

The Story of American Freedom

ERIC FONER

1998



W · W · Norton & Company

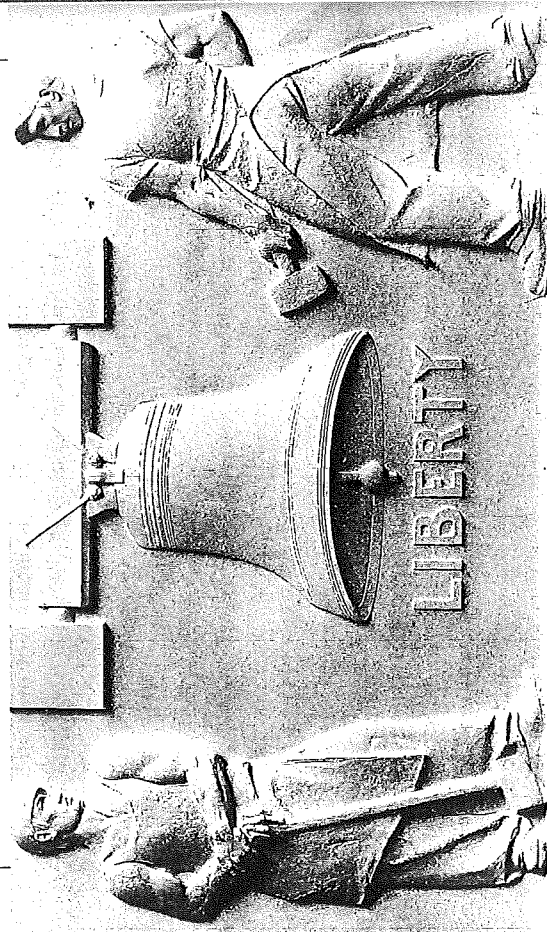
New York London

9

The New Deal and the Redefinition of Freedom

THE STOCK MARKET CRASH of 1929 plunged the United States into the greatest economic and social crisis in its history. By 1932, the gross national product had fallen by one-third, prices by nearly half, and over 15 million Americans—25 percent of the labor force—could not find work. For those who retained their jobs, wages fell precipitously; not until 1940 would they regain the level of 1929. One-third of the nation, said Franklin D. Roosevelt, who assumed the presidency in 1933, was ill-housed, ill-clothed, and ill-fed. Hungry men and women lined the streets of major cities; thousands more inhabited the ramshackle shanty towns called Hoovervilles that sprang up in parks and on abandoned land. With the future shrouded in uncertainty, the birth rate fell to the lowest level in the nation's history.¹

No part of American society was left untouched by the crisis. The Depression spawned a political revolution, sweeping from power the Republicans who had controlled the presidency since 1896 except for Woodrow Wilson's two terms, and inaugurating a long period of Democratic hegemony. Under Roosevelt's guidance, the Democratic Party was transformed from a bastion of localism and states' rights into a broad coalition of farmers, industrial workers, the reform-minded urban middle class, liberal intellectuals, and, somewhat incongruously, the white-supremacist South, all committed to federal intervention to reconstruct the economy and provide Americans with social security.



In the realist style characteristic of 1930s art on both sides of the Atlantic, a sculpture by Arturo Piccirilli, commissioned by the Works Progress Administration for the Whitman, Massachusetts, post office, depicts two muscular laborers as ringers of the Liberty Bell. (National Archives)

Southern power in Congress meant that the boundaries of American freedom would continue to be defined by race. But the empowering of the new immigrants through their active participation in a resurgent labor movement and the New Deal's political coalition went a long way toward recasting the definition of American nationality.

The Great Depression made inevitable, in the words of one historian, a "reckoning with liberty." For too many Americans, Roosevelt proclaimed, "life was no longer free; liberty no longer real; men could no longer follow the pursuit of happiness." The "American Way of Life," that ebullient slogan of the consumer culture of the 1920s, took on a hollow ring. Americans, the Lynds discovered when they revisited Muncie, Indiana, in the mid-1930s, still believed themselves "the freest people in the world." But the Depression discredited the idea that social progress rested on the unrestrained pursuit of wealth and transformed expectations of government, reinvigorating the Progressive conviction that the national state must protect Americans from the vicissitudes of the marketplace. It elevated "social citizenship"—a broad public guarantee of economic security—to the forefront of American discussions of freedom. When Irwin Edman, a popular writer on philosophy and aesthetics, in 1941 published a survey of democratic thought from the ancient world to the twentieth century, he concluded that what distinguished his own time was its awareness of "the social conditions of freedom." Thanks to the Depression, "economic security" had "at last been recognized as a political condition of personal freedom."²

Security and Freedom

Like the Civil War, the New Deal recast the idea of freedom by linking it to the expanding power of the national state. But now, economic security, not the civil and political rights of the former slaves and their descendants, dominated discussions of freedom. "Our democracy," wrote John A. Ryan, "finds itself . . . in a new age where not political freedom but social and industrial freedom is the most insistent cry."³ During the 1930s, the federal government took up this responsibility, laying the foundations, in the name of greater freedom, for a broadly based American welfare state. The pathbreaking legislation of the 1930s arose from the historical conjuncture of an unprecedented economic crisis, the coming to power of men and women long committed to government-sponsored reform, and a popular mobilization demanding far-reaching economic and social change.

