

## THE NEW NEGRO AND THE NEW DEAL

John Hope Franklin

When Franklin D. Roosevelt became President of the United States on March 4, 1933, the economic condition of the nation could best be described as alarming. Everywhere there were signs of economic decay and deterioration as unemployment figures mounted and as the nation's major industries and financial houses closed their doors.<sup>1</sup> For some groups, such as farmers and Negroes, the suffering brought on by the crash of 1929 and the subsequent depression was not a new experience. All during the previous decade they had felt the pinch of economic privation, the farmers as a result of the collapse of world markets and declining prices and the Negroes as a result of the persistent rejection of their services as industrial laborers and the exploitation of them as agricultural workers. By 1933 the Negro's position in American life was more than critical. It was desperate. Added to the economic sufferings were the humiliating denials of the elemental rights as American citizens, denials as old as the nation itself.<sup>2</sup> Now, in the midst of the worst depression in modern times, ingenious Americans had come forward with techniques by which Negroes were discriminated against, even among the unemployed. The shabby treatment they received in the improvised bread lines and soup kitchens was enough to disillusion even the most sanguine among them.<sup>3</sup>

As the Roosevelt administration undertook the gigantic task of raising the country from the depths of depression it took cognizance, albeit rather slowly, of the importance of giving special attention to the plight of the Negro. Utilizing, first of all, the services of a young white Southerner, Clark Foreman, as Adviser on the Economic Status of Negroes in the Department of the Interior, the administration moved into a period of utilizing the services of Negroes as advisers on such matters. Thus, there began to converge on Washington a considerable number of Negroes who were destined to play roles of varying degrees of importance in working out a New Deal for Negroes. They were appointed to posts in the Department of Labor, the Civilian Conservation Corps, the National Youth Administration, the Department of Agriculture, and in numerous other regular and emergency agencies of the federal government.<sup>4</sup> Others entered the federal service for brief periods to participate, in a peripheral manner, in the development of some new program or to perform tasks of research and writing for the Roosevelt government.

One of the striking things about the personnel of the Negro New Dealers was the absence, for the most part, of those persons who, in the previous decade, had written and spoken so much about the nation's most pressing minority problem and who had played such an important part in the "New Negro Movement." <sup>5</sup> They had examined the Negro's place in the economic life of the nation. They had remarked on his political status. They had looked at the problem of class structure and the Negro's relation to it. They had commented at length on the Negro's coming of age intellectually. They had said this and much more in a remarkably felicitous manner. Where were they now?



Alain Locke had returned to his chair in philosophy at Howard after a brief sojourn at Fisk. Charles S. Johnson had left *Opportunity* magazine and had begun his significant sociological researches and writings at Fisk. E. Franklin Frazier was preparing to leave Fisk to continue at Howard the work that was to take him to the pinnacle of his profession. W. E. B. Du Bois, disillusioned with what seemed to be a fruitless struggle for first-class citizenship, was evolving a new approach. He was returning once more to the Deep South—to Atlanta—after an absence of twenty years, to pick up where he had left off in 1910, when he went to New York to edit the *Crisis*. There were a host of others: Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Walter White, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Jessie and Arthur Fauset, and Countee Cullen. They had gone their separate ways. Some continued to write. Some, if they could, passed over to the white world. Others passed on to the world beyond.

On the other hand the majority of the Negroes highly placed in the New Deal had not been especially articulate during the period of the New Negro movement. Some of them, however, such as Lester Granger of the National Urban League, had participated in programs designed to improve the status of Negroes in American life. Others, like Robert L. Vann of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, had assumed the role of spokesmen for Negroes and, more importantly, had supported the Democratic Party in the election of 1932.<sup>6</sup> Still others, like Robert C. Weaver, William H. Hastie, and William J. Trent, had only recently completed their formal education and brought to their assignments the kind of special skills rarely displayed by Negroes in public life. There were also college presidents, deans, and professors; labor leaders and social workers; politicians and opportunists. They were a curious assortment, welded together by their common interest in the problem of the Negro. But in those days Washington was attracting the strangest bedfellows in its desperate effort to improve the economic and social climate of the nation.<sup>7</sup>

The duties of these Negro New Dealers were at once numerous and ill-defined. Many relief and recovery measures administered by the agencies to which they were attached affected, or at least could affect, the great mass of Negroes in a very vital way. They were expected to provide information about numbers and conditions of Negroes that might be affected by certain measures and to offer suggestions regarding the way in which the programs could best be administered among Negroes. Seldom did they have the opportunity to see the total picture, and almost never did they have the opportunity to contribute to the total planning. They served, as a rule, in an advisory as distinguished from a policy-making capacity. As they sought to give advice without knowing all the facts or, at times, without even knowing what purposes the advice was supposed to serve, they found themselves in an almost impossible situation.

