

*PROBLEMS IN AMERICAN CIVILIZATION*

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# The New Deal

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*For Ellis W. Hawley*

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Deadly floods on the Ohio River in 1937 produced this ironic scene in Louisville, Kentucky. The billboard suggests white America's vision of a mass consumption economy, while the line waiting outside a relief center portrays a starkly different reality for African Americans. The photograph was taken by Margaret Bourke-White and originally appeared in *Life* magazine. (Margaret Bourke-White, LIFE Magazine © Time, Inc.)

*Lizabeth Cohen*

## Workers Make a New Deal

Older accounts of the New Deal almost always told the story of the 1930s from a national perspective. The focus was almost invariably on Roosevelt and Congress or on labor leaders such as John L. Lewis and the struggle to build the CIO. In these accounts, however, farmers, workers, and the unemployed—"grassroots America"—were portrayed as passive participants in the New Deal drama. They listened to Roosevelt's fireside chats, voted in elections, wrote an occasional letter of protest, worked for a relief program, but in no important sense did they shape the New Deal or make conscious choices.

In her prize winning book *Making a New Deal*, a study of Chicago's ethnic working class during the 1920s and 1930s, Lizabeth Cohen offers a dramatically different perspective. These workers and their families were largely uninvolved in city or national politics before 1933, but faced with the shock of the depression and the benefits of the New Deal, they began to affiliate with Chicago's—and Roosevelt's—Democratic Party and to join the CIO's newly formed industrial labor unions. These working-class families were "making" their own New Deal within their communities and factories. They were vital participants in a larger national story. In the chapter excerpted here, Cohen describes how ethnic and African American workers came to identify themselves as Democrats and to mobilize politically.

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In 1935, Mrs. Olga Ferk wrote a letter to President Roosevelt in which she complained that she was mistreated at her relief station, that she was only \$19 behind in her government HOLC mortgage payments, not three months as accused, and that her son's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) paychecks were always late in arriving. "How long is this rotten condition going to last," she demanded of the president. "I am at the end of the rope. The Rich get Richer and the poor can go to—H—that is what it looks like to me. . . . Let's have some results." What is most striking about Mrs. Ferk's

From Cohen, Lizabeth, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939*. © 1990 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press and the author.

letter is that only a few years earlier, her expectation that the federal government should provide her with regular relief, a mortgage, and a job for her son and be efficient and fair about it would have been unimaginable. In the midst of the Great Depression, families like the Ferks were depending on the national government as once they had looked to their ethnic institutions and welfare capitalist employers.

Two years later, Sociology Professor Arthur W. Kornhauser and his assistants at the University of Chicago interviewed several thousand Chicago residents of diverse occupations to learn their opinions about the great controversies of the day. Their findings indicate that Mrs. Ferk's discontents were typical of semiskilled and unskilled workers. Three-fourths of them felt that working people were not treated fairly, whereas in the minds of almost everyone, wealthy businessmen had too much influence in running the country. Although these workers were not asked directly how they would solve the depression crisis, their point of view can be pieced together from responses to other questions. Chicago's industrial workers blamed the capitalist system, and particularly big businessmen, for the economic depression, yet for the most part they were unwilling to abandon capitalism in favor of a socialist system where government owned industry. At the same time, however, they advocated the strengthening of two institutions to rebalance power within capitalist society: the federal government and labor unions. Ninety percent of the sample of unskilled workers and 81 percent of the semiskilled favored Roosevelt's New Deal, whose programs represented to workers the expansion of federal authority. Three-fourths of these workers even went so far as advocating that the government play a role in redistributing wealth in the society. Clearly, Chicago's working people were seeking a powerful federal government that would work for them, not their bosses. The other institution that workers thought would bring about a more equitable capitalist society was the labor union. More than four-fifths of them endorsed strong labor unions to which all workers would belong. If workers were organized in unions and protected by a strong federal government, the "moral capitalism" that they had hoped for under welfare capitalism during the 1920s might finally prevail, these Chicago working people seemed to be saying.

