



The Great Depression: America 1929-1941

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One of the classic studies of the Great Depression, featuring a new introduction by the author with insights into the economic crises of 1929 and today.

In the twenty-five years since its publication, critics and scholars have praised historian Robert McElvaine's sweeping and authoritative history of the Great Depression as one of the best and most readable studies of the era. Combining clear-eyed insight into the machinations of politicians and economists who struggled to revive the battered economy, personal stories from the average people who were hardest hit by an economic crisis beyond their control, and an evocative depiction of the popular culture of the decade, McElvaine paints an epic picture of an America brought to its knees—but also brought together by people's widely shared plight.

In a new introduction, McElvaine draws striking parallels between the roots of the Great Depression and the economic meltdown that followed in the wake of the credit crisis of 2008. He also examines the resurgence of anti-regulation free market ideology, beginning in the Reagan era, and argues that some economists and politicians revised history and ignored the lessons of the Depression era.

The Great Depression: America 1929-1941 Details

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From Reader Review The Great Depression: America 1929-1941 for online ebook

Samsung says

gives excellent historical insight into economics, political cycles, and the time when people feared there'd be another Great Depression. Sound familiar?

Debbie Carlson says

I am reviewing the original version written in the 80s. It was a book I was supposed to have read in my college political history class. I actually didn't read it then, but kept the book believing I would some day. And so I finally did.

It was a fascinating read. I enjoyed the different viewpoints of the great depression from the various politicians to the average person to those from other nations. The author injects his opinions as well as other expert opinions. He doesn't hide his liberal thoughts and at times takes some good jabs at Reagan. I didn't agree with everything, for example, the idea that people tire of social programs and vote out politicians who advocate to the poor. I think it only looks that way on the surface. The conservatives have always fought against social programs, even fighting against FDR in all legislation to help the poor in the midst of the great depression. The author even mentioned that fact in the book. Also, people want change no matter what it is in politics. They hate change in the rest of their life, but their government must always be in constant change, I think because people are never satisfied with the state of the current government. I learned a lot from this book and will be looking at other books written by this author.

Ryan says

This was a great history of the Great Depression. I've previously read the first two volumes of Arthur Schlesinger's famous "Age of Roosevelt" series, but found it hard to read and process. This book, however, served as an even better overview. It discussed not only the various programs FDR initiated as part of the New Deal (AAA, NRA, Social Security, the SEC, the Wagner Act, etc), but also how well they worked, and why. The author dives into popular literature and films of the era to build a narrative of the public's changing values, from competition-based acquisitive individualism in the Roaring Twenties to cooperation-based economic moralism (which he differentiates very nicely from the communism and socialism ideologies that conservatives of the time feared were FDR's real goals).

This book also paints great portraits of the leading figures of the times: Calvin Coolidge, aloof, uninvolved, and happy during the great speculation-boom of the mid-'20s; Herbert Hoover, the dumbstruck pragmatist, whose attempts at economic rescue as the Depression started were forgotten and took most of the blame for Harding's and Coolidge's negligences; and Franklin Roosevelt, the skillful politician with a paternalistic streak, pragmatic, always tinkering, charming and warm-hearted, and smart enough to gauge the public's mood and jump in front of it.

The author describes how the FDR administration and the New Deal saved capitalism from the shock of its worst excesses by being pragmatic, and not ideologically rigid. It ends by concluding that nothing the New

Deal did ever cured the Depression (which only ended with the start of World War II), but that the emerging values of Depression-era America laid the groundwork for the U.S. government we know today.

The stock market fell another 500 points today. Yeah, it's timely.

Charles Potter says

Thoughtful reading.....

Erik Graff says

I picked this up at the Evanston Public Library a week ago and read it prior to meeting with up with my former professor, political economist Dave Schweickart. It was a quick, easy, enjoyable, well worth the time even though David and I never got around to discussing the topic of the book, the depression of 1929-41.