Many Americans reacted to the Depression with resignation or blamed themselves for economic misfortune. Others responded with protests at first spontaneous and uncoordinated, since unions, socialist organizations, and other groups that might have provided disciplined leadership had been decimated during the 1920s. Armed farmers blocked roads to protest low farm prices and to prevent foreclosures by banks. Twenty thousand unemployed World War I veterans descended on Washington, D.C., in the spring of 1932 to demand early payment of a bonus due in 1945, only to be driven away by federal soldiers. Throughout the country, the unemployed demonstrated for jobs and public relief, an early indication of a shift in attitudes toward the government's responsibility for underwriting economic progress.⁴

Franklin D. Roosevelt's election as president in 1932 did much to rekindle hope among those who called themselves, in the words of a worker writing to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, "slaves of the depression." Indeed, Roosevelt's inauguration unleashed a flood of poignant letters to the federal government describing what a Louisiana sugar laborer called the "terrible and inhuman condition" of many workers. "We have no freedom nor rights," wrote an employee of an Alabama textile mill. "Truly," a Detroit brass worker wrote the president, "there is such a thing as economic slavery." Roosevelt, declared another correspondent, should "be another Lincoln and free us from the slavery that we are in." "I believe that this country owes a living to every man, woman, and child," a New York City woman wrote to Harry Hopkins, administrator of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of the New Deal's public works agencies. "If it can't give us this living thru private industry it *must* provide for us thru government means. [This is] an inalienable right of every person living under this government."⁵

The 1930s produced a plethora of books and essays on freedom. The large majority took for granted that individualism as a coherent philosophy was outmoded and that the Depression had made a new definition of liberty imperative. Influenced by Ryan, the National Catholic Welfare Conference in 1935 abandoned the church's traditional hostility to federal intervention in the economy, declaring that "social justice" required a government guarantee of continuous employment and a "decent livelihood and adequate security" for all Americans. A number of works bore the title *Land of the Free*, often employed ironically. In one such volume, Archibald MacLeish juxtaposed Farm Security Administration photographs of migrants, refugees, and impoverished sharecroppers with his own poetry to question the reality of freedom in desperate times. "We told ourselves we were free," he wrote. Now, "we wonder if the liberty is done . . . or if there's something different men can mean by Liberty."

duction industries ignored by the AF of L. The mid- and late thirties were an era of heroic labor militancy. Aided by a federal government for the first time openly taking the side of labor, the CIO wrested contracts from the nation's most powerful corporations, finally winning the decades-long battle for unionization in basic industries. In tightly controlled industrial towns scattered across the nation, CIO organizers spread the message that the "political liberty for which our forefathers fought" had been "made meaningless by economic inequality" and "industrial despotism." With the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and the Wagner Act two years later offering statutory recognition of workers' right to collective bargaining, the union became an emblem of citizenship. "We are free Americans," declared the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee. "We shall exercise our inalienable rights to organize into a great industrial union."

Building on the idea, so prominent in the 1920s, that an American standard of living based on mass consumption was the key to prosperity, CIO leaders explained the Depression as the inevitable result of an imbalance of wealth and income. One-tenth of 1 percent of the population in 1929 earned as much as the bottom 42 percent, making it impossible for society to absorb the products that rolled off modern assembly lines. The role of unions, in cooperation with the government, was to "create a consumer's demand" by raising wages and redistributing wealth, thus stimulating production and lifting the nation back to prosperity. Indeed, the pathbreaking 1937 agreement between the auto workers' union and General Motors spoke of a "rate of pay commensurate with an American standard of living." By mid-decade, the "underconsumptionist" explanation of the Depression was widely accepted among New Dealers, who drew from it the conclusion that the government must act to raise dramatically wage earners' share of the national income.⁷

But even more than the struggle for a living wage, the overriding concern of the labor uprising, as garment union leader Sidney Hillman declared, was the "quest for security." "The most marked trait of present life, economically speaking, is insecurity," Dewey wrote in 1930. The vast economic transformations of the past half century had woven insecurity into the fabric of working-class life, a situation the Depression greatly exacerbated. In the face of pervasive economic uncertainty and widespread resentment over the arbitrary and capricious authority of employers, union activists resurrected the Progressives' language of "economic freedom" and "industrial democracy," as well as an older vocabulary equating oppressive working conditions with "slavery." "Liberty" meant not only higher wages but stable and steady employment, an end to management's "dictatorship" on the shop floor, and recognition of the right



In this 1930 cartoon from the *Chicago Defender*, a black weekly, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters awakens a worker to the promise of economic freedom. (*Chicago Defender*, 25 Jan. 1930)

Americans, declared a writer in the journal *Christian Century*, had been "so busy defending a traditional . . . concept of freedom from governmental control" that they had forgotten that liberty can be protected "by the state" rather than needing protection from it. Such views were widely shared. A 1935 survey by *Fortune* magazine found that among poor respondents, 90 percent believed that the government should guarantee that "every man who wants work has a job." Freedom, John Dewey insisted in 1935, needed once more to be reconceptualized: "today, it signifies liberation from material insecurity."⁸

In the quest for economic freedom, the most striking development of the 1930s was the mobilization of millions of workers in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), founded in 1935 to organize laborers in mass pro-

to collective bargaining. Workers, declared one union newspaper, had "rights in the workshop as well as at the polls. . . . Can you really be free if they are not recognized and respected?" The Depression had brought in its wake the collapse of the "welfare capitalism" of the 1920s and a sharp increase in arbitrary discipline and dismissals. The coming of the union, said a member of New York City's transport workers' organization, enabled workers "to go to our bosses and talk to them like men, instead of . . . like slaves." The implementation in 1930s contracts of impartial grievance procedures and seniority systems governing hiring, firing, and promotions marked a major accomplishment of the CIO unions, stabilizing a chaotic employment situation and offering members a sense of dignity and freedom by ending what one union organizer called the "total submissiveness of worker to boss." "People were longing for some kind of security in their work," declared a local organizer for the auto workers union, and the CIO went a long way toward providing it.⁸