Having lost faith in the capacity of their ethnic communities and welfare capitalist employers to come to the rescue, Chicago's industrial workers had found new solutions. By the mid-1930s, they, and their counterparts elsewhere in America, were championing an expanded role for the state and the organization of national-level industrial unions. State and union, workers hoped, would provide the security formerly found through ethnic, religious, and employer affiliation as well as ensure a more just society. Although most workers interviewed did not call for revolutionary change, it would be a mistake to assume that their commitment to a moral capitalism did not challenge the status quo. Too often retrospective analysis of workers' responses to the Great Depression falls into the trap of pigeonholing them as either radical or not, according to some external standard, without evaluating in a more subtle way how workers changed their attitudes over the course of the 1930s. Newfound faith in the state and the unions was not preordained. It required workers to make significant breaks with previous values and behavior and to adopt new ones. . . .

### Voting in the State

It was not at all obvious that when Chicago's working people suffered misfortunes in the depression they would turn to the federal government for protection. During the 1920s, these workers had put little faith in government, particularly at the national level. . . . [T]o the extent that working people's social welfare needs were met at all, they were met in the private sector, by ethnic communities and welfare capitalist employers. Many workers looked warily on the expansion of state power, as they felt it was already interfering with their cultural freedom by legislating and enforcing Prohibition.

Most indicative of their disinterest in government, large numbers of Chicago workers failed to vote. In wards with high percentages of foreign-born workers, less than one-third of the potential electorate (people over the age of twenty-one) turned out for the presidential election of 1924, in contrast to 65 percent in native, middle-class wards. Many of these nonvoters could not vote because they were not citizens. Stiff citizenship requirements and a disinclination to naturalize kept them away. Others qualified to

vote but did not bother to register or to vote even when registered. They simply did not find national party politics relevant to their lives. "I had cast maybe one ballot in a national election, before the mid-1930s," recalled steelworker George Patterson, an immigrant of Scottish birth who had become a citizen easily in the twenties with no new language to learn.

Even those ethnic workers who voted during the 1920s did not often identify politically beyond their local community. The kind of machine politics that flourished in Chicago during the twenties kept people dependent on a very local kind of political structure not tightly bound to any one major party. . . . Political parties were most visible in a community right before election time and then often disappeared. There were general patterns, of course, in the voting of blacks and "new immigrant" groups who dominated Chicago's industrial work force—blacks and Yugoslavs strongly Republican; Poles, Czechs, Lithuanians, and eastern European Jews frequently Democratic; Italians often split—but no party could count on a particular group's votes, except the Republicans on the blacks. It was a rare ethnic worker in Chicago who had a strong identity as either Democrat or Republican before the late 1920s.

All this changed at the end of the decade. Workers became drawn into an interethnic Democratic machine in Chicago under the leadership of Czech politician Anton Cermak that connected them not only to a unified Democratic Party on the city level but also to the national Democratic Party. . . .

The creation of a Democratic machine in Chicago under Mayor Cermak and his successor Mayor Kelly (who took office in 1933 after Cermak was killed by an assassin's bullet intended for President Roosevelt) has drawn much attention for how it paved the way for years of undemocratic rule by the Daley machine. What is lost in hindsight, however, is how voters actually felt about joining a citywide and national Democratic Party at the time. First- and second-generation immigrants still made up almost two-thirds of Chicago's population, and a large proportion of these came from eastern and southern Europe. After years of having little voice in either party, new ethnic groups finally felt that they had a party that represented them. When Republican candidate "Big Bill" Thompson made an issue of Cermak's eastern European origins in

the mayoral race of 1931, a multiethnic alliance for the Democrats was clinched. Thompson's taunt,

Tony, Tony, where's your pushcart at?  
Can you picture a World's Fair mayor  
With a name like that?

and Cermak's retort ("He don't like my name. . . . It's true I didn't come over on the Mayflower, but I came over as soon as I could") crystallized for ethnic Chicagoans how the Democratic Party had become the only party for them.

The best evidence that Chicagoans were becoming increasingly committed to the Democratic party is that the Democratic vote in both local and national elections mushroomed. By 1936, 65 percent of Chicago voters favored the Democratic presidential candidate, three times as many as had in 1924. In wards with large numbers of first- and second-generation ethnics, 81 percent supported Roosevelt in 1936, in contrast to 38 percent for Davis in 1924. Even more significant, these new Democratic voters, when white, were less often converted Republicans than new recruits, ethnic working-class people who had not voted during the 1920s. In their wards, there was a two-thirds increase in voter turnout between 1924 and 1936, with essentially all of these new participants voting Democratic.