A rather significant part of their responsibilities was to serve as public relations officers between their agencies and the Negro world. Thus, they found themselves frequently trying to interpret to Negroes the implications of legislation and executive orders without having been adequately briefed on them. Although they might not always be expected to do so, they also wanted to represent the views, desires, and protests that Negroes registered with them. This

was an almost thankless and hopeless task. Frustrations abounded; everywhere there were numerous efforts to circumvent the laws as they might apply favorably to Negroes; and sensitive Negroes, failing to understand what the Negro New Dealers were doing about such matters, accused them of selling the race short.<sup>8</sup>

Occasionally these strategically placed Negro leaders would get together to discuss their mutual problems. On such occasions the agenda was long, and the sessions were longer. They would hear how Negro tenant farmers were not getting their cash benefits under the Agricultural Adjustment Act because white landlords cashed the checks and dared them to complain. They would hear how the Farm Security Administration was assisting thousands of Negroes in purchasing their farms but would probably be liquidated because many Southern members of the Congress claimed that it was subversive. The growing independence of Negro tenant farmers was conclusive proof, to many, that it was subversive! They would hear of the rather significant developments in agencies like the National Youth Administration and the Civilian Conservation Corps, where Negroes were advancing toward policy-level positions and from which the rank and file of Negroes were receiving large benefits. They would hear of the construction of low cost housing for Negroes but would be sickened by news of numerous local discriminatory policies and by the refusal of the New Deal housing agencies to whip local officials into line.<sup>9</sup>

These Negro New Dealers would also discuss strategy. How could they press for economic and political equality for Negroes when their own positions were largely jim-crow positions? How could they impress upon their superiors the need for action to relieve jobless Negroes, when the descriptions of their own jobs carefully limited the area of their own discretion and authority? How could they convey to their superiors that the "Jobs-for-Negroes" campaigns in the larger Northern cities and the struggles of Negroes to crack the labor unions could deteriorate into something quite unfortunate if the government took no cognizance of these legitimate aspirations? How could they function effectively in behalf of Negroes within the proscriptive framework of their positions? It was always the framework, some of them thought. There were always these frustrations, these deaf ears, this red tape. Some wondered if *anything* could be accomplished within the framework. There was the framework of discrimination, about which the New Deal said all too little, and the framework of segregation, about which it said nothing.

What was needed clearly was an invocation of the spirit of the New Negro, the kind evinced in McKay's "If We Must Die," in Cullen's "From the Dark Tower," and in Frazier's "The Pathology of Race Prejudice." During the most critical, economic emergency the nation had ever known, who was there to tell the demagogues, as McKay had done, that Negroes had some pride and self-respect? Who was there to tell the not-so-fair New Dealers, as Cullen had told an earlier group, that Negroes were not made eternally to suffer and to weep, while others enjoyed the fruits of their labors? Who was there to tell the Southern racists, as Frazier had done, that segregation and discrimination are a form of insanity just as surely as dementia praecox is? <sup>10</sup>



There were some efforts to revive the spirit of the New Negro, but they cannot be regarded as highly successful. The Joint Committee on National Recovery, founded in the early days of the New Deal and composed of more than a score of independent Negro organizations was bitterly critical of the New Deal's racial policies.<sup>11</sup> In the spring of 1935, the Joint Committee, in cooperation with the Division of the Social Sciences of Howard University, sponsored a conference in Washington to consider the plight of the Negro. Speakers at the Conference were, for the most part, highly critical of the New Deal's treatment of the Negro; and the Executive Secretary of the Joint Committee, John P. Davis, provided the conference with a great deal of information about the Negro under the New Deal based on his extensive travel and study of the situation. The report was almost uniformly unfavorable. Out of this conference grew the National Negro Congress. At the time of its first meeting in Chicago in February, 1936, the Congress presented some hope; but within a few years after its founding it disintegrated rapidly.<sup>12</sup> Negroes became suspicious of it long before the Committee on Un-American Activities and the Attorney General began to issue periodic lists of communist-tainted organizations. The Southern Negro Youth Congress seemed to recoup some of the energies and points of view of the New Negro for a while, but it soon dissipated its own energies by moving in too many directions at the same time.

The spirit of the New Negro "broke through" in some of the literary efforts of Negroes, some of whom were, at the time, employed on New Deal projects. During the time that Sterling Brown was Adviser on Negro Affairs of the Federal Writers' Project he wrote "Break of Day," a poem which bitterly described the violence that accompanied the competition between whites and Negroes for the few desirable jobs that existed in the South.<sup>13</sup> Margaret Walker, while working on the Chicago Federal Writers' Project, wrote "For My People," which called for a "bloody peace" to be written in the sky and asked that a "race of men now rise and take control!"<sup>14</sup> While these vigorous protests against existing conditions won deserved praise from the critics, they do not seem to represent the general attitudes taken by articulate Negroes during the period of the New Deal.

