> The market on the rampage is no respecter of persons. It wasted fortune after fortune away yesterday and financially crippled thousands of individuals in all parts of the world. . . . The market has now passed through three days of collapse, and so violent has it been that most authorities believe that the end is not far away.[41]

In human terms, the debacle would be devastating and enduring. For millions, the image of prosperity was washed away almost instantaneously. They were forced to recognize what had been there all along, but so effectively hidden from view. A gaping hole had opened up in the pavement along Easy Street, and in the sobered minds of multitudes, business and businessmen, speculators and plutocrats—the cult heroes of the twenties—soon became objects of scorn.

Bernays notwithstanding, *friendly giants* were becoming ogres once more. A new publicity machinery that would arise in response to the wreckage would only add to that impression.

12
The Greater Good

THE STOCK MARKET crash was but the overture to an extended period of economic devastation. In 1931, the bond market plummeted. A year later, the mortgage market succumbed. By the fall of 1932, both industrial production and national income had fallen precipitously. Steel plants were running at only 12 percent of capacity. Industrial construction had declined to a mere 7.7 percent of its 1929 level. Institutional figures, viewed together, are overwhelming:

> Between 1929 and 1933 the GNP fell from $103.1 billion to $55.6 billion. . . . Between 1929 and 1932 more than one hundred thousand American businesses failed, the total net profits of private corporations dropped from $8.4 to $3.4 billion, and total industrial productivity fell off 51 percent. From 1929 to 1932 the value of both American imports and American exports declined by more than two thirds.[1]

Beneath the surface of these statistical catastrophes, the human toll was enormous. The industrial labor market had evaporated, and by 1932 between 12 million and 17 million people—a quarter to a third of the American workforce—were out of work. Among those still employed, many held part-time jobs at reduced wages, enduring a state of relentless insecurity. Farm income, which had been severely depressed throughout the twenties, was decimated even further, falling from $11 billion to $5 billion nationwide between 1929 and 1932. Banks were failing, and with them, a multitude of life savings became irretrievable. Many people who had ridden the bubble of prosperity during the twenties were now plunged into desperate times. Homeless

and hungry, legions of Americans gravitated to shantytowns, scavenging for food. "Never in modern times," remarked economist Rexford G. Tugwell in 1932, "has there been so widespread unemployment and such moving distress from sheer hunger and cold."[2]

The cant of prosperity and the celebration of laissez-faire capitalism—so boisterous only a few years earlier—had vanished. "Each of the failures made it harder for some large public group to get a living," observed S. H. Walker and Paul Sklar, a pair of business reporters. "In the end a majority of the citizens had been more or less severely hurt by the collapse of the economic machine." With these reversals, business enterprise, which had served as a spiritual lodestar during the twenties, fell into widespread disrepute. "[T]he people sought to fix the blame for what was happening," noted Walker and Sklar, "and by and large they blamed business. Those who did not grow actively hostile to business, they added, "came to distrust business as a trustee of the national economy."[3]

Callous to the growing misery around them, business leaders did little to neutralize these sentiments, nor did many grasp the hazardous social precipice upon which they themselves were perched. As millions suffered, many corporate masters continued to bring home exorbitant salaries and bonuses, at the same time contributing little in the way of taxes. Meanwhile, in public pronouncements they scolded the government for spending too much money on relief and called for cuts in already glaringly insufficient social spending.

Amid the cataclysm, few businessmen assumed any obligation to deal with the social destitution, nor did they wish to see any energetic governmental response. Walter Gifford, the head of American Telephone and Telegraph spurned the notion of federal aid to the unemployed as a violation of America's tradition of unregulated enterprise. "Federal aid would be a disservice to the unemployed, or might be a disservice to the unemployed" he declared before a Senate subcommittee in 1931. "[T]here is a grave danger," he warned, "in taking the determination of these things into the Federal Government. I think the country is built up on a very different basis."[4]

This was standard fare from American business. As the Committee on Labor of the House of Representatives debated the possibility of establishing a national old-age pension system—to provide pressing relief for elderly Americans—John Edgerton, president of the powerful National Association of Manufacturers (NAM), huffed that his organization refused to bow to "social and political pressures."

> Today we have before Congress groups advocating the passage of Federal Public Old Age Pensions to be supported by national appropriations. And this at a time when factions in individual states are agitating for pensions, old-age compensation, or similarly-termed dole for the indigent aged.
>
> The National Association of Manufacturers, for the organized industry of the country, has made representations to Congress against the social advisability . . . of such national measures. It maintains in the first place that such a pension scheme is not within the province of Congress under the authority given by the Constitution; and, additionally, that such a system of doles, from the economic value-point, is an unwarrantedly weakening drain on industry, a deterrent of individual initiative, and a menace to our competing strength in the marts of the world.[5]

Later that year, Edgerton confided to NAM members that homeless and jobless Americans had only themselves to blame for their predicament. Their cruel conditions, he instructed, were simply the result of their not having dutifully practiced "habits of thrift and conservation." "[I]f they gamble away their savings in the stock market or elsewhere," he added disdainfully, "is our economic system, or government, or industry to blame?"[6] Amid widespread economic distress, pronouncements such as this only quickened the spread of anti-business feeling.

With the fall of big business' public image, rancor gravitated toward the Hoover administration as well. Though the president did sanction some exploratory investigations into the causes of the breakdown—some of which revealed egregious cases of financial manipulation and corruption—he was seen, by and large, as ineffectual, dispirited, and unresponsive to the wretchedness around him. As shantytowns multiplied in cities throughout the United States, they acquired the popular sobriquet of "Hoovervilles," a bitter encomium to a president whom many held accountable for their woes.

As the economy slid, Hoover's relations with the press did little to improve his reputation in the public mind. Earlier in his career, partic-

ularly during his years as secretary of commerce under Harding and Coolidge, Hoover had been relatively proficient in dealing with the press, routinely dispensing evidence—in the form of press releases and official reports—designed to demonstrate the widely hailed prosperity. In the process, he gained media celebrity as an able "engineer" of industrial progress, a builder and promoter of economic growth.

As president, Hoover was less accessible, in keeping with the customary bearing of his office. On occasion he agreed to answer reporters' questions, but only if they were submitted to him—in written form—beforehand.[7] With the breakdown of the economy, however, Hoover completely withdrew. He was seen as "uncommunicative, hostile . . . all but totally estranged from the press."[8] By the fall of 1931, with the economic situation worsening, his relations with Washington correspondents had, according to one of them, achieved "a state of unpleasantness without parallel during the present century."[9]

Hoover's public undoing reached its culmination in 1932, when he called out army troops, which violently dispersed a peaceful assembly of unemployed World War I veterans who had marched on Washington to claim bonuses promised them as a pay adjustment for their service in the First World War.[10] When the ragged multitude of bonus marchers was driven from its encampment amid a fusillade of fire and gas bombs, Hoover's public standing reached a low from which it did not recover. The suffering of the depression was far too general—and the Committee on Public Information had done its job too well during the war—for many Americans not to see the attack on the Bonus Army as an attack on themselves.

The assault on the Bonus Marchers was the deed of a leader who was glaringly out of touch with the people and their needs; it accentuated an already perilous leadership vacuum at the top. Meanwhile, the population was becoming progressively more jittery. In Europe, similar conditions provided a breeding ground for fascism. In the United States, they paved the way for a resounding Democratic victory in the 1932 presidential election and for the emergence of Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) and of the "New Deal" that he promised all Americans.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

When Roosevelt took office in March 1933, bad times had gotten worse. "The interval between Roosevelt's election in November, 1932, and his inauguration in March, 1933," noted historian William Leuchtenburg, "proved the most harrowing four months of the depression. Three years of hard times had cut national income more than half; the crash of five thousand banks had wiped out nine million savings accounts."[11]

Tugwell, who left his professorship at Columbia University to become a member of Roosevelt's inner circle of advisers—his Brain Trust—described the United States, at the time of FDR's first inauguration, as a society nearing the brink of popular rebellion. "I do not think it is too much to say," he wrote in his journal, "that on March 4 we were confronted with a choice between an orderly revolution—a peaceful and rapid departure from the past concepts—and a violent and disorderly overthrow of the whole capitalist structure."[12]

Informing Roosevelt's obvious preference for "orderly revolution" were economic ideas that had begun to emerge during the twenties, ways of seeing that were at odds with the triumphal canon of unfettered free enterprise. No one advanced such ideas more effectively than British economist John Maynard Keynes. In a 1926 essay, "The End of Laissez-faire," Keynes made a conspicuous break with prevailing assumptions of bourgeois economic thought. Though he allowed that capitalism might indeed be "more efficient for attaining economic ends than any alternative system yet in sight," he also argued that capitalism—as a social system—was "in many ways extremely objectionable."[13] Countering notions that business enterprises should be permitted to proceed without governmental intervention and rejecting the idea that unrestrained profit taking would ineluctably generate social and material benefits, Keynes proposed a vision of political economy that presupposed an elemental conflict between private enterprise and the general good.

"The world is not so governed from above that private and social interest always coincide," he observed. "It is not a correct deduction from the Principles of Economics that enlightened self interest generally is enlightened."[14] Repudiating the twenties' pipe dreams of prosperity, Keynes described capitalism as an economic system that routinely and congenitally benefited from human failure and defeat.

> Many of the greatest economic evils of our time are the fruits of risk, uncertainty, and ignorance. It is because peculiar

> individuals, fortunate in situation or abilities, are able to take advantage of uncertainty or ignorance, and also because for the same reason big business is often a lottery, that great inequities of wealth come about; and these same factors are also the cause of the unemployment of labour, or the disappointment of reasonable business expectations, and of the impairment of efficiency and production.

The remedy for these deleterious tendencies, Keynes concluded, would not come from the unregulated activities of individual businessmen. In fact, he added sharply, it is often in the economic interest of private entrepreneurs "to aggravate the disease."[15]

The role of government, Keynes proposed, was to intercede as an agent on behalf of the social body, to ensure the "social interest" of the community in those circumstances where the normal functioning of business fails to do so.

> The most important *Agenda* of the state relate not to those activities which private individuals are already fulfilling, but to those functions which fall outside the sphere of the individual, to those decisions which are made by no one if the state does not make them. The most important thing for government is not to do things which individuals are doing already . . . but to do those things which at present are not done at all.[16]

His was not an argument for the abolition of capitalism; Keynes continued to place a high value on "private initiative and enterprise." He was, however, suggesting that government was the "appropriate organ of action" through which society could, if required, exert "directive intelligence . . . over many of the inner intricacies of private business." A "co-ordinated act of intelligent judgement," in short, was necessary to balance the interests of "the community as a whole" against the "money-making and money-loving instincts" that were the motor force of business.

In 1926, Keynes had relatively few takers in the United States. The priests of prosperity continued to condemn the evil of governmental regulation. When FDR assumed office seven years later, however, the "social interest" of the community lay in a state of

irrefutable ruin, and Keynes's ideas had gained ground. Too many urgent decisions were being made by *"no one."* Too many pressingly needful things were not being *"done at all."* It seemed time for the "directive intelligence" of government to step in.

The architects of the New Deal were guided by more than Keynesian economics, however. They were also inspired by older, more American visions, drawn from memories of the Progressive Era. As encountered in Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and fleshed out over several decades in the writings of Henry George, Simon Patten, George Gunton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, John Dewey, Edward Filene, and Lewis Mumford, this train of thought argued that mass-production methods augured the potential for unprecedented, universally attainable, material abundance. Questioning ancient assumptions that scarcity and poverty were inescapable features of the human condition, these modernist visionaries maintained that industrial society stood on the threshold of general well-being and was heading toward a new epoch, in which democratic egalitarianism would be reinvigorated and mass-produced consumer goods would be available to all.