Throughout the nation's industrial heartland, the labor upsurge altered the balance of political and economic power and propelled to the forefront of politics labor's grievances—economic insecurity and pervasive inequality—and its goal of a fairer, freer, more egalitarian America. Unlike the AFL, with its traditional aversion to government intervention in labor-management relations, the CIO put forward an ambitious program for federal action to shield Americans from economic and social insecurity, complete with public housing, universal health care, and unemployment and old age insurance. Other mass movements of the mid-1930s also placed the question of economic justice, not just economic recovery, on the political agenda. In 1934, Huey Long, heir to Louisiana's populist and socialist traditions as well as the state's heritage of undemocratic politics, launched his Share-Our-Wealth movement. Long called for confiscatory taxes on the wealthy to finance an immediate grant of \$5,000 and a guaranteed minimum annual income for all Americans. In the same year, the "radio priest," Charles E. Coughlin, attracted millions of listeners by his attacks on Wall Street bankers and rapacious capitalists and his call for expanded public works and other measures to combat unemployment. (Coughlin's crusade would later shift to anti-Semitism and support for European fascism.) Meanwhile, Dr. Francis Townsend, a California physician, won wide support for a proposal that unemployed older Americans receive a monthly payment of \$200 from the government, with the requirement that they spend it immediately to stimulate the economy.⁹

Franklin D. Roosevelt did not enter office with a blueprint for dealing with the Depression or enhancing the social welfare. As the historian Richard Hofstadter pointed out, one searches Roosevelt's record in vain for a consistent in-

tellectual vision. Campaigning in 1932, he spoke of the government's responsibility to guarantee "every man . . . a right to make a comfortable living," yet simultaneously called for a balanced budget and offered few specific plans for economic recovery. A master improviser and brilliant political tactician, Roosevelt shifted course many times during his presidency. In 1933 and 1934, the New Deal concentrated on promoting agricultural and industrial recovery, reforming the banking system and securities industry, and providing emergency relief and public employment. Spurred by the failure of his initial policies to pull the country out of the Depression (and the Supreme Court's invalidation of some of these early measures), and the growing popular clamor for more sweeping measures, Roosevelt in 1935 launched the "second New Deal," with greatly expanded relief programs and a highly publicized tax on concentrated fortunes. The centerpiece, however, were the Wagner Act, which threw the government's support behind the right to collective bargaining, and Social Security, a complex system of unemployment insurance, old age pensions, and aid to the disabled and to dependent children. These were soon followed by appropriations for the construction of public housing and by the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which established a national minimum wage and limits on hours of work.¹⁰

Compared with the welfare states of social democratic Europe, the American version was far more decentralized and involved lower levels of public spending. It represented a dramatic departure, however, from the traditional functions of government in the United States. Taken together, these measures transformed the relationship of the federal government to the economy and citizenry and established much of the agenda of modern American liberalism. The federal government assumed a responsibility, which it has never wholly relinquished, for guaranteeing Americans a living wage and protecting them against economic and personal misfortune. The second New Deal forged a close and long-lasting marriage between the Democratic Party, organized labor, and the federal government, all committed to enhancing mass consumption and tam-ing the power of big business. "Laissez-faire is dead," wrote Walter Lippmann, "and the modern state has become responsible for the modern economy [and] the task of insuring the continuity of the standard of life for its people."¹¹

Along with being a consummate politician, Roosevelt was a master of political rhetoric. The first president to employ the radio to bring his message directly into American homes, he was particularly adept at appealing to traditional values in support of new departures. Thus, in urging passage of the wages and hours law, he invoked the rights of "free labor." Roosevelt consciously abandoned the term "progressive" and chose instead to employ "liberal" to de-



Signs carried by striking cotton mill workers in Lumberton, North Carolina, in 1937, illustrate the survival of the rhetoric of wage slavery. (Highlander Research and Educational Center)

scribe himself and his administration. In so doing, he transformed "liberalism" from a shorthand for weak government and laissez-faire economics into belief in an activist, socially conscious state, an alternative both to socialism and to unregulated capitalism. He also reclaimed the word "freedom" from conservatives and made it a rallying cry for the New Deal. "Freedom," declared the journalist Dorothy Thompson in a speech to the American Woman's Club in 1935, "has not been the word of our generation. We have talked instead of prosperity, of high standards of living, of recovery. . . . In the name of freedom every sort of injustice has been practiced." But as early as 1934, in his second "fireside chat," Roosevelt juxtaposed his own definition of "liberty" as "greater security for the average man" to the older notion of freedom of contract, which served the interests of "the privileged few." Henceforth, Roosevelt would consistently link freedom with economic security and identify entrenched economic inequality as its greatest enemy. At the height of the second New Deal, he made the election of 1936 a crusade against "economic royalists" and pledged that the federal government would establish a "democracy of opportunity for all the people." The "right to work" and the "right to live" were no less central to citizenship than "the right to vote," and the same federal government that protected "political freedom" had an obligation to act against "economic slavery." "The liberty of a democracy," he declared in 1938, was not safe if citizens were unable to "sustain an acceptable standard of living."¹²

In the mid-1930s, with urban working-class voters providing massive majorities for the Democratic Party and business large and small bitterly estranged from the New Deal, politics reflected class divisions more completely than at any other time in American history. Conceptions of freedom were sharply divided as well. Americans, wrote George Soule, editor of *The New Republic*, were confronted with "two opposing systems of concepts about liberty," reflecting "the needs and purposes of two opposing aggregations of the population." One was the old shibboleth of "freedom for private enterprise," the other a "socialized liberty" based on "an equitably shared abundance."