'The Great Depression' was, like WWII, influential in my household growing up. All the grownups had lived through both, at least as children and, of course, with German occupation and/or domestic rationing, the war was characterized by deprivation just like the years prior to it. Other than the stories and the oft-repeated phrase (and its variants) along the lines of 'you have no idea of how lucky you are!' the Depression lived on in my family in a number of ways. There was a general consciousness of how much everything cost. One did not flush the toilet unnecessarily 'because water costs money'; one did not have snacks or leave anything on one's plate; one did not receive an allowance, one did special chores for a pittance; one got a job once one turned sixteen or one went to summer school; one left home and became self-supporting at eighteen; and so on. There was no family support for college. There was no thought of such a thing and I was later amazed to find some students financially helped by their families. Consequently, the Depression also lives on in me. I'm notoriously frugal, cheap, penny-pinching, miserly...

But that's all legacy. This book is the real deal, an attempt to get at the period from both the top down and the bottom up, an account ranging from the White House and the Congress to the Hobo camps and Hoovervilles. As such, it is sympathetic, sympathetic to the victims and to the often hapless members of government attempting to come to grips with the crisis. As such, it is most certainly not sympathetic to the upper crust and to their representatives, Democrat or Republican, but increasingly Republican. Reading this book, written thirty years ago, is like listening to an extremely long speech by the junior senator from Vermont, Bernie Sanders. Reading this book, or similar accounts, would likely inspire many to vote for him.

The only flaws to this book are the repeated references to the administration of its time and their 'depression', i.e. to the Reagan presidency. While the comparisons may be substantially valid, they are given in the present tense, detracting from the historical tone of the rest of the text. Perhaps this was corrected in the other, later editions.

And, oh, yeah. Hardcover books at the Evanston Public Library are fifty cents. Dad would approve.

Jerry Smith says

I've been meaning to read more history of the US for ever - probably something that I should continue to do for ever as well as there is always more to learn and different angles to examine. Looking at the Great Depression through the lens of 80 years or so is interesting, although it should be noted that this book was first published 25 years ago. As well as providing inherent interest in events passed, history has a lot to teach us, should we care to listen. Most of the time of course, we choose not to do so.

McElvain clearly writes from a left wing viewpoint which is in some ways good for me since I share that worldview, but in other respects this doesn't get me as emotionally involved as is the case when I passionately disagree with a particular line of reasoning. I wish I could say that I sought alternative views more often but alas, I am not as enlightened in that area as I feel I should be. The new intro to this addition clearly ties the depression era to mistakes that were repeated during the 80s and continue to this day.

Wealth inequality is essentially the cause of the depression among a number of other things according to this analysis, and it is persuasive. The folly and fallacy of "trickle down" is laid bare here, although I am sure there will be many a reader who hankers after the apparently halcyon days of Reagan when he tried it in the 80s. Clinton is also rightly criticized for signing legislation to untie merchant and retail banking that was originally put in place to prevent many of the worst excesses of the 1920s. We saw the results of these policies in the early 21st Century but I doubt we will learn from that either.

The early chapters of the book were more interesting to me than the latter, which concentrated more on what life was like during the Depression and it was just that: depressing. Often leading to many social ills and personal despair. We must try to avoid another episode like that but I sadly fear that it will come again. Interesting book, somehow I found it rather heavy going and I am not sure why. Probably more to do with the reader than the author.

Shirley says

probably would have enjoyed it more if i wasn't reading it for my social IA

Sara W says

Due to the current economic crisis, I decided to give this book another try. What seemed boring a few years ago seems pretty damn relevant now!

Original Review: I did not finish this book. I was looking for a social history about the Great Depression and this was more of a political history, so I found it pretty boring. I much preferred The Worst Hard Time for a social history about the Great Depression.

Josh Stewart says

A terrific look into the decade plus that made up the depression. Definetly gives one a feel for the dire

situation that Americans faced during this time period. Also highlights the many factors that lead to the depression. A good read for those interested in politics and economics, it will enlarge your understanding of these two subjects.

Corban Ford says

A very even, thorough, and readable account of one of the the greatest economic crisis ever. From the beginning in 1929 all the way to it's effective finish in 1941, McElvaine looks at the depression from a broad lens, analyzing its effects from a cultural, political and historical standpoint. This is one of the classic studies of the Great Depression and one that I enjoyed reflecting on.

Emory Dunn says

Read for my film/history class. Extremely detailed, sometimes a little too much. Learned a lot about The Great Depression that I did not know before.