In its own way, the gospel of prosperity that flourished during the twenties had served to sustain and popularize such imaginations. The dramatic growth of consumer industries and an increasingly pervasive culture of advertising had proudly publicized an oath of abundance that suggested that all would benefit from the fruits of economic expansion. Though millions had not tangibly benefited from the merchandising revelries of the 1920s, a consumer-oriented vision of *the good life*—the centerpiece of a new American birthright—had been proposed and would inform the aspirations of a generation.

As Roosevelt and his Brain Trust of progressive-minded social thinkers and activists formulated game plans for their "orderly revolution," the Progressive concept of industrially fired material well-being—the idea of *the people as consumers*—along with the Keynesian idea of the state as an indispensable force of "directive intelligence," were close at hand. So, too, was a belief in the importance of publicity.

In "The End of Laissez-faire," Keynes had prophetically anticipated the importance of this dimension within his vision of economic reform. While the essay focused primarily on the need for the state to impose direction on the private sector, Keynes also maintained that

"full publicity"—the incessant propagation of information "on a great scale"—was essential to the success of his plan.

In part, the idea of "full publicity" was about making "all business facts which it is useful to know" available to those who were directly involved in analyzing problems and making decisions.[17] But it was more than that.

"[T]he fiercest contests and most deeply felt divisions of opinion," Keynes had predicted in 1926, will not boil up "around technical questions, where the arguments on either side are mainly economic." For most people, he declared, battles will be waged around questions that "for want of better words, may be called psychological or, perhaps, moral." To bring about economic change, then, it was necessary to nurture a psychological and moral renovation in society.[18]

No one was more suited to this task than FDR. It wasn't him alone, of course. The New Deal was a collective creation, the invention of a generation of Americans who were alarmed and outraged by the rampant destructiveness of "free market" capitalism and were looking to establish an alternate arrangement of social and economic priorities. Sometimes FDR was their leader, sometimes he was dragged along by them. But in his prodigious capacity to shepherd and embolden the public mind and in his ability to engage the thinking—as well as the sentiments—of the nation, no previous president had revealed a greater aptitude. A natural publicist, FDR challenged the intrinsic dualism that had guided the practices of public relations since the turn of the century.

From 1900 on, public relations thinking had vacillated between two poles of epistemological understanding. At one end there was the Progressive democratic faith, which assumed that people were essentially rational beings, that they could be most effectively persuaded by a publicity of factual, logically framed argument. At the other end was the perspective that had gained a legion of converts during the Great War. This view held that human nature was essentially irrational and maintained that "opinion" was most efficiently shaped by scientifically informed subliminal appeals to unconscious urges and instinctual drives. This outlook embraced a rhetoric of symbols, and under its influence the image had begun to displace the word as the favored language of public address.

In FDR's mind, things were less absolute, more textured. His approach to publicity moved beyond the myopic essentialism that had

previously shaped public relations debates. In some ways FDR was a Jeffersonian publicist, an eighteenth-century democrat, committed to ongoing "civil instruction," believing in the possibility of informed public debate. At the same time, FDR was a prototypical twentieth-century persuader, intuitively sophisticated about public psychology, remarkably attuned to the modern media apparatus and to the powers of visual communication.

Roosevelt's Jeffersonianism was informed by historian Claude Bowers's 1925 book on Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, a study that presented the men as the sires of two antagonistic yet persistent political traditions.[19] At one end stood the egalitarian principles of Jefferson, whose faith in the common man and commitment to popular democracy were inspirational to Roosevelt. At the other stood the Hamiltonian persuasion, a patrician perspective that discounted the opinions of "the average man" and mistrusted the ideal of "popular government." This to Roosevelt was the vantage point of vested wealth.[20]

Bowers's book focused on political struggles that marked the life of the early republic, but for FDR its implications were remarkably up-to-date. Representing the outlook of economic elites, Hamilton anticipated—in Roosevelt's mind—the pro-business boosterism that governed the politics and culture of the 1920s. Against the modern Hamiltonians, Roosevelt espoused the optimism of Jefferson, the true democrat who dared to rally the energy of "the masses against the aristocracy of the few."[21]

FDR pictured America in the twenties as "a period similar to that from 1790–1800, when Alexander Hamilton ran the federal government for the primary good of the chambers of commerce, the speculators and the inside ring of the national government."[22]

To counteract this tendency, Roosevelt argued that the "line of demarcation which differentiated the political thought of Jefferson on the one side, and of Hamilton on the other, must be restored." The Democratic Party, he declared as he moved toward his run for president, "must make it clear that it seeks primarily the good of the average citizen through the free rule of the whole electorate, as opposed to the Republican Party which seeks a moneyed prosperity of the nation through the control of government by a self-appointed aristocracy of wealth and of social and economic power."[23]

Central to FDR's Jeffersonianism was a belief in publicity as an indispensable instrument for promoting democratic dialogue. "Jef-

ferson brought the government back to the hands of the average voter, through insistence on fundamental principles, and *the education of the average voter.* We need a similar campaign of education," he insisted. As he evolved from candidate to president, he reiterated this theme again and again:

> Jefferson realized that if the people were free to get and discourse all the facts, their composite judgment would be better than the judgment of a self-perpetuating few.[24]

To invigorate popular democracy, and to uphold the interests of "the forgotten man," political leaders must commit themselves to fostering public education and public conversation. "The constant free flow of communication among us—enabling the free interchange of ideas—forms the very blood stream of our nation."[25]

To ensure this flow and to further his commitment to "Jeffersonian" principles, Roosevelt would promote the federal government not merely as an instrument of "directive intelligence," but as a "clearing house for the exchange of information and ideas, of facts and ideals, affecting the general welfare."[26] The government would gather opinions from around the nation, he pledged, and disseminate ideas for the greater good. In a historic battle between the vested interests and the forces of democracy, FDR was looking for a "modern substitute for the old town meeting, and the talk around the stove."[27]

Alongside his respect for eighteenth-century democratic ideals, however, Roosevelt was also a man of his moment. His magnetic personality and his uncanny understanding of the mass media as instruments for mobilizing public opinion responded to the demands of the modern age.

Roosevelt's apprenticeship as a modern publicist began early in his political career. Running for the state Senate of New York in 1912, he chose Louis McHenry Howe—a sympathetic reporter for the *New York Herald*—to direct his campaign. A seasoned journalist, Howe provided Roosevelt with techniques for getting his name in the newspapers and for keeping it there by cultivating "national press attention." Historian Betty Houchin Winfield elaborated:

> Howe devised a campaign strategy to send thousands of "personal" letters from Roosevelt to farmers throughout the district, publish large newspaper advertisements, and mail ready-to-print boiler-plate articles emphasizing specific Roosevelt proposals.[28]

Howe would become Roosevelt's closest political adviser into the White House years. Throughout, his overarching game plan was to manage news coverage strategically. Howe's approach was simple and relentless. "If you say a thing is so often enough," he instructed, "it stands a good chance of becoming a fact."[29]

Howe also encouraged Roosevelt to mingle with ordinary people. When FDR was assistant secretary of the navy, for example, Howe prodded him to go out and talk with workers in the navy yards, to thrash out the pros and cons of their "labor conditions." From these encounters, Eleanor Roosevelt later recalled, FDR "developed a political flair" with people, an ability to connect that would characterize his leadership style through the remainder of his life.[30]

While governor of New York, FDR continued to learn from Howe's expertise, gaining a serviceable understanding of the ways that facts, events, and circumstances evolve into something known as "news." In presenting his gubernatorial program to reporters, for example, FDR dished it out piece by piece, in readily digestible packages that were dispensed over a period of days or weeks. This technique made the program easy to report on; extended the life of the story; and, most important, made it easier for readers to understand. Roosevelt was also encouraged by Howe to experiment with the medium of radio as a means of skirting the customary watchdogs of truth—the newspapers—in order to chat directly with the people. In a political world that was still defined by habits of aloofness and ceremony, this was an unprecedented move toward accessibility and intimacy. For a man committed to the Jeffersonian ideal of "civil instruction," FDR was in the process of becoming, by the end of the twenties, a master educator.

If Howe's mentorship was key to Roosevelt's development as a publicist of *the word,* it was a personal crisis—a life-altering bout with poliomyelitis—that honed his skills as an image maker. In August 1921, at the age of thirty-nine, FDR was stricken by the

virus. Though he struggled to recover and would spend the rest of his life looking for a remedy, his legs were permanently paralyzed.

This condition presented an enormous challenge. Beyond the private difficulties faced by a vigorous man who was now, suddenly, a paraplegic, Roosevelt's condition also threatened to nullify his public aspirations. Could a man in a wheelchair communicate the aura of strength that people expected of their political leaders? Fearing the worst, Roosevelt's mother encouraged her son to accept an invalid's asylum.

Roosevelt rejected this counsel; his desire to remain in politics presented him with one of his greatest challenges, to expel all visible evidence of his infirmity from the public mind. During the early weeks of the affliction, Howe repeatedly declared to reporters that his boss was only mildly ill, that full recovery was expected. FDR also labored to keep his name and political viability alive during his recuperation, contributing regular columns to newspapers in Georgia (where he was convalescing) and New York.[31]

When the acute phase of the illness passed, Roosevelt needed to project an image of himself as a man fully capable of withstanding the rigors of public life. Running for governor of New York in 1928, he perfected a way of conveying the impression that he was able to walk, using his strong upper body to shift his weight back and forth between a cane on one side and his son Elliott on the other. Though he could not actually move his legs, this arduously staged illusion permitted FDR, the campaigner, to portray himself as a man who had beaten the curse of a disabling disease.[32]

To bolster the image of vigor, Roosevelt seized upon other public relations techniques. Contemplating a run for president in 1931, for example, he pulled a preemptive publicity stunt to refute those who might question his candidacy on the basis of poor health. He "ostentatiously took out over half a million dollars of life insurance through twenty-two companies," relates James MacGregor Burns, "and saw that the highly favorable medical report was well publicized."[33]

Methodically cultivating the picture of a person who was back on his feet, FDR was able to enlist the willing cooperation of the press corps. Hugh Gregory Gallagher, who chronicled FDR's "splendid deception," described an implicit pact struck between Roosevelt and photojournalists, initially in Albany as governor and later in Washington while president.

> FDR had made it a rule, during his first campaign for governor, that photographers were not to take pictures of him looking crippled or helpless. His actual words, said to some newsreel cameramen taking his picture as he was being helped out of a car in 1928 were, "No movies of me getting out of the machine boys." And from then on . . . no such pictures were taken. It was an unspoken code, honored by the White House photography corps. If, as happened once or twice, one of its members sought to violate it and try to sneak a picture . . . one or another of the older photographers would "accidentally" knock the camera to the ground or otherwise block the picture. Should the President himself notice someone in the crowd violating the interdiction, he would point out the offender and the Secret Service would move in, seize the camera, and expose the film.[34]

This system of "voluntary censorship was rarely violated," and it has shaped the visual record of FDR's remarkable political career to this day. Of the more than "thirty-five thousand still photographs of FDR at the Presidential Library," Gallagher reported, "there are only two of the man seated in his wheelchair. No newsreels show him being lifted, carried, or pushed in his chair. Among the thousands of political cartoons and caricatures of FDR, not one shows the man as physically impaired."[35]

Roosevelt's genius in erecting a spectacle of mobility—over a period of nearly twenty-five years—was essential to his political ascendancy and testimony to his monumental personal strength. His ability to present a seamless semblance of physical vigor consigned his paralysis to the position of a nonissue and made room for him to guide the far more significant and comprehensive governmental public relations campaign that characterized his presidency and the New Deal more generally.

■ ■ ■ ■ ■

The success of New Deal publicity was predicated on a number of elements. There was Roosevelt's remarkable aptitude as both a student and a leader of public opinion and the ingenuity and talent of many who went to work in his administration. Bordering all this—an element that cannot be discounted—was the dire social emergency of

the Great Depression, a tear in the fabric of society that compelled many to question and reconsider the defining values of American life.