If Roosevelt invoked the word to sustain the New Deal, "liberty"—in its Gilded Age sense of limited government and laissez-faire economics—became the fighting slogan of his opponents. The principal conservative critique of the New Deal, which emanated from wealthy conservatives and from "populists" like Father Coughlin, was that it restricted American freedom. When conservative businessmen and politicians in 1934 formed an organization to mobilize opposition to the New Deal, they called it the American Liberty League. Robert Taft, leader of the Republican bloc in Congress, accused Roosevelt of leading the country down the road to communism by sacrificing "individual

freedom" in a misguided effort to "improve the conditions of the poor." Increasingly, the New Deal's opponents rallied around the slogan "freedom of enterprise" and opposed not only economic planning but all regulation of employment relations by the federal government.¹³

As the 1930s progressed, opponents of the New Deal invoked the language of liberty with greater and greater passion, convinced that the New Deal constituted the greatest threat to individual freedom in American history. Herbert Hoover launched ever more strident attacks on his successor for endangering "fundamental American liberties." Freedom, Hoover insisted, meant unfettered economic opportunity for the enterprising individual. Far from being an element of liberty, the quest for economic security was turning Americans into "lazy parasites" dependent on the state. For the remainder of his life, Hoover continued to call himself a "liberal," even though, he charged, the word had been "polluted and raped of all its real meanings." The fight for possession of the "ideal of freedom," the *New York Times* reported, was the central issue of the presidential campaign of 1936. Opposition to the New Deal planted the seeds for the later flowering of an antistatist conservatism bent on upholding the free market and dismantling the welfare state. But as Roosevelt's landslide reelection indicated, most Americans by 1936 had come to accept the view that freedom must encompass economic security, guaranteed by the government.¹⁴

Within a year of Roosevelt's reelection, the Supreme Court gave its imprimatur to this epochal shift in the meaning of freedom. Having earlier invalidated numerous pieces of New Deal legislation, major and minor, in the name of freedom of contract and states' rights, the Court in 1937 executed an astonishing about-face, spurred in no small measure by Roosevelt's sweeping reelection victory and his plan (rejected by Congress) to "pack" the Court with sympathetic judges. Beginning with a decision upholding the constitutionality of a state minimum wage law, the Court exhibited a remarkable new deference to economic regulation by both the states and the federal government. In ensuing decisions, it affirmed federal power to regulate wages, hours, child labor, agricultural production, and numerous other aspects of economic life. heralding the advent of a new judicial definition of freedom, Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes remarked that the words "freedom of contract" did not appear in the Constitution. "Liberty," however, did, and, Hughes continued, this required "the protection of law against the evils which menace the health, safety, morals, and welfare of the people."¹⁵

Roosevelt conceived of the second New Deal, and especially Social Security, as expanding the meaning of freedom by extending assistance to broad groups of needy Americans—the unemployed, elderly, and dependent—as a universal

right of citizenship, not charity or special privilege. His goal, according to Frances Perkins, was a broadly inclusive cradle-to-grave system of social provision that guaranteed every American a measure of economic security. But as enacted, New Deal measures were far from universal. Political realities—especially the enduring power of urban political machines in the North and black disenfranchisement in the South—powerfully affected the drafting of legislation. The result was a two-tiered system that offered generous, nationally established benefits to some Americans, primarily white and male, while leaving others with lesser entitlements or none at all.

The Social Security Act of 1935 encompassed a series of programs with divergent structures and target populations. The most generous—old age pensions and unemployment insurance—provided aid automatically and without the stigma of dependency. By linking benefits to taxes paid by eligible wage workers, these programs identified assistance as a right rather than charity. The payroll taxes were harshly regressive, but Roosevelt believed they gave contributors “a legal, moral, and political right to collect their pensions and their unemployment benefits,” which no future Congress could rescind. But this link to paid work eliminated most women, and the exclusion of agricultural, domestic, and casual laborers left uncovered the large majority of the employed black population.

Social Security also included public assistance programs, notably aid to dependent children and to the impoverished elderly. These were open to all Americans, regardless of race, who met a means test. But they set benefits at extremely low levels and authorized the states to determine eligibility standards, which in some instances included moral behavior as determined by local authorities. As a result, public assistance programs allowed for widespread discrimination in the distribution of benefits. Because recipients did not pay Social Security taxes, they soon came to bear the humiliating stigma of dependency on government handouts. The gap between the two programs widened in 1939, when wives, elderly widows, and dependent survivors of covered male workers were moved from general public relief into the Social Security system, leaving single mothers and the non-white poor to dominate what would come to be called “welfare.”¹⁶

Designed to alleviate poverty and economic insecurity, the Social Security law of 1935 established the key elements of federal social policy for the next half century. From the system's inception, boundaries of gender and race circumscribed the new definition of economic freedom. White male (and some female) workers were covered by different programs and benefits from non-white men and poor women and children. These boundaries of inclusion and exclu-

sion reflected prevailing social norms and political realities. The Depression had inspired widespread demands for married women to remove themselves from the labor market to make room for unemployed men. Indeed, many states and localities prohibited the hiring of women whose husbands earned a “living wage,” and employers from banks to public school systems adopted rules barring married women from jobs. Although the CIO organized women workers, it too adhered to the family wage tradition. “The working wife whose husband is employed,” said a vice president of the United Auto Workers, “should be barred from industry.” The Social Security Act institutionalized the assumption that in normal circumstances, the man was household head and economic provider, and the wife a homemaker. The large number of women still employed as domestics also enjoyed no benefits under Social Security. “Those who need protection most are completely overlooked,” the sister of a household worker complained to Secretary of Labor Perkins. “What about the poor domestics, both in private homes and private institutions. What have you done for them? Nothing.”¹⁷

Even more dramatic was how the power of the solid South helped to mold the New Deal welfare state into an entitlement of white Americans. Roosevelt spoke of the system's universality, but the demand for truly comprehensive coverage came from the political left and black organizations. Representing Minnesota's Farmer-Labor Party, Congressman Ernest Lundeen in 1935 introduced a bill establishing a federally controlled system of old age, unemployment, and health benefits (illness being a major cause of economic hardship completely ignored by Social Security) for all categories of wage workers, plus support for female heads of households with dependents. Recognizing the long-term dangers of relegating blacks to “welfare” programs, black organizations like the Urban League and NAACP supported the Lundeen bill and lobbied strenuously for a Social Security system that enabled agricultural and domestic workers to receive unemployment and old age benefits and that established national relief standards. The Social Security Act, however, not Lundeen's proposal, became law, and its limitations, complained the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black newspaper, reflected the power of “reactionary elements in the South who cannot bear the thought of Negroes getting pensions and compensations,” and who feared that the inclusion of black workers would disrupt the region's low-wage, racially segmented labor system.¹⁸