Gregory Blecha says

Having just read "The Forgotten Man" by Amity Shlaes, and "The Great Depression" by Robert McElvaine, back-to-back, I have the opportunity to compare how both authors treat this complex topic.

What struck me is that Shlaes' approach seems to be "top-down" while McElvaine's approach is "bottom-up". McElvaine sprinkles into his text the correspondence from ordinary Americans to the Roosevelts; the language is rich, heartfelt, evocative, and infuses the text with a deep sense of melancholy. Shlaes focuses more on the major players, people in a position of power, thought leaders.

Both authors approach the topic of the New Deal from diametric economic and political camps. McElvaine's commentary is definitely biased toward a liberal belief in government. His swipes at President Reagan may seem anachronistic (I believe the book was published in the early eighties, and then re-published in the early nineties) so Reagan-bashing may have been more au courant at the time, but now it seems like cheap jabs. Fortunately, these remarks are not too distracting.

Shlaes makes a strong case that the New Deal was coincident to the easing of the economic downturn, while McElvaine plays both sides - he attributes the New Deal as "saving capitalism" but as having little influence on ending the Depression.

Both books emphasize the experimental nature of FDR's attempts at righting the economy, and ascribe much of the direction of the New Deal to political rather than economic forces. Both books are required reading for the student who wishes to understand how America changed from the Roaring Twenties to the Great Depression.

Billy says

Like Kennedy, sympathetic towards Hoover, but argues that Hoover's failures led to the acceptance of later New Deal programs which broke with Hoover's anti-government in business stance. Still, Hoover pioneered programs for business and agriculture relief, although in these forms the federal government did more organizing than intervening. McElvaine uses letters from ordinary Americans to show how much they supported Roosevelt. With the Great Depression came a new acceptance of cooperation between workers and intellectuals that could not occur in the 1920s. American workers, confused at the prolonged Depression and in shock that so much wealth could be lost, blamed themselves. Most were reluctant to seek help from the government. By 1935, resentment displaced self-blame. Soon, relief recipients felt entitled.

McElvaine's 1993 revised introduction adds much to Great Depression Historiography. He primarily compares the 1980s with the 1920s and 1930s to show just how much the New Deal Era has drastically changed American life. First, he notes that the stock market crash of 1987, while only a blip on the economic radar, accounted for a greater single day loss than any day of the Great Depression. He argues that America did not plummet into depression in the 80s because of Republican deficit spending which far exceeded any deficit spending of previous Republican administrations. Rhetorically, Reagan-era Republicans attacked the welfare state, but continued to spend upwards of \$200 billion per fiscal year. Next, consumption has become so engrained in the American way of life that after the 1987 crash, nobody recoiled from consumption as they did in the 1930s. In fact, FDR and Reagan are similar in that they both popularly had "the government do much more than they asked the people to pay for." (xix) While during the middle part of the 20th century, democrats rampantly taxed and then spend. Reagan countered this by BORROWING, and then spending. Except, of course, Reagan did not spend on social programs, make a clean break with liberalism.

If TR used Herbert Croley's idea of Hamiltonian means (big gov't) to ensure Jeffersonian ends (uplifting the poor), and FDR used Jeffersonian biases (intellectuals) to reach Jacksonian ends (improving the "common man"), Reagan used FDR's deficit spending to uplift the well to do (Hamiltonian). Reagan and Hamilton loved to pay back interest payments, because those payments went to the American rich. Taxes then transfer wealth from the middle class to the rich. This is exactly what happened during the 1980s.

In Short:

Major differences between the 30s and 90s are

- End of Communism
- Rise of Consumption (without hesitation)
- Deficit spending even by Republicans

Tom Hill says

This book is well written and very interesting. My only complaint is that the author is obviously a liberal democrat and all his analysis of the people and events of this time are filtered through this ideology. Liberal, or progressive is good, conservative is bad and the root of all evil. His admiration for FDR and disdain for Ronald Reagan comes through loud and clear. Although he makes some good points, his lack of a balanced approach makes most of his conclusions less than convincing. He does, however, seem to have found a believer in the current White House occupant. Let us hope it does not take another World War to achieve for

the economy what his policies have not.

Jim Dowdell says

very political and liberal mostly about FDR but covers social issues well