Programmatically, there were two ways that Roosevelt and the New Dealers tried to resuscitate American society. On the one hand, their critique of laissez-faire capitalism led them to launch programs that would use the government to modernize American business standards, to intervene in speculative practices that had damaged the economy, and to secure the wobbly position of the middle class.[36]

At the same time, the New Deal sought to establish channels through which historically disadvantaged Americans—farmers, industrial workers, the elderly, the sickly, and the destitute—might gain guaranteed access to the material ingredients of a more comfortable life. Here, FDR's programs went head-to-head with the religion of private enterprise, proposing that the government might create the means to improve social conditions where private enterprise—which routinely jockeyed prices and production to maximize profits—had congenitally failed.[37]

Responding to rife feelings of social anxiety, the New Deal also sought to institutionalize social welfare assurance, to provide a reliable system of security for people in need. Unemployment insurance was established to provide subsistence and relief to those who were temporarily out of work. Against protests from the NAM and other stubborn business interests, the Social Security Act established the principle of universal old-age insurance. The promise of guaranteed universal health care was also placed on the agenda, though this aspect of social insurance has never been fulfilled.

In short, the core of New Deal politics was predicated on a fundamental shift in the balance between economic practices and social life. If laissez-faire sermonizers had preached that the free market economy was sacred and that it was the duty of society—and its inhabitants—to surrender all other considerations to the supremacy of the market, the New Deal proposed a different formula, one that evaluated the market in terms of its ability to support the greater good of society. When the market failed to do so, New Dealers reasoned, economic institutions and practices had to be adjusted to respond to social need. This realignment of social priorities explains both the wide popular appeal of New Deal programs and the anti–New Deal sentiments that began to mount early on in many of the boardrooms of American businesses.

13

The New Deal and the Publicity of Social Enterprise

A SIMPLE LIST OF New Deal programs, however, does not adequately explain the extent to which the New Deal, over a period of years, was able to alter the ways that Americans saw themselves and their world. Throughout the twenties, a sunny portrait linking an ideal of public welfare to the principle of unfettered private enterprise had been diligently painted by a modern corporate publicity apparatus. As the daydream vanished, Franklin D. Roosevelt's remarkable dexterity in restoring public optimism—around a spiritual covenant linking the general welfare with governmentally insured social enterprise—was founded largely on his own ingenious instincts as a publicist. As much as any particular New Deal program, it was the protocols of publicity that served to fortify the public mind, leading it beyond the conceits of laissez-faire capitalism.

From the beginning of his presidency, Roosevelt placed a high priority on public relations. Louis Howe, his chief council, assembled a daily press summary—nicknamed "Howe's Daily Bugle"—that kept the president apprised of news coverage and editorials that appeared throughout the nation. This kind of information, capsulizing views from around the United States, was essential to the president. "Franklin reserved certain periods for his study of the press, particularly the opposition press, and, at least while Louis Howe was with him, he was always closely informed on all

shades of opinion in the country," recalled the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt.[1]

Roosevelt's dealings with the press were aided by a team of seasoned reporters who served as his public relations advisers. Beyond Howe, there was Marvin McIntyre, a former city editor of the *Washington Times* and a graduate of the Committee on Public Information. There was also Stephen Early, who, in 1933, became the first to occupy the newly created office, presidential press secretary.[2]

It was FDR himself, however, who played the starring role in White House press relations. Previously, direct interactions between presidents and the press were largely ceremonial. Calvin Coolidge communicated with reporters almost exclusively through an official "spokesman." Herbert Hoover occasionally responded to reporters' questions, but only when they were submitted to him beforehand, in writing.

With the coming of the New Deal, these rituals were scrapped. Never before had correspondents had such unrestricted access to a president, and they reveled in it. "Mr. Roosevelt's impact on the Washington correspondents was galvanic," observed Leo C. Rosten in 1937. "Precedents were brushed aside, formalities ignored, the hocus pocus of Presidential aloofness forgotten."

A naturally sociable man who had acquired a good deal of experience bandying with ordinary folks, FDR schmoozed with the press enthusiastically. He enjoyed the interchange, and his empathic personality provided a democratic tone to press conferences and other public functions.

> Mr. Roosevelt announced that the correspondents would be free to ask direct oral questions. . . . No President had submitted to the hazardous practice of oral questioning en masse. Roosevelt did—and won the press corps by his skills.[3]

Reporters experienced FDR's personal charm with friendly fascination. For the most part, they were thoroughly enchanted. One reporter's glowing recollection offers a rich portrait of the process.

> I knew him, I'd been introduced to him. When I was a newspaper man I used to see him three times a week in press conferences. He was a genius in handling the press; in knowing a lot and in being able to answer questions from the press. [Even though] most of the press . . . was editorially against Roosevelt, and fiercely so, the journalists were all for him. There were a few reporters who were considered real oddballs, who were personally critical and inimical to him. They could ask questions too. And he was . . . usually very delightful. Accessible. Oh yes, oh boy. He shaped the press conference. [Before FDR became president] there was no such thing.[4]

Roosevelt also established the routine of inviting reporters to be guests at state dinners and other receptions. This had never been done before. Early worked with Eleanor Roosevelt to ensure that the roster of Washington correspondents was divided evenly by the number of White House functions to be held each season. This system assured that every reporter, along with a spouse, experienced the tribute and flattery of a White House invitation. Employing first-name familiarity with his guests, comfortably intermingling them with heads of state and other notables, Roosevelt encouraged reporters to feel they had undergone an unprecedented advance in social status.[5]

This was the key to FDR's magnetism: his ability to make ordinary people feel that they were, in his sincere estimation, extremely important. Because of this ability, at least in part, the president made conventional elites—those who thrived on now frayed customs of deference—uneasy. The personal style of FDR, an aristocrat by birth, an easygoing democrat by conviction, both embodied and contradicted the standards by which Americans had historically gauged their presidents. As Julius C. C. Edelstein, a reporter for Drew Pearson's column, "The Washington Merry-Go-Round," described him:

> He was the one who was hated by the aristocrats as a traitor to his class. And yet his personality and his style and his manner . . . the way he held a cigarette . . . his graces. He was just First Family. And this was very much appreciated by the people. He spoke of ordinary people in a sort of highly educated Bostonese . . . a Harvard accent . . . and they lapped it up.[6]

The reporters' soaring sense of access and of heightened status was, in large part, accurate. The reporters interacted with a president as never before, and in their news reporting—which was predominantly favorable—they served as esteemed ambassadors of political innovation. A number, in fact, moved from the press corps into the White House to work as speech writers or publicists.

Though FDR ardently romanced working journalists, it must be inserted that his attitude toward their employers—the newspaper publishers—was openly and deliberately hostile. Denouncing the elitist bias of the nation's editorial pages, he routinely asserted that 85 percent of American newspaper publishers were opposed to the New Deal.[7]

To a certain extent, FDR's regular attacks on newspaper publishers must have been strategic. Painting the publishers as latter-day Hamiltonians, FDR was also steeling his administration against an ideological counterattack that—if the historic zeal of the free enterprisers was any index—was certain to come. If his rapport with reporters served to keep his message in the news columns, Roosevelt's concomitant attack on the publishing giants was designed to alert Americans to the untrustworthy nature of commercially manufactured information and opinion. Counting newspaper owners among the "economic royalists" who had carried the country to ruin, Roosevelt warned that they and their editorial opinions must be vigilantly and continually questioned. Implicitly, he was laying the way for the New Deal administration and its various publicity agencies to be seen by the public as more reliable sources of information.

In his frequent and friendly dealings with print journalists, FDR borrowed from public relations know-how that had been evolving since the turn of the century. Yet New Deal publicity reached far beyond newspapers. It also sought to open up new channels of communication in order to circumvent the power of the historically conservative commercial press. With this aim in mind, the New Deal administration assumed the functions of a sophisticated publicity apparatus, working overtime to exert a direct influence on the public mind. This strategy was applied in a wide range of venues.

One of the most prominent was the New Deal's innovative use of radio, a medium that, according to Early, the presidential press secretary, was preferable to newspapers as a publicity device. "It cannot misrepresent nor misquote," he observed at a time when radio was still, for the most part, live. "It is far reaching and simultaneous in releasing messages given it for transmission to the nation or for international consumption."[8]

FDR's ability to employ radio in the thirties was lubricated by a number of factors. First, there were deep personal relationships that existed between the White House and the two major broadcast networks—NBC and CBS. Henry Bellows, head of CBS's Washington bureau, had been Roosevelt's classmate at Harvard. George Holmes, the chief Washington correspondent for NBC, was Early's brother-in-law.[9]

Yet there were other considerations that encouraged the radio industry to be particularly cooperative. Unlike the commercial print media, which enjoyed the sanctuary of the First Amendment, broadcasting was legally more vulnerable to governmental intervention. As Erik Barnouw and, more recently, Robert McChesney have ably demonstrated, the twenties and early thirties witnessed pitched battles over the control of broadcasting in the United States. Many questioned the advisability of commercializing the airwaves, arguing that radio must be maintained on behalf of the "public interest." They saw radio as too invasive, potentially too dangerous to be entrusted to the control of unregulated private interests.[10]

By the mid-thirties, these battles were virtually over. The commercialization of American broadcasting had been settled as an indelible fact. Nonetheless, the principles of "public interest" and governmental oversight still lingered and had been written into communications law. As part of the "public interest" component, for example, the Federal Communications Commission charged all radio stations to offer a measure of "educational" programming.

Given their concerns that the government would interfere with license renewals or might initiate antitrust litigation against the networks, leaders of the radio industry labored to foster a spirit of accommodation with the administration. "The close contact between you and the broadcasters," CBS's Henry Bellows told Press Secretary Early, "has tremendous possibilities of value to the administration, and as a life-long Democrat, I want to pledge my best efforts in making this cooperation successful."[11] In the spirit of this cooperation, the networks produced a number of programs that roundly

praised the New Deal and its policies. In 1935, for example, CBS produced a program entitled "Of the People, By the People, For the People," celebrating "the New Deal's second anniversary." On it, "professional actors recreated great moments in the administration's brief history, the 'actual participants' discussed the events depicted." Historian Richard Steele added that "CBS arranged through the Office of Education to have civics and government classes listen to the two-hour program and even provided supplementary reading materials."[12]

Beyond network-produced programming, the radio industry also handed over a large measure of network airtime for government-produced programming. While newspapers resisted requests to carry news of governmental operations without editorial comment, the radio industry submitted with gusto, and the New Deal publicity apparatus became a conspicuous supplier of mandated educational programming.

> Everything the administration had to say went over the airwaves without the intercession of reporters, editors, or publishers. Not only did radio carry the government's message without adulteration, it carried it farther, more immediately, and more effectively than newspapers. A nationwide "hookup" simultaneously reached millions, including many never touched by newspapers. And, given the proper speaker, it reached them in a form more readily understood than the printed statement.[13]

The administration was not lacking in "proper speakers." The First Lady and cabinet members took to the air. Howe had a weekly radio series of his own. "Special" informational programs and "spot" announcements were offered airtime as well.[14] But it was the president whose mastery in communicating effectively through a radio microphone was the most profound.