Despite his great personal popularity and political power, Roosevelt preferred to work within the Democratic Party's prevailing power structure and felt he could not frontally challenge the power of southern Democrats, who during the 1930s chaired about half the committees of Congress. In 1938, with many

southern congressmen turning against the New Deal (in large part out of fear that continued federal intervention in their region would upset race relations), Roosevelt tried to persuade voters to replace recalcitrant congressmen with more cooperative ones. The South's truncated electorate dealt him a stinging rebuke. In the end, because of the "Southern veto," non-white workers were confined to the weakest, least generous, and most vulnerable wing of the new welfare state. The National Resources Planning Board presciently noted in 1942 that because of their exclusion from programs "which give aid under relatively favorable conditions," blacks were becoming disproportionately dependent on "general relief," a program widely viewed with popular "disfavor." The situation, the report concluded, seemed certain to stigmatize blacks as recipients of "welfare," and welfare as a program for minorities, thus dooming it forever to inadequate "standards of aid."¹⁹

Overall, the Great Depression and the New Deal had a contradictory impact on black Americans. Hit hardest by the Depression, blacks benefited disproportionately from federal relief measures. Although Roosevelt seems to have had little personal interest in race relations or civil rights, he appointed Mary McLeod Bethune, a prominent black educator, as a special adviser on minority affairs and a number of other blacks to important federal positions. Key members of his administration, including his wife Eleanor and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, directed national attention to the injustices of segregation, disenfranchisement, and lynching. These developments contributed to a historic shift in black voting patterns. In the North and West, where they enjoyed the franchise, blacks in 1934 and 1936 abandoned their historic allegiance to the party of Lincoln in favor of Democrats and the New Deal. A "new day" had dawned, Bethune proclaimed, when blacks would finally reach "the promised land of liberty."²⁰

But hopes for broader changes in the nation's race system were quickly disappointed. Despite a massive lobbying campaign, a southern filibuster prevented passage of a federal antilynching law. Federal relief and public works employment were implemented in a blatantly discriminatory manner. In the South, many New Deal works projects refused to hire blacks. "They give all the work to white people and give us nothing," a black resident of Mississippi wrote the president in 1935. The New Deal began the process of modernizing southern agriculture, but tenants, black and white, footed much of the bill. Tens of thousands of sharecroppers were driven off the land as a direct result of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's policy of supporting crop prices by paying landowners to reduce cotton acreage. Landlords were supposed to share federal payments with their tenants, but many failed to do so. Eventually, sup-

port for civil rights would become an acid test of liberal credentials. But in the 1930s, there was no correlation between support for Roosevelt's economic program and support for antilynching legislation or moves to incorporate black workers within Social Security. Roosevelt gave no assistance to the antilynching initiative, and Theodore Bilbo, the notoriously racist senator from Mississippi, was one of the New Deal's most loyal supporters.²¹

Nowhere were the limits of New Deal freedom more evident than in the evolution of federal housing policy, which powerfully reinforced residential segregation. Owning one's home had long been a widely shared ambition in American society. "A man is not a whole and complete man," Walt Whitman had written in the 1850s, "unless he owns a house and the ground it stands on." Although the renter is, in some ways, "freer" than the owner, in the industrial age homeownership increasingly replaced ownership of productive property as an economic measure of freedom. More than an investment, a home was a mark of middle-class respectability, and, for workers, a form of economic security at a time of low wages, erratic employment, and limited occupational mobility. In the early twentieth century, immigrants invested heavily in ethnic building and loan associations in order to purchase homes. Indeed, on the eve of World War I, a considerably higher percentage of immigrant workers than the nativeborn middle class were homeowners.²²

The Depression devastated the American housing industry. The construction of new residences all but ceased and banks and savings and loan associations that had financed homeownership collapsed or, to remain afloat, foreclosed on many homes (a quarter of a million in 1932 alone). In 1931, President Hoover convened a Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership to review the housing crisis. Owning a home, the president proclaimed, was a "birthright" essential to "the national well-being," the embodiment of the spirit of "enterprise, of independence, and of . . . freedom." Rented apartments, Hoover pointed out, did not inspire "immortal ballads like *Home, Sweet Home*, or *The Little Gray Home in the West*." The conference revealed that millions of urban families lived in overcrowded, unhealthy slums, and millions of other Americans resided in ramshackle rural dwellings. Private enterprise alone, it seemed clear, was unlikely to solve the nation's housing crisis.²³

Despite Hoover's aversion to federal economic intervention, his administration established a federally sponsored bank to issue home loans. Not until the New Deal, however, did the government systematically enter the housing market. Roosevelt spoke of "the security of the home" as a fundamental right akin to "the security of livelihood, and the security of social insurance." In 1933 and 1934, his administration moved energetically to protect homeowners from

foreclosure and to stimulate new construction. The Home Owners Loan Corporation and Federal Housing Administration (FHA) insured millions of long-term mortgages issued by private banks. At the same time, the federal government itself constructed thousands of units of low-rent housing. Like Social Security, New Deal housing policy represented a remarkable departure from previous government practice. Thanks to the FHA and, later, the Veterans Administration, homeownership was brought within the economic reach of tens of millions of families. It became cheaper for most Americans to buy single-family homes than to rent.²⁴