If the Negro New Dealers seldom pursued the lines of thought and plans of action called for by the New Negro, they cannot be disparaged or severely criticized for dereliction on this score. The responsibility which they bore called for an approach that was totally at variance with the framework in which the New Negro operated. They could not let their spirits roam, untrammelled and fearless. They could not afford to be abrupt in speech or precipitate in action. They had specific, if onerous tasks to perform; and they had to operate within a framework of political and economic expediencies. If they could get a few more jobs, a few more houses, and a few more farms for their people, they would have performed significantly in an orbit where their powers were so carefully defined and their experiences so severely limited.

Too often they solicited the aid of the lone Negro member of the Congress, Arthur W. Mitchell, who was in the unenviable position of representing all the Negroes of the United States as well as the populous south-side district in Chic-

ago. He was a Democrat—the first of his race ever to sit with that party in the Congress—but he could not always be helpful. Having only recently deserted the Republican Party himself, he was not high in the councils of the Democratic Party. And in the mid-thirties, when the control of his party was largely in the hands of Southerners, there was little likelihood that he would rise to a position where his influence in behalf of Negroes would be decisive.

Negro New Dealers would have been in a stronger position had they been supported with greater effectiveness by persons and groups who did not have to function within the proscribing framework of political agencies. In this regard the Negro press left a good deal to be desired. The high standards set by newspapermen like Robert S. Abbott and magazine editors like W. E. B. Du Bois were sagging under the pressures of the day. The Negro columnists, moreover, had come into their own. Frequently writing from Washington their views ranged over the whole spectrum of opinion and taste. Some wrote like Pearson, others like Pegler, others somewhere in between. Some of them were content to engage in gossip and rumor and to raise mysterious questions about what Black New Dealer was seen where and with whom. Editors, bending to the winds of political pressures, were vigorous in their praise or condemnation of the New Deal. Many of them saw much good in the New Deal; but some became somewhat apprehensive and critical when it appeared that new labor legislation might force them to pay higher wages to their own workers. While there were commendable features and aspects of the Negro press during the New Deal days, they did not keep alive the remarkable journalistic tradition of the twenties.<sup>15</sup>

Elsewhere in the country, conditions seemed more heartening than those which Negro New Dealers faced daily in Washington. One could see the determination of grass roots organizations in all parts of the country to fight for justice in a constructive and meaningful way.<sup>16</sup> Negroes were exhibiting a deep and abiding interest in the general improvement of their condition. They were insisting on a fair share of public housing, although segregated. They were assisting each other in making arrangements to purchase land under the Farm Security program.<sup>17</sup> They were holding mass meetings to protest police brutality and other forms of injustice. They were voting in increasing numbers, and where the suffrage was denied them they were resorting to court action in order to win for themselves this supreme function of citizenship.<sup>18</sup> Through court action, moreover, they were beginning the long, costly fight to secure equal opportunities in the field of education.<sup>19</sup>

In many parts of the country Negroes were finding new opportunities in industry. Thanks to the rise of new industrial unions under the sponsorship of the Congress of Industrial Organizations and to favorable New Deal labor legislation the working man in America was winning greater respectability and an even greater voice in shaping his own destiny. In the CIO Negroes were not only given new opportunities in employment but were expected to participate in the militant struggle to secure better working conditions for all labor.<sup>20</sup> Gradually, some of the unions affiliated with the American Federation of Labor adopted more liberal policies with respect to Negro membership and participation.<sup>21</sup>



By 1941 the New Deal was over. There had been much relief and recovery and some reform; but the pattern of race relations had not substantially changed. War clouds were already in evidence, and the government was retooling itself almost as rapidly as the nation's industries were. War would prove to be a much more effective catalytic agent in the modification of race relations than depression, unemployment, and New Deal reform had been. Negro New Dealers or their successors would find the climate of the 1940's much more congenial to a vigorous prosecution of a program for the improvement of the condition of Negroes than the 1930's had been. With greater experience and more propitious circumstances Negroes in positions of responsibility could be more uncompromising in the future than they had been.

To have expected, as some had done, that the New Negro movement could have been a vital force in the Negro's role in the New Deal was to have expected the impossible. To be sure, the New Negro movement and the New Deal had certain similarities. Both emerged out of deep needs resulting from tragic, almost cataclysmic experiences. Both were born amid confusion and frustration. Both displayed a freshness and a vigor in approach to problems that were both stimulating and inspiring. But there the analogy ended. The New Negro movement of the 1920's was both amorphous and undisciplined, while the New Deal, with all its confusion, had a political framework in which it was required to function. This gave it a form and direction which the New Negro movement never did acquire and never needed to. The New Negro movement was much too concerned with distant goals to give attention to the practical, immediate problems with which the New Deal was concerned. The latter, of necessity, involved too many compromises, too many concessions, to suit the spirit of the New Negro. The Negro of the thirties, however, was in a mood to go along with the New Deal. McKay's "If We Must Die" was all right, perhaps, but living was much more important, if the fight was to continue, even if one did not get all he was entitled to under the WPA.