During the first ten months of his administration alone, Roosevelt spoke directly to the nation on twenty occasions.[15] He saw radio as a medium that could help him reinvigorate democratic ideals. It could, he thought, "restore direct contact between the masses and their chosen leaders."[16]

Nowhere is FDR's use of radio more illuminating than in the thirty-one "fireside chats" that he delivered over the course of his presidency. Meticulously conceived radio talks through which he forged a lasting and intimate bond with his constituents, they powerfully illustrate his skills as a publicist, his Promethean capacity to mix Jeffersonian ideals of democracy with modern media know-how. Though the chats were carefully scripted by policy advisers and then finely polished by the playwright Robert Sherwood, everything about Roosevelt's delivery suggested a tone of straightforward conversation and neighborly intimacy.[17]

Having witnessed him delivering his chats, FDR's Labor Secretary Frances Perkins provides the most graphic firsthand account of his media style. His gift, according to Perkins, was in his ability to shut out his own environment, to visualize his audience as real people sitting in their homes, and then to project himself out into the ether as a disembodied spirit sitting among them.

> He did not and could not know them all individually, but he thought of them individually. He thought of them in family groups. He thought of them sitting around on a suburban porch after supper of a summer evening. He thought of them gathered around a dinner table at a family meal. He never thought of them as "the masses."
>
> When he talked on the radio, he saw them gathered in the little parlor, listening with their neighbors. He was conscious of their faces and hands, their clothes and homes.
>
> His voice and his facial expression as he spoke were those of an intimate friend. After he became President, I often was at the White House when he broadcast, and I realized how unconscious he was of the twenty or thirty of us in that room and how clearly his mind was focused on the people listening at the other end. As he talked his head would nod and his hands would move in simple, natural, comfortable gestures. His face would smile and light up as though he were actually sitting on the front porch or in the parlor with them. People felt this, and it bound them to him in affection.

Tours of the heartland confirmed Perkins's perspective.

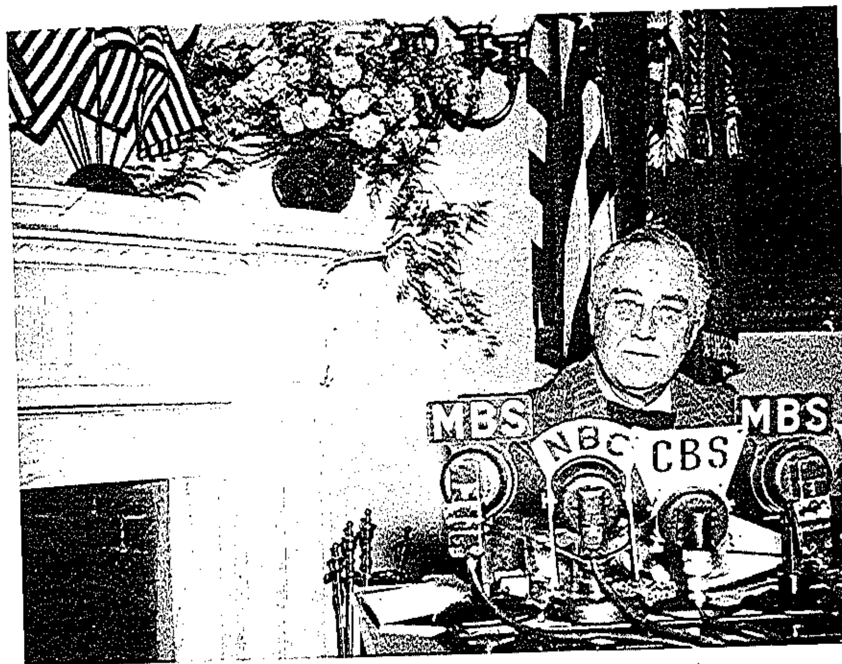
I have sat in those parlors and on those porches myself during some of the speeches, and I have seen men and women gathered around the radio, even those who didn't like him or were opposed to him politically, listening with a pleasant, happy feeling of association and friendship. The exchange between them and him through the medium of the radio was very real. I have seen tears come to their eyes as he told them of some tragic episode . . . of the poverty during unemployment . . . and they were tears of sincerity and recognition and sympathy.

I have also seen them laugh. When he told how Fala, his little dog, had been kicked around, he spoke with naturalness and simplicity. He was so himself in his relation to the dog, based on the average man's experience of the place of a pet in his home, that the laughter of those gathered around radios of the country was a natural, sincere, and affectionate reaching out to this man.

To Perkins, FDR's skill in transcending the encumbrance of spatial distance, in establishing what Gabriel Tarde had termed the "mental cohesion" of a "spiritual collectivity," was the key to FDR's dexterity as a leader.

The quality of his being one with the people, of having no artificial or natural barriers between him and them, made it possible for him to be a leader without ever being or thinking of being a dictator. . . . It was this quality that made people trust him and do gladly what he explained was necessary for them to do.[18]

Yet beside his avuncular style and the rapport he was able to establish with his listeners, FDR's use of radio also exemplified his Jeffersonian convictions. Reading over the texts of his fireside chats, one cannot help but be struck by their substance, by the sophisticated political arguments they routinely presented. More than their capacity to transmit an aura of familiarity, the chats were also a repudiation of the accustomed disdain for the public mind that had framed public relations thinking since the end of World War I.



FDR chats with his friends. U.P.I./BETTMANN

In Roosevelt's words there was the clear intention to educate; to reason with his listeners; to make issues more comprehensible, not less. This intention was evident in his first fireside chat, which aired on March 12, 1933, only a week after his inauguration. Here FDR's objective was to explain actions being taken to resuscitate the incapacitated banking system. From his first sentence, an inflection of genuine concern was combined with the teacherly promise that, as president, he would work to keep the public informed, so people might fully grasp the circumstances that weighed on their social and economic lives. Unspoken, but evident, was a determined and unaccustomed faith in ordinary people's ability to make sense of things.

My friends, I want to talk for a few minutes with the people of the United States about banking—to talk with the comparatively few who understand the mechanics of banking, but more particularly with the overwhelming majority of you who use banks for the making of deposits and the drawing of checks. I

want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, and why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be.

What followed was a well-organized national civics lesson, a patient account of the way that a modern banking system operates. For those suckled by an age of hype, FDR's palpable regard for his listeners' intelligence and the straightforwardness of his explanation are nothing short of astonishing. They provide an uncommon glimpse at a moment when American political life was, for a time, energized by the ideal of an informed and conscious citizenry.

> First of all, let me state the simple fact that when you deposit money in a bank the bank does not put the money into a safe deposit vault. It invests your money in many different forms of credit—in bonds, in commercial paper, in mortgages, and in many other kinds of loans. In other words, the bank puts your money to work to keep the wheels of industry and of agriculture turning round. A comparatively small part of the money that you put into the bank is kept in currency—an amount which in normal times is wholly sufficient to cover the cash needs of the average citizen. In other words, the total amount of all the currency in the country is only a comparatively small proportion of the total deposits in all the banks of the country.

He then proceeded to clarify the events that, in February and early March of that year, had caused banks throughout the country to topple like dominos.

> Because of undermined confidence on the part of the public, there was a general rush by a large portion of our population to turn bank deposits into currency or gold—a rush so great that the soundest banks couldn't get enough currency to meet the demand. . . . By the afternoon of March 3, a week ago last Friday, scarcely a bank in the country was open to do business.

He closed his exegesis with a reasoned explanation of the "national bank holiday," a temporary closing of banks in order to arrest the run on deposits and to reinforce "our financial and economic fabric."

Yet beyond the rational tone and the detailed explanation, there was something else about this talk that broke from publicity thinking of the recent past. Throughout the twenties, the public had increasingly been seen as an inanimate entity, as protoplasmic raw material to be molded by impression managers. In Roosevelt's approach to public conversation, all this changed. *The public* reentered the stage of history as a subject, an active and thoughtful force.

Throughout his exposition on banking, for example, the importance of *the people* as participants in a bold national effort was paramount. The need to fortify public courage, to rest the efforts of government on the active support of the people, was unmistakable in his tone. "Let us unite in banishing fear," he enjoined his listeners. "We have provided the machinery to restore our financial system . . . it is up to you to support and make it work. It is your problem, my friends, your problem no less than it is mine. Together," he concluded with a measure of confidence that had been absent from many people's lives, "we cannot fail."[19]

In subsequent chats, Roosevelt's notion of an engaged public grew in importance. He challenged Americans to discredit the contemptuous wisdom of the compliance engineers like Walter Lippmann, who for a decade-and-a-half had asserted that the public was inherently incapable of informed political understanding, unfit for reasonable decision making. "It is time," Roosevelt encouraged his listeners on April 28, 1935, "to provide a smashing answer for those cynical men who say that a democracy cannot be honest, cannot be efficient. If you will help, this can be done."

This was not simply rhetoric. As powerful business interests became steadily more hostile to New Deal policies, Roosevelt believed that ordinary citizens had to be mobilized. They had to become politically active, and believe in themselves as politically powerful to counterbalance the substantial weight of unfriendly corporate and financial interests.

For a publicist this was an unfamiliar kind of reasoning. With the decline of radical progressivism, public relations had evolved into an instrument of vested power, a necessary antidote to a critical public and a restless crowd. PR was seen as the tonic that could cure perilous democratic ideas that had boiled up among the "lower strata" of society. In his uses of publicity, on the other hand, FDR struck a bargain with popular activism. Exhibiting trust and affection for the

public, not fear, he encouraged ordinary people to examine even his own New Deal programs and to provide suggestions—if required—for more suitable actions to be taken.

> I . . . hope you will watch the work in every corner of the nation. Feel free to criticize. Tell me of instances where work can be done better, or where improper practices prevail. Neither you nor I want criticism conceived in a purely fault-finding or partisan spirit, but I am jealous of the right of every citizen to call to the attention of his or her government examples of how the public money can be more effectively spent for the benefit of the American people.[20]

Given the overarching principle of "the greater good," this was also an implicit invitation for every citizen to question any institution—public or private—whose policies or activities impacted on the terrain of social life.

The fireside chats also offered an opportunity for FDR to articulate a vision of an American way of life that was distinct from the religious equation between democracy and "free enterprise" that had been promulgated throughout the twenties. Such business-oriented renderings of democracy—FDR charged in his radio talk of June 28, 1934—serve only to benefit "the comparative few who seek to retain or to gain position or riches by some shortcut which is harmful to the greater good."

A more humane democratic standard was necessary, he urged, one that "seeks the primary good of the greater number" as its supreme objective. Toward this end, he proposed a new social compact—a foundation of three inviolable social principles, each of which linked the needs of individuals to the notion of governmental stewardship on behalf of "the greater good."

> That security involves added means of providing better homes for the people of the nation. That is the first principle of our future program.
>
> The second is to plan the use of land and water resources to the end that the means of livelihood of our citizens may be more adequate to meet their daily needs.
>
> And . . . the third principle is to use the agencies of government to assist in the establishment of means to provide sound and adequate protection against the vicissitudes of modern life—in other words, social insurance.

Distancing these principles from the label of "socialism," perennially a foreign idea to the minds of many Americans, FDR asserted that they were simply a reanimation of America's honorable democratic roots, a return to principles that had gotten lost amid an inferno of commercialism.

> We seek the security of the men, women, and children of the nation . . .
>
> . . . I believe that what we are doing today is a necessary fulfillment of what Americans have always been doing—a fulfillment of old and tested American ideals.[21]

Yet as Roosevelt evoked the grail of venerable democratic principles, he also carried those principles to a level unprecedented among presidents. The "men, women, and children" for whom he spoke constituted a far more inclusive public than had heretofore been seen.

The Declaration of Independence had elevated the principle of universal equality, but its author and its adherents were enmeshed in social and economic structures that ensured that the ideal of general rights could not be realized. The sovereign public of the late eighteenth century had been limited to white—primarily Anglo-American—men, property holders at that.

Even the early-twentieth-century Progressives, who pointed the way for many New Dealers, held to a notion of the public that was extremely limited in membership. While they boldly condemned the excesses of private enterprise, they were also consumed by a relentless anxiety over the ungovernable passions of an alien and dangerous crowd. Their public was still—for the most part—restricted to the company of the Anglo-American middle class.