Also like Social Security, housing policy was put into practice by local officials, who established a two-tiered system that reinforced existing racial boundaries. Many municipalities opted out of public housing altogether; nearly all, North as well as South, insisted that such housing be racially segregated. (In Texas, some communities financed three sets of housing projects—for whites, blacks, and Mexicans.) The FHA, moreover, had no hesitation about insuring, and sometimes insisted upon, mortgages with racially restrictive covenants, and resolutely refused to channel money into any but segregated neighborhoods. It declared entire areas, mostly in central cities, ineligible for loans. In some cases, the presence of a single black family on a block led the agency to declare the entire block off-limits for federal mortgage insurance. Along with discriminatory practices by private banks and real estate companies, federal policy was a major factor in institutionalizing housing segregation in America. In housing as in other matters, the New Deal greatly expanded the definition of American freedom while leaving intact or even reinforcing the racial barriers to the full enjoyment of freedom's benefits.²⁵

"A New Conception of America"

But if the New Deal failed to dismantle the impenetrable boundary that barred non-whites from full participation in American life, the 1930s witnessed the absorption of other groups into the social mainstream. With Catholics and Jews occupying prominent posts in the Roosevelt administration and new immigrant voters forming an important part of its electoral support, the New Deal made ethnic pluralism a living reality in American politics. Thanks to the cutoff of Eastern European immigration in 1924, the increasing penetration of movies, chain stores, and mass advertising into ethnic communities, and the common experience of economic crisis, the 1930s witnessed an acceleration of cultural assimilation. But in the transformed political environment, the process had a

different character from the nativist upsurge and corporate-sponsored American plans of the preceding years. For the children of the new immigrants, labor and political activism were themselves agents of a different kind of Americanization. The thirties proved that one could participate fully in the broader society without surrendering one's ideals and ethnic identity. "Unionism is Americanism" became a CIO rallying cry. "I'm in the U.S.A.," a Minnesota iron miner wrote Secretary of Labor Perkins, complaining of low wages and management hostility to unions, but "the Mesabi range isn't Americanized yet."²⁶

In the mid-1930s, for the first time in American history, the left enjoyed a shaping influence on the nation's politics and culture. The CIO and the Communist Party became focal points of a broad social and intellectual impulse, a "cultural front" that helped to redraw the boundaries of American freedom. An obscure, faction-ridden organization when the Depression began, the party experienced remarkable growth during the 1930s. Its membership never exceeded one hundred thousand, but several times that number passed through its ranks, some to suffer bitter disillusionment and turn sharply to the right, others to become anti-Communist leftists, still others to emerge as independent radicals willing to work in Communist-affiliated activities. At the height of its influence, the Communist Party's militant antifascism attracted the support of numerous New Deal liberals, while its commitment to socialism resonated with a widespread belief that the Depression had proved the bankruptcy of capitalism and that Marxism offered the only comprehensive vision of a better future. As Dewey, hardly a supporter of Joseph Stalin, put it, liberalism would have to adjust itself to the realization that "the liberty of individuals" required planned action to "socialize the forces of production."

But it was not so much the party's ideology as its vitality and activism—its involvement in a mind-boggling array of activities, including demonstrations of the unemployed, epochal struggles for industrial unionism from Kentucky's Harlan County to the auto factories of Detroit, and the renewed movement for black civil rights—that for a time made it the center of gravity for a broad democratic upsurge. It is one of the era's ironies that an organization so authoritarian in structure and so tied—at least at its upper echelons—to Stalin's Russia should have contributed so much to the expansion of freedom in the United States. But men and women joined the party or cooperated with it not only to defend the world's first "workers' state" overseas, but in the hope of building unionism, fighting racial injustice, and democratizing life at home. In the end, the party did not create a new form of American socialism, but it helped to invigorate New Deal liberalism, to imbue it with a more militant spirit and a more pluralistic understanding of Americanism.²⁷

Politically, the era of the Popular Front, when the Communist Party actively sought to ally itself with liberals, socialists, and independent radicals in broadly based movements for social change, lasted only a few years. Launched in 1935, it was shattered four years later by the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Even before then, the Moscow Trials of 1937, in which former revolutionaries were condemned to death as Western agents, had led numerous former allies, especially among the intelligentsia, to dissociate themselves from the party. But at the height of the Popular Front, Communists gained an unprecedented respectability, working closely with church, academic, and civil rights groups, and with the Democratic Party in many local elections. Earl Browder, the party's leader, even appeared on the cover of *Time*.²⁸

The left's impact was felt far beyond the Communist Party, among intellectuals, artists, and social activists. In literature, theater, film, and dance, the Popular Front vision of American society sank deep roots and survived much longer than the political moment from which it sprang and the New Deal agencies like the federal arts and theater projects that briefly gave it an outlet. In this broad left-wing culture, social and economic radicalism, not support for the status quo, defined true Americanism; ethnic and racial diversity was the glory of American society; and "the American Way of Life" meant unionism and social citizenship, not the unbridled pursuit of wealth. The American "people," declared obsolete by Lippmann in the 1920s and viewed by many intellectuals in that decade as a repository of mean-spirited fundamentalism and crass commercialism, was suddenly rediscovered as the embodiment of democratic virtue. Museum exhibitions, murals sponsored by the Works Progress Administration, the federally sponsored "people's theater," and Hollywood films all rediscovered the American people and expanded its definition to include the new immigrants and their children, and even non-whites. Art about the people—such as Dorothea Lange's photographs of migrants and sharecroppers and documentary films like *The Plow That Broke the Plains*—and art of the people such as folksongs and black spirituals came to be seen as expressions of genuine Americanism. Painters, sculptors, photographers, and choreographers eagerly took up the task of depicting the daily routines, the work lives and leisure activities, of farmers and urban dwellers. "The heart and soul of our country," Roosevelt proclaimed, was "the heart and soul of the common man."²⁹