In one way or another thousands of Negroes were beneficiaries of the New Deal. An increasing number had become federal government workers; more were employed in industry; and more were getting a fair share of the fruits of their labors on the farms. What was even more important, the New Deal had sustained Negroes in their darkest hour. The material sustenance and survival which the New Deal provided made it possible for Negroes to take new courage in their fight for first-class citizenship in the 1940's. With a new political sophistication and with renewed vigor they carried on a fight in the forties that combined the idealism of the New Negro days with the realism of the New Deal days. It could be seen in the uncompromising stand of William H. Hastie as the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War, in the Detroit and New York riots, in the March on Washington, in the "Double V" campaign of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and in dozens of other ways. With the happy combination of the experiences of two highly important decades, victory for Negroes could not be far off.

<sup>1</sup> Vivid descriptions of the condition of the country during these years are given in Dixon Weeter, *The Age of the Great Depression* (New York, 1945), pp. 1-49 and Arthur S. Link, *American Epoch* (New York, 1955), pp. 352-373.

<sup>2</sup> John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of American Negroes* (New York, 1947), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1943), I, 352 ff., and Franklin, *op. cit.*, p. 488.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 519 ff. and Roi Ottley, *New World A-Coming* (New York, 1943), pp. 255 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York, 1925) and Sterling Brown and others, eds., *The Negro Caravan* (New York, 1941).

<sup>6</sup> Henry L. Moon, *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote* (New York, 1948), p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Link, *op. cit.*, pp. 381 ff. and Franklin, *op. cit.*, pp. 520 ff.

<sup>8</sup> In 1934, for example, one observer commented: "We have been waiting for some time to hear from all those distinguished colored men recently incarcerated in Roosevelt's New Deal. Where are they? What are they doing? What are their plans? For God's sake, say something! It's cold and silent out here." *Crisis*, XLI (April, 1934), 93.

<sup>9</sup> At times, however, they were apologetic and optimistic. See John P. Murchison, "The Negro and Low-Rent Housing," *ibid.*, XLII (July, 1935), 199, and Robert C. Weaver, "The New Deal and the Negro: A Look at the Facts," *Opportunity*, XLIII (July, 1935), 200-202. The Murchison article was inspired, in part at least, by the bitter attacks on the New Deal made at the conference at Howard University in May, 1935. See below, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup> The McKay and Cullen poems and the Frazier article are reprinted in Brown and others, *The Negro Caravan*, pp. 350, 352, and 904 ff.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the articles written by John P. Davis, the Executive Secretary of the Joint Committee: "NRA Codifies Wage Slavery," *Crisis*, XLI (October, 1934), 298; "Blue Eagles and Black Workers," *New Republic*, LXXXI (November 14, 1934), 7-9; and "A Black Inventory of the New Deal," *Crisis*, XLII (May, 1935), 141, in which Davis suggested the organization of a National Negro Congress.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the beginnings of the Congress see Myrdal, *op. cit.*, II, 817-819, and E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro in the United States* (New York, 1949), p. 534.

<sup>13</sup> Brown's poem first appeared in "Federal Poets: An Anthology," *New Republic*, XCV (May 11, 1938), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Brown and others, *Negro Caravan*, pp. 409-410.

<sup>15</sup> One of the first serious setbacks the New Deal received among Negroes was when Robert L. Vann, editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and Assistant to the Attorney General, resigned his post and returned to the Republican Party in 1936. Other Negro journalists who were critical of the New Deal were Louis Luntier, John P. Davis, and George S. Schuyler.

<sup>16</sup> See the work of the Emergency Advisory Council for Negroes in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in fighting local discrimination in the FERA, *Opportunity*, XLIII (July, 1935), 223; and the account of the mass meeting of the Negro Workers' Council in Pittsburgh in *ibid.* (August, 1935), 255.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Stener, *The Negro's Share* (New York, 1943), pp. 185 ff., 295 ff., and 310 ff. and Robert C. Weaver, *The Negro Ghetto* (New York, 1948), pp. 141 ff.

<sup>18</sup> Moon, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-116.

<sup>19</sup> See the Yearbook issue of the *Journal of Negro Education*, "The Courts and Racial Integration in Education," XXI (Summer, 1932).

<sup>20</sup> Horace R. Cayton and George S. Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions* (Chapel Hill, 1939), pp. 190 ff. and 257 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York, 1944), pp. 237-238.