With the coming of the New Deal, however, the prevailing conception of the American public became more inclusive than ever before. To a large extent, this expanded view of America reflected dramatic shifts that had altered the makeup of the electorate. During the New

Deal period, noted historian Steven Fraser, the public increasingly included among its ranks "legions of new voters from among the new immigrant working class."[22]

For Roosevelt, customary distinctions between *the public* and *the crowd* served no political purpose. If anything, they accentuated divisions that, if cynically exploited, could serve to erect a protective middle-class barrier between the very rich and the very poor. In Roosevelt's fireside chats—along with other arenas of New Deal publicity—the crowd was unified with the public under the common appellation of *the people*. Though FDR would strategically throw swipes at the "kidnapers, bandits, and malefactors of great wealth" who opposed his programs, he painted a picture of the American Way in which class distinction, of any kind, had no place.

This egalitarianism became increasingly evident as FDR approached the 1936 election, a time when business opposition to the New Deal had grown fierce. Accepting his party's nomination that summer, Roosevelt had excoriated "the royalists of the economic order" who, while they grant "that political freedom [is] the business of the Government," at the same time maintain that "economic slavery [is] nobody's business."

> They granted that the Government could do anything to protect the citizen in his right to vote, but they denied that the Government could do anything to protect the citizen in his right to work and his right to live. Today we stand committed to the proposition that freedom is no half-and-half affair. If the average citizen is guaranteed equal opportunity in the polling place, he must have equal opportunity in the market place.[23]

In his fireside chat of September 6, 1936, a pre-election appeal for the votes of farmers and laborers, he built upon this campaign theme.

> In this country we insist, as an essential of the American way of life, that the employer-employee relationship should be one between free men and equals. We refuse to regard those who work with hand or brain as different from or inferior to those who live from their own property. We insist that labor is entitled to as much respect as property. But our workers with hand and brain deserve more than respect for their labor. They deserve practical protection in the opportunity to use their labor at a return adequate to support them at a decent and constantly rising standard of living, and to accumulate a margin of security against the inevitable.

Realizing that such egalitarian rhetoric would surely alarm the propertied classes and set their own propaganda machine into motion—condemning the president as an instigator of class conflict—Roosevelt argued that it was the intractable stance of vested property that actually jeopardized the social order. Efforts to oppose workers' rights, he warned, will not protect America from conflict, but bring it to ruin. Events overseas, he testified, were already providing a cautionary lesson.

> It is those . . . who . . . would try to refuse the worker any effective power to bargain collectively, to earn a decent livelihood, and to acquire security. . . . not labor, who threaten this country with that class dissension which in other countries has led to dictatorship and the establishment of fear and hatred as the dominant emotions in human life.

Against the threat of these possibilities, Roosevelt proposed the idea of a more providential society, in which the oath of universal equality was the guiding principle. "There is no cleavage," he told his radio audience, "between white-collar workers and manual workers, between artists and artisans, musicians and mechanics, lawyers and accountants and architects and miners."

To emphasize his message, FDR turned to the question of familiar American rituals and their meanings. It was the evening before Labor Day as he spoke, and he seized the occasion to encourage listeners to think of the holiday as something more than a simple tribute to working-class people. "Anyone who calls it a class holiday," he intoned, "challenges the whole concept of American democracy." He then explained, offering a lesson in democracy that spoke powerfully to the needs of millions of Americans while repudiating the prevailing ideology of the free enterprisers:

> The Fourth of July commemorates our political freedom—a freedom which without economic freedom is meaningless indeed. Labor Day symbolizes our determination to achieve an economic freedom for the average man which will give his political freedom reality.[24]

This widely publicized idea—that in order for Americans' political rights to mean anything, Americans' economic well-being must be likewise guaranteed—was the glue that brought a nation together at the height of the Great Depression. It was a promise that as America moved toward the future, the activities of private enterprise would be tolerated only insofar as they sustained the general welfare of all Americans. When they didn't, it would be the social enterprise of government to ensure that the precept of "the greater good" would be enforced.

A reconfigured portrait of America—and of American democracy—was a persistent element in Roosevelt's public oratory, but it was also a vision that reached far beyond his personal talents as a publicist. It permeated the New Deal's approach to doing politics, to building and maintaining popular support.

More than a set of programs or a purposeful gathering of individuals, the New Deal was a huge publicity apparatus, grander in scale and far more effective and beloved than George Creel's Committee on Public Information. Its impact on the American political imagination was so extraordinarily durable that only in the last two decades of this century has a business-sponsored and extravagantly financed counterattack (which commenced in 1935, as recounted in Chapter 14) been broadly, if perhaps impermanently, triumphant.

The means by which the New Deal administration transmitted its ideas were inventive and varied. Some techniques were but ingenious extensions of conventional PR practices, whereas others employed the creative labor of the nation to erect a new and compelling tableau of America, its people, and their ill-met needs.

In terms of the former, for example, both Early and McIntyre—over and above their experience in print journalism—had spent time working in the newsreel industry during the twenties. These contacts meant that the White House had ready access to movie theater newsreels that complemented its positive image in news columns and on radio.[25]

Yet to a number of influential New Dealers, relations between the White House and the commercial news and entertainment industries were not enough. Particularly in the years between 1935 and 1937, as corporate interests became increasingly unhappy with New Deal policies toward the entitlements of privately held wealth, the government began to take steps to bypass the conventional commercial manufacturers of truth. To establish open corridors linking the administration's activities with the general public, a number of governmental agencies—most notably the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Resettlement Administration (RA), later called the Farm Security Administration (FSA)—moved toward the deployment of independent communication strategies that mobilized a diversity of creative arts on behalf of New Deal programs, generated their own communications channels, and promoted and advanced an inclusive vision of America.

The range of these enterprises was enormous; together, they contributed to the way that people continue to envision the period of the Great Depression and the New Deal. They included the WPA's Federal Writers Project and other programs that employed artists to paint murals in post offices and other federal or federally funded facilities. There was also a Federal Theatre Project whose documentary-style "Living Newspapers" addressed the fact and drama of pressing social realities.

There were also documentary motion pictures, most notably Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937), a poetic tribute to the Mississippi River as the blood supply of a nation in crisis. In the latter film, the river assumed the role of a heroic and tragic figure. It was the historic source of America's wealth, carrying cotton, lumber, and the products of American industry that clothe, house, and feed the world. At the same time, it unbosomed the onerous costs of American industrial expansion: the deforestation, soil depletion, and flooding that threatened the survival of ordinary Americans.

Behind this visual epic of industry, riverboats, billowing clouds, and a river swollen with tree trunks, intercut with shots of depleted land and devastated forests, lay an argument about recent American history, connecting unregulated economic growth with undeniable evidence of natural wreckage. At the same time, *The River* provided an argument on behalf of the land-reclamation activities of the FSA, the New Deal agency that had sponsored the production of the film.

In many ways, the FSA—and its predecessor, the RA—offer a paradigmatic look at New Deal publicity. In the nearly 80,000 photographs that were produced and disseminated under the auspices of these agencies, one gets an illuminating look at the ways that New Deal publicity served to broadcast a new and unaccustomed picture of America, of the American people, and of the American way of life.[26]

Thematically, the photographs offered arguments akin to those encountered in the rhetoric of the fireside chats. In his radio addresses FDR had spoken of *a third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-nourished.* He had proposed a concept of democracy that joined the promise of economic security to that of political rights. He had argued that business profits must be linked to the touchstone of the greater good and that it was the role of the government to ensure that outcome. In an empathic tone, the president had expanded the bounds of citizenship. If the fireside chats had provided a verbal argument on behalf of a redefined America, however, it was through the innovative photography of the RA and FSA that this ideal was most eloquently visualized.

The RA's and FSA's enterprise in photographic publicity was the offspring of two men whose lives, by the mid-thirties, had been connected for more than a decade. One was Rexford G. Tugwell, the brain truster and former economics professor, who was named to head the RA in 1935; the other was Roy Stryker, son of a radical populist farmer from Kansas, who had been a student of Tugwell at Columbia University in the early 1920s.

As a freshman in Tugwell's course on utopian socialism and in other courses, Stryker was transported by his professor's iconoclastic social views and his inventive approach to pedagogy. While many American intellectuals had become witting mouthpieces for a dominant faith in "prosperity," Tugwell rejected the prevailing doctrines of the period. His investigations fastened on the egregious deficiencies of economic life, on the millions of Americans who continued to be plagued by conditions of social and economic deprivation.

In his approach to teaching, Tugwell also repudiated the ruling dogma. Dissatisfied with the abstract predilections of most academic economics—which, he believed, only distanced students from a true appreciation of society and its problems—Tugwell embraced a pedagogy designed to make ordinary people's lived experience the foundation of economic thinking.[27] To accentuate the experiential dimension and consistent with the image-oriented approach to persuasion that characterized the postwar period, Tugwell made innovative use of "visual aids as an adjunct to learning." F. Jack Hurley, who chronicled the collaboration between Tugwell and Stryker, elaborated:

> Tugwell believed strongly in descriptive economics. He felt that it was important for students to have visual contact with the economic institutions they were studying. What did a bank look like? What did a cotton farm look like? How did it differ from a rice farm?[28]

Through Tugwell's freshman course, Introduction to Contemporary Civilization, many Columbia students were touched by his novel approach to teaching, but none more than Stryker. Under Tugwell's tutelage, Stryker became obsessed with the problem of how to communicate social and economic realities visually. In 1924, Tugwell offered Stryker—now his graduate teaching assistant—the position of "joint author" in exchange for selecting images and preparing captions for an economics textbook he was preparing. Stryker's fascination with the problem of visual communication now had a perfect outlet.

Published in 1925, the book, *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement,* foreshadowed the social radicalism of the New Deal in general and the photographic publicity of the RA and FSA in particular. Written when the religion of money was at its height and images were routinely employed to aggrandize the cult of prosperity, the book provided a refreshingly subversive mix of words and images, one that stressed the economic hardships and social contradictions that lurked beneath the surface of *the good life.* While the book echoed Simon Patten's optimistic faith that industrial civilization had the potential to bring about a new and universally improved standard of living, its assessment of the present was that this promise remained largely unfulfilled. Against the widely promoted idea that America was a land of general prosperity, the authors of *American Economic Life* dissected American society into woefully unequal thirds.

At the top of the heap were the wealthy, the 1 percent of the population that garnered 12 percent of the national income—often

without even working—and whose assets constituted an even larger percentage of the nation's wealth.

Below these people stood an intermediary group—13 percent of the population, according to Tugwell—who were defined as those living at the "comfort level." These were the middle class who, occasional difficulties notwithstanding, enjoyed a "regular money income" and who, in the 1920s, benefited from the proliferation of modern consumer goods.

Beneath these two groups were that 86 percent of the population whose lives were mired in poverty and whose social lives were marred by a combination of "discontent and crime." This group comprised rural and urban working people who, despite their often arduous labors, earned only a "bare subsistence." It also included the growing number of unemployed people.

In the face of these potentially explosive social divisions, *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement* offered a number of proposals designed to promote the "economic progress of society as a whole." These proposals included the modernization and improvement of living conditions in cities and the depressed agricultural heartland, a more just distribution of income, the establishment of collective bargaining rights, and comprehensive social and economic reorganization and planning. In an era of laissez-faire, it was an argument for energetic economic interventionism.

Written by Tugwell, the book's text relied on a range of eloquent sources to make its points, but it was the photographic element of the book, concocted by Stryker, that stood out as its most articulate feature. None of the pictures were taken by Stryker, nor did he commission anyone to take new photographs for the volume. His approach to the pictorial ingredient of the book was essentially curatorial; he collected pictures and wrote captions for them.