"A new conception of America is necessary," wrote the immigrant labor radical Louis Adamic in 1938. Despite bringing "ethnic" and northern black voters into the Democratic coalition, the New Deal devoted little explicit attention to ethno-cultural issues, fearful of rekindling the divisive battles of the 1920s. It was the Popular Front, not the mainstream Democratic Party,

that forthrightly sought to popularize the idea that the country's strength lay in diversity and tolerance, a love of equality, and a rejection of ethnic prejudice and class privilege. Depicting itself as an uprising of ordinary Americans who had set aside prejudice to struggle for the common good, the CIO avidly promoted the idea of ethnic and racial inclusiveness. Breaking decisively with the AFL's tradition of exclusionary unionism, it made cultural pluralism—an idea previously associated with intellectuals like Randolph Bourne and Horace Kallen and with the self-defense of ethnic and Catholic enclaves—an article of faith of a mass movement. The Communist Party, a meeting ground for native-born Protestant radicals, blacks, and new immigrants (especially Jews), insisted that racial and ethnic prejudice was incompatible with the country's democratic tradition. Party membership offered one road to acculturation, bringing second-generation immigrants who had grown up in ethnic ghettos into contact with indigenous regional and folk cultures, and, through self-education in literature and the fine arts, with a broadly cosmopolitan culture. At least partly because of the party, for example, young Jews from New York's Lower East Side, weaned on the Yiddish theater, came to embrace modern dance, cubism, and the plays of Ibsen and O'Neill.³⁰

Later critics on the left would chide the Popular Front for unquestioning allegiance to Roosevelt, the Democratic Party, and the national state, and for a sentimental glorification of all things American. Viewed in light of the subsequent Cold War, it seems highly ironic that the Communist Party claimed to be the inheritor of "the traditions of Jefferson, Paine, Jackson, and Lincoln." The Young Communist League in 1937 even organized a celebration of the anniversary of Paul Reveré's ride, and chided the Daughters of the American Revolution for failing to mark the occasion. But Popular Front culture also disseminated a more critical reading of the country's past and present. Communist historians produced pathbreaking scholarly studies of African-American and labor history, fields then ignored at mainstream universities, which shed a less than flattering light on the national past. Martha Graham's modern dance masterpiece, *American Document* (1938), an embodiment of Popular Front aesthetics with its emphasis on America's folk traditions and multi-ethnic racial heritage, centered its account of history on the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address. Yet Graham did not neglect what the narrator called "things we are ashamed of," including the dispossession of the Indians and the plight of the unemployed. Attempting to answer Crèvecoeur's old question, "What is an American?", Graham answered, in effect, not only middle-class Anglo-Saxons but also blacks, immigrants, and the working class. Earl Robinson's "Ballad for Americans," a quintessential expression of Popu-

lar Front culture that invoked the religious, racial, and ethnic diversity of American society, became a national hit and was performed at the Republican National Convention of 1940.³¹

It was fitting that "Ballad for Americans" reached the top of the charts in a version performed by the magnificent black actor and singer Paul Robeson. For where Popular Front culture moved well beyond New Deal politics was in condemning racism as a malignant set of beliefs and practices, incompatible with true Americanism. In the 1930s, groups like the American Jewish Committee and the National Conference of Christians and Jews actively promoted ethnic and religious tolerance. But whether in Harlem or East Los Angeles, the Communist Party was the era's only predominantly white organization to make fighting racism a top priority. "The communists," declared Charles H. Houston, chief legal strategist of the NAACP, "have made it impossible for any aspirant to Negro leadership to advocate less than full economic, political and social equality."

Communist influence spread even to the South, where the party helped to create the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. Founded in 1938, it brought together a new generation of homegrown radicals—New Dealers, black activists, organizers of the sharecroppers union and other labor leaders, even a few elected officials—to work for unionization, unemployment relief, and racial justice. The Communist-influenced International Labor Defense, whose origins lay in the defense of civil liberties after World War I, mobilized popular support for black defendants enmeshed in a racist criminal justice system. It helped make the Scottsboro Case, in which nine young black men were unjustly convicted of rape in Alabama, an international cause célèbre. Despite the patent implausibility of the evidence against the "Scottsboro boys," Alabama authorities three times put them on trial during the 1930s and three times won convictions. The first two verdicts were overturned by landmark Supreme Court decisions that established legal principles greatly expanding the definition of civil liberties: defendants have a constitutional right to effective counsel and states cannot systematically exclude blacks from juries. (The third set of convictions, which led to long prison sentences for five of the defendants, was allowed to stand.)³²

Throughout the country, despite considerable resistance from white workers determined to preserve their historic monopoly of skilled positions and access to promotions, the CIO, and especially its Communist-influenced unions, welcomed blacks as members and advocated the passage of antilynching laws and the enfranchisement of southern black voters. The CIO brought black industrial workers into the labor movement for the first time in significant num-

bers. The Depression's devastating impact in black communities had propelled economic survival to the top of the agenda for black organizations. In this atmosphere, black workers, many of them traditionally hostile to unions because of their long experience of exclusion, responded with enthusiasm to CIO organizing efforts. The union offered not only the promise of higher wages but dignity in the workplace and an end to the arbitrary power of often racist foremen. Blacks understood the rise of the CIO through their own historical experience. Unionization, said A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the era's most prominent black union leader, was part of the "unfinished task of emancipation." Ed McRea, a white CIO organizer in Memphis, reported that it was not difficult to persuade black workers why a union was necessary: "You didn't have any trouble explaining this to blacks, with the kinds of oppression and condition they had. It was a question of freedom."³³

