York Times*, May 9, 1933.

<sup>159</sup> Murray T. Quigg, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, May 13, 1933.



ahead Walter Lippmann would be openly critical of the New Deal, but in this case offered tremendous praise regarding the financial aspects of the fireside chat. In a syndicated article on May 9, Lippmann praised Roosevelt for resisting the temptation of depicting the “present speculation as a victory,” asserting that a combination of public works and inflationary measures might bring about some economic progress. By the end of the article, Lippmann suggested that inflationary practices might carry over into banks, “expected to cooperate by relaxing pressure on debtors,” and industry, by supporting “organized actions against further price cutting and further wage reductions.”<sup>160</sup> Mirroring Lippmann’s commentary, an article from the *Chicago Tribune* published before the fireside chat even aired speculated that the speech itself might “douse a little cold water on extravagant inflation hopes,” essentially arguing the administration might use inflationary practices in a cautious way.<sup>161</sup>

A mixed response to the gold standard was felt through the letters arriving from the public as well. Fred Lockley of Portland, Oregon, wrote not only in support of Roosevelt’s decisions connected to currency, but was impressed with his “sincerity” on the subject.<sup>162</sup> Clearly speaking from a different perspective, Daniel Luten of Indianapolis began his letter with the belief that Roosevelt had received much praise, and that the president might “welcome one in partial

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<sup>160</sup> Walter Lippmann, “Today Tomorrow: The President’s Address,” *Boston Globe*, May 9, 1933.

<sup>161</sup> “Profit Taking and Rumors Put Stocks Lower: See Inflation Curb by Roosevelt,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 7, 1933.

<sup>162</sup> Fred Lockley to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

criticism.” Luten went on to question the legitimacy of the decision to allow for inflation, ironically suggesting he had “heard the same plan made so often by the farmer inflationists of the West.” Luten concluded his damning criticism with the warning that once inflation has been invoked, it cannot be controlled, and will spiral out of control.<sup>163</sup> Still, good or bad, the decision to remove the gold standard and support the Thomas Amendment does fall under a legislative agenda, and still represents an education of New Deal policy for the people. Some, such as Arthur Young of Buffalo, actually wrote the administration requesting such a radio explanation of administrative policy, in this case of the decision to erase the gold standard:

In view of the uncertainty concerning the effect of abandonment of the gold standard permit me to suggest that you or some other well qualified spokesmen for the government give a 15 minute or more talk over the radio similar to the address which so ably made to the public regarding the bank holidays. It seems to me the American people would welcome and appreciate such a talk in simple terms to enlighten them on the subject.<sup>164</sup>

While seemingly not part of the New Deal’s *legislative* agenda, the gold standard does represent policy from the administration, and in this way, embodies the fireside chat’s ability to educate the public of FDR’s program. Responses such as Young’s clearly solidify the idea that the public saw the fireside chats as a way to become acclimated to the New Deal as it enveloped the country.

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<sup>163</sup> Daniel Luten to FDR, May 9, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

<sup>164</sup> Arthur Young to FDR, April 21, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

As Young's letter indicates, the fireside chat quickly became an expectation from the people, a means the president would use to communicate with the nation. To be sure, the medium was a valued opportunity to hear the celebrated president speak to the nation, but the content he would present provided the people with an equally intimate relationship on how the administration would pull the country out of depression. To this point, members of Congress also anxiously awaited the subject of the radio address as well. On May 7, the morning before the second fireside chat, the *Times* ran a story entitled "Congressmen are uneasy about Roosevelt Speech." The story reported a general nervousness in Congress over the possibility Roosevelt would use the radio to demand powers he did not already have or ideas he has yet shared, specifically calling in war debt from World War I to help budget problems.<sup>165</sup> This possible "war debt legislation" did not come to light during the chat, but the absence of this discussion from the chat says much about the planning and purpose of the address from the standpoint of the administration. Congress' fear of the speech not only affirms the effectiveness of Roosevelt's use of the radio, but also suggests that the content of the speech, specifically legislative priorities of the administration, were of utmost importance. Congress would show less, if any, concern if the chats only strength lay with their delivery. Surely, the issue of war debt would certainly appear if Roosevelt wanted to address the concerns of Congress. The war debt issue, however, appears nowhere in the chat. In this

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<sup>165</sup> "Congressmen are uneasy about Roosevelt Speech," *New York Times*, May 7, 1933.

way, the fireside chats were truly about the president's legislative agenda whenever possible, not the perspectives of Congress.

This, however, did not stop the people from comparing the White House to Congress in light of the fireside chat. Despite Roosevelt's assurance during the chat that Congress would continue to legislate, the people began to see the Roosevelt White House as the chief legislator. On May 9, *The New York Times* included a selection of congratulatory telegrams sent to the White House from men of power—the amount of support, real or exaggerated, for the New Deal was astounding. From Thomas Watson, president of IBM and one of many financial leaders of New York in support of the New Deal, to Nassau County Republicans of that same state, who simply insisted “Do not alter your course,” this was a program receiving support beyond the common American.<sup>166</sup> Over time, Americans looked to Roosevelt not only for his charming smile and his infectious confidence, but for a plan of recovery. At times, the power to push forward connected to Congress—power the people expected Congress to give Roosevelt, as Irving Aronowitz of Brooklyn wrote emphatically: “The people of this nation realize the various delicate problems confronting you and are behind you 100%. The powers you request from Congress must be granted because you are the right man.”<sup>167</sup> Such letters display the need Americans have for a plan to be put into action, and at times asked specifically for it. Tyson Pearson from Los Angeles

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<sup>166</sup> “Roosevelt Speech Hailed Over Nation,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1933.

<sup>167</sup> Irving Aronowitz to FDR, May 10, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President's Personal File—Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

wrote: “I thank you for your Radio talk of yesterday. It shed light upon various phases of your work and I hope you will, from time to time, when occasion demands, use the same means of keeping us “in line”. It is impossible to get your bearings from the press.”<sup>168</sup> The fireside chat became an indispensable connection between the “people and the president.”

More and more, people came to see Roosevelt’s New Deal as a forum for legislative experimentation—the system by which their government would attack the economic catastrophe. In this way, the fireside chat became the mode Roosevelt would employ to inform the public of his legislative agenda. This is contrary to the historical record: authors first refer to the grammar, syntax, and radio voice employed by Roosevelt as the defining features of these speeches, a treatment that sells these addresses far short of their intended purpose. Nor can the historical record chalk these speeches up to a way for Roosevelt to instill confidence: every word that Roosevelt uttered was filled with confidence, and those spoken over the radio were no different. More importantly, Roosevelt knew full well that confidence would not be enough. There needed to be a revolution in governance, and it would mean nothing if it did not reach the people. The message needed a vehicle, a device to carry it across the nation free from criticism and disjointed summation in periodicals. The radio was the mode of transportation, and the fireside chat became the course outlined for the

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<sup>168</sup> Tyson Pearson to FDR, May 8, 1933; Folder: May 7, 1933; President’s Personal File–Public Response; Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDR Library.

administration's war on depression. For young Seymour, the grade school student looking to Roosevelt for hope, the magical voice of his president was much more than a real life Lone Ranger, sweeping in to save the day. For him, Roosevelt and his ideas represented hope for the future entwined within the words "*A New Deal for the American People.*"

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