Locating the photographs that would provide a picture of social conditions and would elevate social consciousness, however, was not an easy task. As historian Jack Hurley noted, most serious photographers of the period—people like Edward Steichen or Edward Weston—were exploring the camera as an artistic instrument, and most of the mass media were using photographs "to present an idealized view of life as it ought to be, rather than life as it was."[29]

In response, Stryker went to three sources for his photographs. When appropriate—to depict a rural setting, for example—he used

Life as It Ought to Be: In advertisements during the 1920s, photographs were often used to present people with a picture of *who they could become* if only they purchased and used the right product. In this 1926 ad for LUX Toilet Soap, Hollywood starlets are the models against which ordinary women are expected to measure themselves.

photos from stock photography agencies like Ewing-Galloway. To document manufacturing processes and to portray new consumer goods available to the comfort class, he procured photos from the publicity departments of a number of companies.

In his effort to represent the deplorable disparities of American life, however, he turned to a man who, during the Progressive Era, had pioneered in the field of social photography, Lewis Hine. Stryker's debt to Hine is evident throughout the book. Despite the fact that many of the pictures were now twenty years old, more than

a third of the photos included in the book had been taken by Hine, who obligingly opened his files to Stryker.[30]

Beyond his reliance on Hine's images, however, Stryker also drew on the photographer's wisdom about the ways that photographs might be used to offer social arguments. Of particular advantage was Hine's thinking on the use of "social pen pictures," compelling captions to accentuate a photograph's appeal.

In *American Economic Life,* Stryker carried the social pen picture, as an instrument of persuasion, to an unprecedented—often thoroughly manipulative—level. Pictures that, without words, might have been open to a wide range of interpretations were marshaled for singularly didactic and frequently melodramatic purposes.

A photograph of a pastoral rural landscape, with the added caption "An isolated region—where roads are poor and neighbors few," for example, became an argument against the dulling solitude that, in Stryker's mind, hobbled the lives of many Americans.[31]

Other captions were aimed at evoking for a reader the experience of terrible working conditions. A picture of children picking cotton in Texas is punctuated by the words "The sun is hot, hours are long, bags are heavy" and by the sardonic observation that some cold-hearted people actually see the "discipline of work like this" as just "what children need!"[32]

A picture of a Bowery bread line was reinforced by a historical commentary addressing the cruel ironies of an industrial civilization that, though capable of producing plenty, continues to harbor want.

> To beg for bread has been the ultimate degradation throughout human history. Men and women will suffer most indignities and survive most shames before they come to this. In an age of surplus the bread line still survives, though shrunk in numbers.[33]

A woman sitting on a sidewalk, her head buried in her hands, is explained by the eulogy: "Despair—an unrecognized by-product of industry."[34] A close-up of a young man working at an industrial loom is described as "A youthful machine-tender in an immense impersonal factory." A similar picture, this time with a young girl, is presented to

emphasize that there was "Neither joy nor interest in this monotonous work."[35]

With each caption, Stryker sought to emphasize the often unrecognized social forces that were at play in the everyday experiences of ordinary individuals. This intent didn't only guide his delineation of poverty, it was his overarching approach to representation throughout the book.

As applied to those living at the "comfort level," for example, Stryker's "descriptive economics" provided a powerful rejoinder to his portrayals of poverty. A well-dressed mother and her two children, seen at the front door of their suburban home, provided an opportunity for the reminder that "Mothers and children have a better chance on the comfort level."[36]

A picture of a prosperous young couple, sitting in their well-appointed living room, was used to instruct readers that the maintenance of such a setting "is dependent upon a regular money income."

Captions also contrasted the subjective lives and spiritual fulfillment of people living at different social levels. A portrait of a gray-haired man wearing eyeglasses and a jacket and tie, for example, provided a chance to contemplate the divergent patterns of aging that mark different strata.

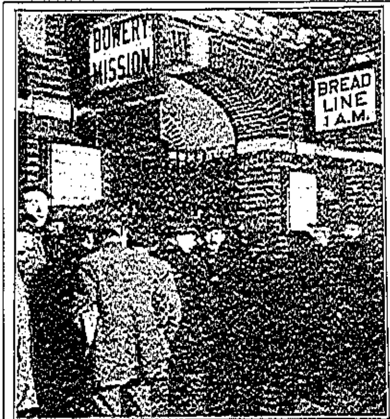
> A member of the professional group—neither tired of his job nor tired by it; still keen and alert, his greatest usefulness just beginning at an age when wage-working men and women are beginning to wonder what luck old age holds in store for them.[37]

A picture of a middle-class "musician in his studio" was interpreted by the doleful observance that "genius is not always permitted such favorable surroundings."

If pictures of people at the "comfort level" were employed to visualize a beneficial way of life, a standard for all Americans, the lives of "the rich" were framed by an aversion rarely encountered during the 1920s. A hotel in Palm Beach was described simply as "a place where rich men idle."[38] A picture of a mansion in New York City, its "windows and doors boarded up," provided the opportunity for a discourse on the yearly migration patterns of plutocrats. The house, the caption explained, "will no doubt remain in this condition except during a few weeks in the fall, when its owners come back for an interval between

Neither joy nor interest in this monotonous work. (Courtesy National Child Labor Committee. Photo Hine)

Despair—an unrecognized by-product of industry. (Photo Hine)

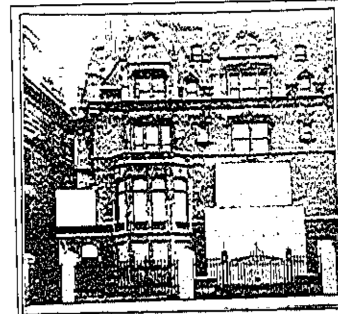


To beg for bread has been the ultimate degradation throughout human history. Men and women will suffer most indignities and survive most shames before they come to this. In an age of surplus the bread line still survives, though shrunk in numbers. (Photo Hine)

Mothers and children have a better chance on the comfort level. (Photo Hine)

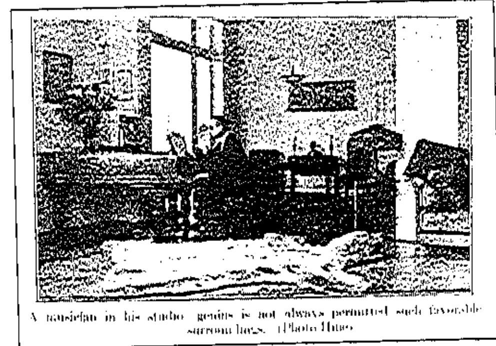
Poverty self-perpetuating. It can more readily be comprehended when one contrasts these two pictures. Left.—Mother and child of the comfort group. Right.—Widow and her nine children. (Photos Hine)

An illustration of what it means to live without surplus above immediate needs. (Photo Hine)



The New York City home of one of the wealthy class—with doors and windows boarded up. It will no doubt remain in this condition except during a few weeks in the fall, when its owners come back for an interval between shore or mountains in the north and shore or mountains in the South. It is interesting to note that within a few blocks of this house is one of New York's most crowded sections. (Photo Hine)

A member of the professional group—neither tired *of* his job nor tired *by* it; still keen and alert, his greatest usefulness just beginning at an age when wage-working men and women are beginning to wonder what luck old age holds in store for them. (Photo Hine)



A musician in his studio—genius is not always permitted such favorable surroundings. (Photo Hine)

In assembling the images and captions for *American Economic Life*, Roy Stryker used pictures and words to illuminate the social inequalities and, for many, the spiritual deterioration of life during a period of so-called prosperity. *AMERICAN ECONOMIC LIFE*, 1925

shore or mountains in the north and shore or mountains in the south. It is interesting to note," the caption adds, in reference to the spaciousness of this sporadically inhabited dwelling, "that within a few blocks of this house is one of New York's most crowded sections."[39]

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Though prepared as a course text, initially for freshmen at Columbia University, *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement* pointed to a pictorial publicity that veered dramatically from the visual thinking of its time. While Stryker's pictures were arranged to strike an emotional nerve, their claim was toward an objectivity—a documentary realism—that had, in large part, been abandoned by modern picturizers. Unlike the overtly idealized imagery, the psychologically inclined "masturbation of the eye" that had gained prominence throughout the 1920s, these pictures with aphoristic captions offered to illuminate actual social experiences, to present verifiable social facts.

In the twenties, this approach to visual publicity stood at the margins of society. It was a technique used by a team of radical economic thinkers to examine social and economic trends, to challenge the establishment, and to question prevailing notions of "prosperity." It was also employed to propose a vision of democracy that would extend to a greater number of Americans. Part of what is remarkable about the book, even today, is its spirited dissent from the ethic of commercial boosterism. In the context of the Great Depression, however, and backed by a government that was putting many of their once heretical ideas into action, Tugwell and Stryker's publicity of "descriptive economics" began to exert an influence on the countenance of American political culture itself. Though boosterism would continue to inform the inflection of commercial advertising and sumptuous products and settings were a typical aspect of escapist films in the thirties, a more critical eye was advancing into the American mainstream.

The time was 1935 and the place was the RA, an independent New Deal agency with Tugwell at its head. The RA was engaged in a range of activities designed to reconstruct depressed rural areas. In addition to "land-use" programs and "loans and grants to individuals and groups of farmers," the RA also sponsored a number of social experiments, including federally funded suburban communities, "Greenbelt towns" as they were called, and "several experimental communal farms for rural families that had suffered displacement."[40] It was these experiments, explicit challenges to the religion of private

enterprise, that prompted Tugwell to set up an "Information Division" to tell the RA's story and to combat anticommunal, antigovernment propaganda that was sure to come from the commercial press and from an increasingly nervous business community more generally. Following a guiding precept of public relations thinking that dated to the turn of the century, the Information Division was Tugwell's apparatus for winning the hearts and minds of middle-class Americans to the RA's social democratic cause. But unlike progressivism, the appeal reached beyond the middle-class toward an expanded—largely immigrant and working-class—electorate that constituted the base of FDR's support. Like other components of New Deal culture, the Information Division endeavored to build a cross-class united front.

The Information Division was a multimedia enterprise, generating radio programming and—as was mentioned—films. At its center, however, stood something called the Historical Section, headed by Tugwell's old friend Stryker, which was charged with the job of producing and disseminating a photographic record of the RA and its mission.

In this regard, it was remarkably successful. Between 1935 and 1943, when the Historical Section (by then a part of the Office of War Information) was disbanded, Stryker's uncanny ability to tell stories through pictures would condition the ways that many people understood not only the hardships of the depression, but themselves, their fellow Americans, and their society. This time, with the federal government subsidizing his visual appetites, Stryker no longer had to rely on previously taken photographs. He could parent his own images, shot with the programs of the RA, and then with the FSA, in mind.

Abetting Stryker in this enterprise was a band of men and women—some with minimal prior experience as photo documentarians—many of whose names would become celestial in the annals of American art: Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Dorothea Lange, Carl Mydans, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein (also a former student of Tugwell at Columbia), Marion Post Wolcott, John Vachon, Jack Delano, John Collier, Sheldon Dick, and others.

In certain ways, the work of the Historical Section was a continuation of efforts begun with the publication of *American Economic Life*. Yet since Stryker was now able to commission his own pho-

tographs and was in a position to guide the process of their creation, he felt less obliged to explain them with words. FDR—in his fireside chats and elsewhere—was already furnishing stirring captions. Breaking from the double-barreled tactic of image and caption that had been employed in his and Tugwell's textbook, this time Stryker threw his confidence squarely behind the eloquence of images. Captions were terse when provided, simply identifying a subject.