Another central element of Popular Front public culture was its mobilization for civil liberties, especially the right of labor to organize. The struggle for industrial unions encountered sweeping local restrictions on freedom of speech, as well as repression by private and public police forces. Nationwide publicity about the wave of violence directed against the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in the South and the CIO in industrial communities in the North elevated the rights of labor to a central role in discussions of civil liberties. The ACLU, primarily concerned in the 1920s with governmental repression, by 1934 had concluded that "the masters of property" posed as great a danger to freedom of speech and assembly as public authorities. "The crucial struggle for civil liberty today," declared *Social Action*, a left-wing periodical, "is among tenant farmers and industrial workers, fighting for economic emancipation and security." Beginning in 1936, a Senate subcommittee headed by Robert M. La Follette, Jr., of Wisconsin exposed the methods used by employers to combat unionization, including a vast array of spies and private police forces. Workers had "no liberties at all," an employee of General Motors wrote the committee from Saginaw, Michigan. The extensive violence unleashed against strikers in California's cotton and lettuce fields and canneries made that state, the committee report concluded, seem "more a fascist European dictatorship than part of the United States."³⁴

Labor militancy and the related efforts of Communists to organize throughout the country helped produce an important shift in the understanding of civil liberties. Previously conceived as individual rights that must be protected against infringement by the state, the concept was now expanded to include violations of free speech and assembly by concentrated power in private hands. As a re-

Ben Shahn's 1939 mural, sponsored by the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration, depicts various aspects of American freedom, including freedom of speech, religion, and the press, and the rights to petition the government and to vote, all surrounding the hand and torch of the Statue of Liberty. The text at the center is that of the First Amendment, reflecting the central place civil liberties had assumed in the New Deal conception of freedom. (Ben Shahn. Jamaica Post Office Mural. 1939. Oil on canvas. © Estate of Ben Shahn/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.)

sult, just as the federal government was emerging as a guarantor of economic security, it also became a protector of freedom of expression. With its restrictions on employers' anti-union activities and explicit recognition of the right of unionists to assemble and organize, the Wagner Act, the young sociologist David Reisman observed in 1942, was one of the "essential pillars for civil liberty in our time."

Even more portentous for the future course of free speech, the same Supreme Court that had relinquished its role as a "censor" of economic legislation moved to expand its authority over civil liberties. While deferring to legislative judgments on economic issues, the justices insisted that constitutional guarantees of free thought and expression were essential to democratic governance and "nearly every other form of freedom," and therefore deserved special protection by the courts. Thus, civil liberties replaced liberty of contract as the foundation of freedom. In 1937, the justices overturned on free speech grounds the conviction of Angelo Herndon, a Communist organizer jailed in Georgia for "inciting insurrection." Three years later, they invalidated an Alabama law that prohibited picketing in labor disputes. Since 1937, the large majority of state and national laws overturned by the courts have been those that, in the justices' view, infringed on civil liberties.³⁵

By the eve of World War II, civil liberties had assumed a central place in the New Deal understanding of freedom. In 1939, Attorney General Frank Murphy established a Civil Liberties Unit in the Department of Justice. "For the



first time in our history," Murphy wrote the president, "the full weight of the Department will be thrown behind the effort to preserve in this country the blessings of liberty." In 1941, the administration celebrated with considerable fanfare the 150th anniversary of the Bill of Rights. It embodied, said Roosevelt, the "freedoms that are inherent in the right of free choice by free men and women." The new appreciation of free thought and expression was hardly universal. In 1938, the House of Representatives established the Un-American Activities Committee to investigate disloyalty. Its expansive definition of the term "un-American" included Communists, labor radicals, and the left wing of the Democratic Party—in sum, the constellation of forces represented by the Popular Front—and its hearings led to the dismissal of dozens of federal employees on charges of subversion. Two years later, Congress enacted the Smith Act, which made it a federal crime to advocate the overthrow of the government. A similar pursuit of unorthodox views took place at the state level. The New York legislature's Rapp-Coudert Committee held sweeping hearings in-

vestigating "subversive" influences in New York City's public colleges, resulting in the firing in 1941 of some sixty faculty members charged with Communist sympathies.³⁶

By then the New Deal, as an era of far-reaching social reform, had reached its peak and begun to recede. In the fall of 1938, in the face of a severe economic recession, the electorate not only rebuked Roosevelt's effort to purge conservative southerners but increased Republican congressional representation. A long period of political stalemate followed, in which a conservative coalition of southern Democrats and northern Republicans dominated Congress. Increasingly, the administration's energies came to focus on the storm gathering in Europe. Even before December 1941, when the United States entered World War II, "Dr. Win-the-War," in Roosevelt's celebrated phrase, had replaced "Dr. New Deal." Yet, as the left's influence in Washington receded, the Popular Front ideal of Americanism gained even wider dissemination as the official version of American society. During World War II, the new immigrants would be fully reconfigured as loyal ethnic Americans, black Americans' lack of freedom would assume, for the first time since Reconstruction, a prominent place on the national political agenda, and freedom would become the nation's rallying cry in the struggle against fascism.³⁷

10

Fighting for Freedom

FEW EVENTS have transformed American life as broadly and deeply as World War II. From the development of the Sun Belt to the modern struggle for black equality, the economic trends and social movements we associate with the postwar world had their roots in the war years. As during the Civil War and World War I, but on a far larger scale, wartime mobilization expanded the size and scope of government. The gross national product nearly doubled and unemployment disappeared as war production finally conquered the Depression. The insatiable demand for industrial labor sent a vast tide of migrants from rural America to the industrial cities of the North and West, permanently altering the nation's social geography. Between 1940 and 1947 some 25 million Americans, over one-fifth of the population, moved in search of new economic opportunities. The war justified a new and permanent role for the United States as a world power and created a close link between corporate-dominated business and a militarized federal government—a "military-industrial complex," President Dwight D. Eisenhower would later call it—that long survived the cessation of hostilities.¹

In contrast to the ambiguous outcome of the Korean War and the unprecedented divisiveness spawned by Vietnam, World War II came to be remembered as the Good War, a time of national unity in pursuit of indisputably noble goals. But as in any war, acceptance of sacrifice required the conscious mustering of patriotic public opinion. By the 1940s, "to sell *goods*, we must sell *words*" had become a credo of the