Barely a year after Stryker's RA service began, the writer James Agee—whose collaboration with photographer Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* would emerge as a classic piece of New Deal culture—baptized the camera as "the central instrument of our time." In words recalling those of Walter Lippmann in *Public Opinion,* Agee observed that "the camera can do what nothing else in the world can do: . . . perceive, record, and communicate, in full unaltered power, the peculiar kinds of poetic vitality which blaze in every real thing and which are in great degree . . . lost to every other kind of art."[41]

More than any other medium, he judged, the camera could simulate the impact of a face-to-face encounter. It could exert what Lippmann had termed an unparalleled "authority over the imagination." At the tiller of the Historical Section, Stryker went forward with the same assumptions. He believed that a photographer, adequately instructed, could guide the process of interpretation by a viewer and could encourage a better understanding of the world existing beyond the frame. "If a photographer understands the social forces present in a scene," he maintained, "the resulting photograph should be a satisfactory pictorial representation."[42] Properly formulated, Historical Section photographs should require no additional words to communicate relevant social and economic realities. With this idea in mind, Stryker provided his photographers with straightforward instructions for their assignments. As Dorothea Lange prepared for her first RA photo excursion in 1936, for example, Stryker requested:

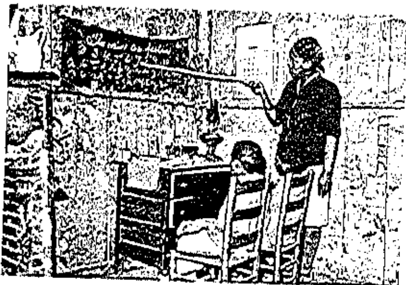
> Would you, in the next few days, take for us some good slum pictures in the San Francisco area. . . . We need to vary the diet in some of our exhibits here by showing some western poverty instead of all south and east. . . . When you get to Los Angeles, I think it might be worthwhile to see if you can pick up some good slum pictures there also. Do not forget that we need some of the rural slum type of thing as well as the urban.[43]

In a 1938 letter to Sheldon Dick, briefing the photographer for a trip to Pennsylvania's coal region, Stryker was even more explicit, revealing his ability to identify the "social forces present in a scene."

> The specific things I noted when I was there were that the town dropped down into a Pennsylvania mountain valley. Everywhere you look is man-made desolation, waste piles, bare hills, dirty streets. It is terribly important that you in some way try to show the town against this background of waste piles and coal tipples. In other words, it is a coal town and your pictures must tell it. It is a church dominated place. . . . The place is not prosperous, people are loafing in saloons and around the streets. You must get this feeling of unemployment. There are many unpaved streets. . . . The houses are old and rundown. The place is devoid of paint. I am sure lots of cheap liquor is consumed for no other reason than in an attempt to blot out the drabness of the place. When you are ready to shoot people try to pick up something of the feeling on the side of youth. Try to portray the hopelessness of their position. . . . youth's confusions—liquor, swing, sex, and more liquor. The actual details will have to be worked out by yourself.[44]

Not all the photographers accepted their instructions with equanimity. Tensions between Stryker and Evans, in particular, were legendary. Yet as one approaches the thousands of photographs assembled under the auspices of the RA and FSA, one is struck by the extent to which the images conform to a distinct set of guidelines and the degree to which, together, they constituted a coherent publicity on behalf of a renegotiated picture of America, a picture that clashed, eloquently, with what had governed America's national culture in the 1920s and beforehand.

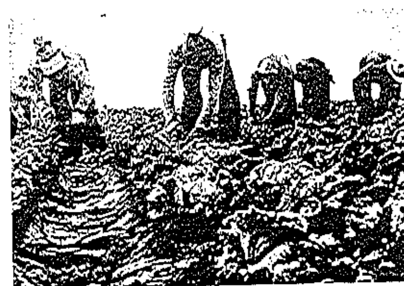
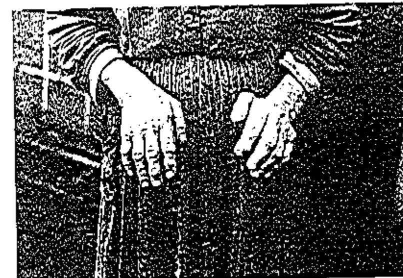
First, most RA and FSA pictures were shot with black-and-white film. In preceding decades, the availability of modern synthetic dyes



(ABOVE AND OPPOSITE) RA and FSA portraits: Introducing America to Americans.
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

and color photography had increasingly defined the window dressing of American industrial society; colorful products and representations of products had become part and parcel of visual culture in general and merchandising in particular. The choice of black-and-white film, then—as historian Sally Stein persuasively argued—embodied a decision to present a reality that contrasted with that seen in the commercial sphere. Against the color-coded daydreams of advertising, black-and-white photography claimed to reveal a truer, more sobering reality, more in synch with the lives of real people.[45]

Yet beyond this socioaesthetic consideration, there were also recurrent—often overlapping—subjects and themes that unified the pictures of the FSA as a publicity campaign. Many of the photographs were simply portraits of people, alone or in groups: portraits of Americans. Other photographs drew attention to the arduous social, economic, and environmental circumstances faced by these people, conditions that the RA and FSA sought to remedy. A third group might be said to comprise a portrait of America as a place, documentations of everyday life: the homes, the land, and the towns where ordinary Americans lived.

The portraits of people, one after another, stand at dramatic odds with traditions of portraiture that had dominated to that time. William Stott wrote that FSA documentary was "a radically democratic genre" that uplifted the ordinary while diminishing the importance of the high and mighty.[46] This standard was continually borne out by the images. Against a history that had habitually damned poor people as belonging to a faceless, often loathsome *crowd*, FSA portraits accentuated the humanity and dignity of those who suffered in America's dust bowl. If most earlier photo portraits of poor people were either condescending and clinical or were marked by the attempt to fashion—in a studio setting—a decidedly middle-class facade, these were portraits that dignified and emphasized hard work and suffering as a credential of one's humanity.

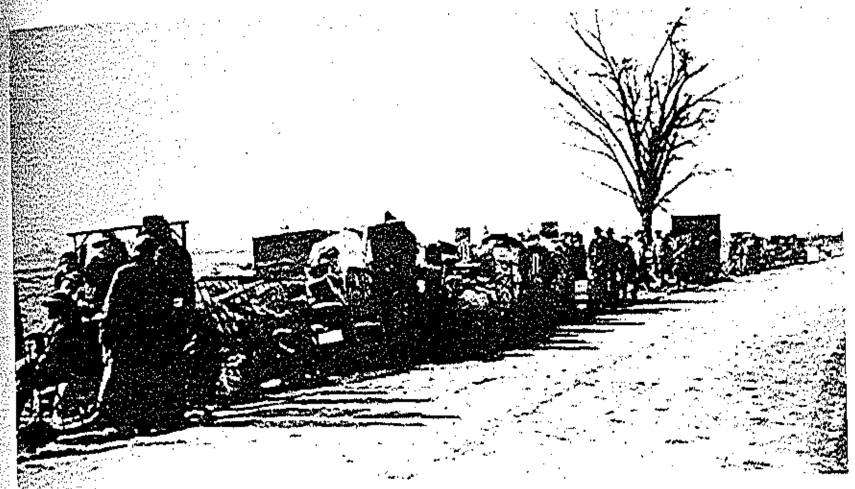
This was the "salt of the earth." It was not simply *poverty* being portrayed, it was people. Tugwell had instructed Stryker, "Roy, a man

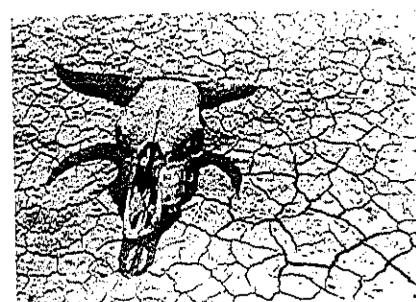
may have holes in his shoes, and you may see the holes when you take the picture. But maybe your sense of the human being will teach you there's a lot more to that than the holes in his shoes, and you ought to try to get that idea across." In the strong but weary gaze of Lange's "migrant mother" and in scores of other pictures, this teaching was expressively realized.

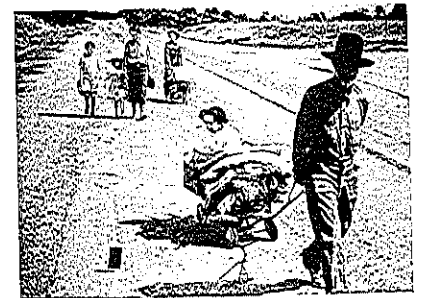
When Stryker claimed that the Historical Section "introduced America to Americans," he underlined the extent to which the photographs presented a portrayal of America and of the American people that had, to that point, been largely invisible in a national, mass-mediated culture. Poor white tenant farmers from Alabama; black cotton pickers on a plantation in Mississippi; children without shoes; flood refugees; unemployed miners; "Okies" on the road seeking a better life; breast-feeding mothers with worried looks in their eyes; migratory Mexican field workers; furrowed and callused hands; men on a chain gang or a county farm; a black teacher in a dilapidated rural school, using chalk on a broken slate in her struggle to enlighten the children; community sings; and a small town meeting in Texas. These were the diverse portraits of Americans that challenged the hegemony of middle-class Anglo-America, and they set the stage for battles over *American identity* that even now, at the edge of a new millennium, are still with us.

In the 1930s, this was a picture of the nation that the American middle class—for whom the photographs were, in large part, being produced—had not seen before, certainly not in publicity coming from the federal government. In most prior representations of the poor, the character of their otherness was conspicuous. "These are not people like you," most pictures had silently declared; "these are people to be feared." Messages like these had helped to erect a polit-

(OPPOSITE) FSA photographs illustrating social, economic, and environmental conditions. Arthur Rothstein's 1936 photograph of a steer's skull on the parched earth of Pennington County, South Dakota, provoked a controversy over the authenticity of FSA images when it was discovered that it was only one of a series of pictures of the skull, each shot against a different terrain. Anti–New Dealers pointed to Rothstein's picture as a sign that FSA pictures couldn't be trusted. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



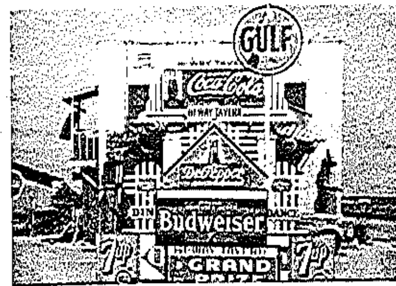


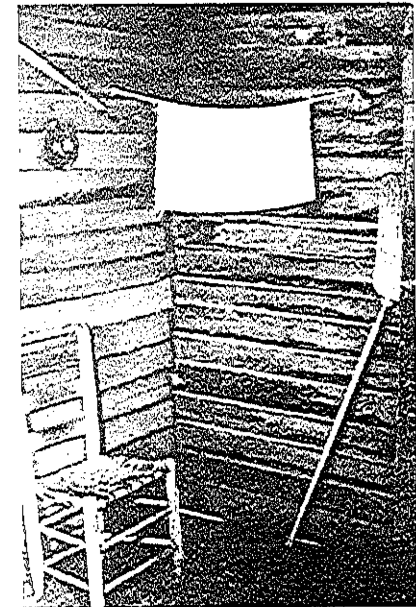


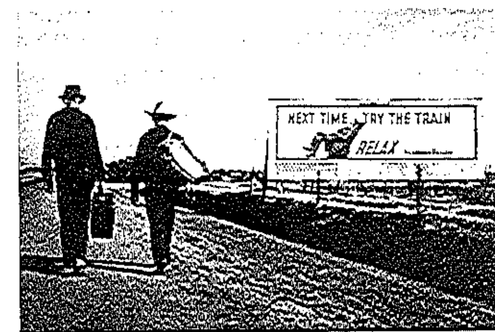
ical barrier between the middle and lower classes, even during the Progressive Era. More recently, from the mid-teens through the twenties, the silent eloquence of images had been used to forge a psychological bond between middle-class Americans and large corporations.

The political success of the New Deal, however, required a different argument, one that transcended the impediment of *otherness* that divided a photographic subject from the audience and, more important, one that encouraged a process of identification between the viewer and the viewed, between the middle class, new working-class voters, and the poor. Stryker's old school mate Arthur Rothstein had argued that "the lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person looking at the print."[47] In the hands of Rothstein and other RA and FSA photographers, this understanding gave rise to a portraiture in which the subjects and the audience entered into close eye contact. These portraits did not afford the spectator the luxury of safe distance; they consciously asked the viewer to project himself or herself into the reality being portrayed, into the everyday lives of the people in the pictures. In the depths of the Great Depression, a middle class that was itself enduring considerable pain had grown uncharacteristically responsive to this call.

The FSA portraits were unquestionably influenced by the eye of Hine, but they also represented Stryker's detachment from the world-view of the celebrated Progressive documentarian. In preparing *American Economic Life* in the mid-twenties, Stryker had been deeply affected by—and heavily dependent on—Hine's visual sensibility. As a result, although the book devoted a great deal of attention to the problems of agricultural poverty, its visual idiom was strikingly urban and industrial. This urban industrialism made sense. Much of Hine's work focused on factory workers and miners, on cityscapes. At the height of the great migration, many of his subjects were distinctly immigrants. The RA and FSA photos, on the other hand, while they were conversant with Hine's approach to "social photography," presented a vision of *the people* that was quite different; overwhelmingly rural, stridently *American*. This vision was probably essential to their broad appeal. Though the people portrayed were markedly diverse, their framing was mythically Jeffersonian. The weathered faces and the callused hands evoked those of heroically self-sufficient pioneers,







FSA pictures of everyday life. On the walls of broken hovels and along the dusty roads, the promises of the consumer culture furnished stunning proof of their own emptiness. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

now in need of help. They seemed to be awaiting Henry Fonda to portray them, and he would.

If the portraiture provided "handles for identification" between spectators and subjects, other photos furnished dramatic visual metaphors by which social, economic, and environmental problems, primarily those afflicting America's heartland, were made legible to the urban middle class. In a grainy print, a man and his son are seen "Fleeing a Dust Storm" in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. A family—its worldly possessions piled in a small wagon—trudges along a barren highway, graphic evidence of social displacement. A hastily dug grave with a rough-hewn headstone, a common dinner plate atop the mound of dry, recently shoveled earth, provides silent testimonial to a casualty along the road. A ramshackle triple-decker building with a muddy backyard presents a vivid demonstration of substandard housing. A crude sign for a twenty-cent flophouse becomes a marker of general want. A black man sipping from a "colored" water barrel in the South points to the legacy of embedded racial segregation that—with proper attention—might also be remedied. A "Christmas Dinner in Iowa," captures four raggedy children, sitting in a leaky cabin, eating their scanty holiday meal out of a rusty, chipped bowl.

Contextualizing the portraits of people and their dire circumstances were photographs that collectively amplified a broad panorama of everyday life. Many were of exteriors that told important American stories: decrepit cabins and outbuildings on a plantation where children and grandchildren of slaves continued to live, street scenes in small towns where unemployed men wiled away their days, rural churches where the forgotten kept their faith and gave their thanks to God, dilapidated small-town general stores where both merchants and customers eked out a bare living, and local cafés where ordinary people came to eat and socialize.

Other photographs were of interiors, places where people lived and assembled their material culture. Evans produced many portraits of the simple implements of life—a washstand and kitchen table, a bucket, a chair, a bed, a fireplace, tin plates, laundry, a broom, and the decorations that poor people put on their walls. Despite the meagerness of these places and objects, Evans's camera offered them an almost reverential status as marks of authenticity.

What is striking about these images of everyday life—particularly when viewed in relation to the commercial imagery that had dominated in the twenties—is the marginal, sometimes ironic status of the commercial culture within them. The jerry-built shops that are seen in many street scenes, for example, display the signage of big business—GULF Oil, Coca-Cola, NEHI sodas, Dr. Pepper, Budweiser, "Grand Prize"—but in these photographs the signs were divested of their merchandising luster. In their black-and-white positiveness, they now testified to the extent to which the culture of prosperity and its once buoyant symbols stood in a state of disrepair.

In many of the interiors, as well, symbols of the commercial culture—magazine advertisements or promotional calendars—are revealed as tattered debris, scraps of paper pasted on the wall to keep inclement weather from leaking through cracks between the timbers or in a makeshift gesture toward decoration. Against the walls of broken hovels, the promises of the consumer culture furnished stunning proof of their own emptiness. These pictures served to underscore bitter distinctions between commercially promulgated ideals and the realities of peoples lives.

The visual ironies, like the diverse portrayal of Americans themselves, provided a defining thread in much FSA photography. These pictures' visual style employed a language of contradiction. The photographs celebrated America while rejecting an American national culture based on the religion of "prosperity" and commercial images. In short, they encouraged people to rethink what business as usual really meant.

In the early 1920s, Lippmann had theorized that people's worldviews were framed by illusory "pictures in their heads." These pictures, he argued, were guided by culturally determined stereotypes—mental templates that gave form and meaning to people's experiences. Throughout the twenties, such thinking had guided an exuberant generation of image managers, publicists who industriously erected a stereotype of democracy that was founded on the ideas of *consumer choice* and *middle-class prosperity*.

By the mid-1930s, in the wake of economic collapse and fostered by a generation of revisionist image makers, the prevailing stereotype

of American democracy had changed. It was more inclusive, it upheld an ideal of universal rights, and it cited the dire needs of regular people—poor farmers, industrial laborers, the unemployed—as the ultimate index of the common good.

With this change in stereotype, the idiom of visual publicity itself had been transfigured. If twenties publicists had mounted elaborate retail dramas, with new consumer goods occupying center stage, the dramas being staged by New Deal publicity were human dramas, with unadorned and ordinary people at their center. In the twenties, image makers had consciously exploited the realm of fantasy; the new generation used images to evoke a sense of the real, albeit a real that was deliberately devised to deliver a powerful emotional punch.[48]

This new social aesthetic was not simply the creation of RA/FSA photographers. Like the visual oratory of prosperity, it was a product of its time. It derived from the overwhelming realities of the Great Depression. But from 1935 onward, the photographs coming out of the Historical Section increasingly created poignant opportunities for Americans to see themselves and their needs anew.

The simple existence and style of the images, of course, did not create these opportunities. A basic element of Stryker's mission was the wide dissemination of his agency's photographs, particularly aimed at the middle-class electorate whose sympathies were essential to the political viability of New Deal policies.

At first, the taking and collecting of photographs took precedence over their exhibition. Within a year, however, display had become a prime objective.

The first major exhibition of the photographs came at the 1936 Democratic convention. With the New Deal under continuing attack from business and the political Right, the pictures' outspoken depiction of a devastated heartland and their remarkable pathos forcefully seconded a radically democratic party platform that declared:

> We hold this truth to be self-evident—that government in a modern civilization has certain inescapable obligations to its citizens, among which are: (1) Protection of the family and the home; (2) Establishment of a democracy of opportunity for all the people; (3) Aid to those overtaken by disaster.[49]

The national attention began to snowball. At an annual photo exhibition sponsored by U.S. Camera in 1936, four pictures by Historical Section photographers were included. Shortly, the College Art Association, a national organization of art educators, sponsored a traveling collection of the pictures.[50] The photographers were becoming prominent, and their pictures were being venerated as important works of modern art.

At no time was this artistic celebration more evident than in April 1938, when the First International Exposition of Photography was held at the Grand Central Palace in New York. In the show, organized around the theme, "How American People Live," a selection of FSA photos were prominently featured. Among the seven thousand visitors on the first day, the impact of these pictures was clearly overwhelming. One after another, in written responses to the show, visitors cited the power of the pictures, their ability to convey what one visitor termed the "real life of a vast section of the American people."[51]

A growing number of institutions were making use of the FSA pictures. Post offices exhibited them as symbols of the government's compassion. Libraries offered them as educational materials for readers. Museums displayed them as art. University classes in economics and sociology employed them as instructional tools. As the success of the photographs became evident, FSA staffers were asked to take on publicity assignments on behalf of other governmental agencies.[52] Stryker's operation was providing a visual standard for the New Deal's rendition of American society.

The impact of the FSA, however, reached beyond institutions of art, education, and government. Between 1938 and 1940, the photographs began to appear, more and more, in the commercial media, often without credit. Among the national magazines with large middle-class readerships in which FSA pictures appeared were *Time, Life, Look, Newsweek, Saturday Evening Post, Survey Graphic, Colliers, McCall's, Fortune, Nation's Business, Today, Literary Digest*, and *Current History*, among others. The photos appeared in more specialized journals, like the *Birth Control Review* and *Junior Scholastic*, as well. They showed up in big-city dailies—the *New York Times* used the pictures routinely—and in small-town weeklies.[53] Even if it was often unattributed, FSA's visual epic of America was becoming a conspicuous element in the culture-at-large.

Stryker's lack of proprietary instinct assisted this progression. Whereas a leader of a *commercial enterprise* might have fought to keep his company's product from being used without proper identification, Stryker's sense of *social enterprise* led him in the opposite direction. "The basic need was to get the pictures before the public," explained Hurley, "direct publicity for his own group was a secondary consideration." This stance, Stryker's willingness to see FSA photos stand as nothing more than social facts, clearly assisted in the dissemination of the FSA's rendition of America.

In many ways, the American mass media actively participated in the promulgation of the FSA way of seeing. Magazines not only used FSA images directly, they also began to hire FSA photographers or photographers with an akin sensibility to produce photo essays for their pages. Evans and Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* for example, began as an assignment for Henry Luce's *Fortune* magazine. Margaret Bourke-White, who became a celebrated *Life* magazine photographer, had taken pictures for a 1930 reissue of Tugwell and Stryker's *American Economic Life.* Many of her late-thirties images, as well, simulated an FSA aesthetic.

An FSA-like portrait of America also seeped into Hollywood films to some extent. Even before Stryker's work at the RA commenced, documentary-style portrayals of destitution were beginning to appear. Mervyn LeRoy's 1932 classic, *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang,* has the feel of the FSA photos, and LeRoy and Busby Berkeley's *Gold Diggers of 1933* ends with a mournful tribute to "the forgotten man." King Vidor's 1934 film, *Our Daily Bread,* not only anticipated the Historical Section's visual style but, in its receptive depiction of an agricultural cooperative, corresponded with some of the RA's and FSA's utopian experiments. Fritz Lang's *Fury* (1936) and Mervyn LeRoy's *They Won't Forget* (1937) both wrestled with the problem of southern lynchings using a naturalistic style. In 1940, *The Grapes of Wrath*—in which Henry Fonda and the salt of the earth would finally meld—borrowed conspicuously from the FSA in its focus on rural displacement and in its aesthetic intonation. *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) and other films bore the imprint of Stryker's enterprise.

What Steichen termed the "simple blunt directness" of the FSA photos, however, was undeniable. The photos' ability to leave a viewer with what he defined as the "feeling of a living experience" magnified

the impact of photojournalism. Ironically, in a business in which attracting readership was the name of the game and in an environment in which the FSA's kind of photography spoke to readers, it is little wonder that these problematically subversive images began to impregnate the establishment culture.

For many in the upper echelons of corporations and for the political Right, the combined impact of New Deal publicity was alarming—even more so than its precursor in the Progressive Era. During that earlier time, an anxious middle class served as a defensive buffer between corporate power and the wrath of the masses. This protection had solidified during the twenties, when the growth of consumer industries and the spirit of boosterism tied middle-class ideals to the hitching post of business. Now, it seemed, the fragile middle class and the "Hoe Man" had become allies, joined by the power and publicity of the federal government.