Several factors explain why Chicago's ethnic workers were voting in record numbers, and overwhelmingly Democratic, during the depths of the Great Depression. To start with, more people were eligible to vote. In an immigrant district such as the one surrounding the Chicago Commons Settlement on the West Side, two-thirds of those over age twenty-one qualified to vote in 1930, in contrast to only one-third in 1920. Both the coming of age of the American-born second generation and the more than doubling of the numbers of foreign born who had become citizens, particularly women, were responsible. But eligibility is one thing, actually turning out to vote quite another. Starting in 1928, Chicago's ethnic workers participated more actively in the political process, and as Democrats, because of ideology not just demography. Finally by the 1930s, they felt like legitimate players in the political game. However undemocratic the one-party rule of Chicago's Democratic machine may have later become, it began as a democratic

experience for many Chicago workers, giving them for the first time the feeling that the political process worked for them.

[There were other crucial reasons for the new commitment to party politics by ethnic workers.] Beginning with Al Smith's campaign as a wet candidate in 1928 and increasingly with Roosevelt in 1932 and particularly in 1936, workers felt that the policies of the national Democratic party were making a difference in their lives. "Before Roosevelt, the Federal Government hardly touched your life," explained one man. "Outside of the postmaster, there was little local representation. Now people you knew were appointed to government jobs. Joe Blow or some guy from the corner." For jobs, and a myriad of other services once provided by others, it soon became clear, workers looked increasingly to the state. John Mega, a worker at Western Electric who grew up in a Slovak family in Back of the Yards, watched this transformation in his own family's political consciousness: "Our people did not know anything about the government until the depression years." His father never voted. In fact, he stated, "In my neighborhood, I don't remember anyone voting. They didn't even know what a polling place was." Suddenly with the depression, all that changed. Mega's relatives were voting to send Democrats to Washington and counting on them for relief and CCC and Works Progress Administration (WPA) jobs. Because the Kelly machine identified itself so strongly with the New Deal, voters like Mega's family and neighbors did not feel they were favoring national over local government. They saw the Chicago Democrats as the conduit for Washington's largesse.

It is important to recognize, however, that the promise and impact of New Deal programs alone cannot explain workers' reorientation to the federal government. That they had personally helped put in power the Democrats in Chicago and in Washington mattered enormously. Voting was a gradual process teaching them that national politics was reciprocal. As workers took credit for electing the nation's political leadership, the state seemed less remote. Over time Chicago workers came to feel like national political actors who had earned rights by their political participation. When Celie Carradina's estranged husband refused to share his WPA pay with her in late 1935, this resident of Back of the Yards wrote to President Roosevelt for help on the grounds that "I hope you every way that I could doing election and I am going to do my

best again" (*sic*). . . . Many others like Mr. and Mrs. Memenga threatened the president that if relief benefits did not improve, "we will think twice the next time [we are asked to vote for you]." Working-class voters in Chicago were coming to feel not only that their fate increasingly lay in the hands of New Deal officials but also that national office holders and bureaucrats owed them something for their votes. . . .

Black workers in Chicago were also voting in record numbers and more Democratic than ever before by 1936, but they arrived at this same destination via a very different route than did ethnic workers. Rather than being newcomers to the political process, blacks had participated actively in elections during the 1920s. When only a third of Chicago's ethnics were voting in 1924, over 50 percent of blacks did. At the most basic level, it was easier for blacks to vote in Chicago. The longest residency requirement they faced was a year to vote in state elections, whereas the minimum requirement for naturalization was over five years, and it usually took immigrants at least ten years to become citizens. No less important, voting mattered to blacks who had been kept from expressing their full citizenship rights in the South. Many immigrants, in contrast, were former peasants from eastern and southern Europe who had never even had the expectation of voting.

Blacks not only voted more than ethnics in the twenties but also displayed a strong loyalty to one party, the Republicans. In fact, Mayor "Big Bill" Thompson built his political career on the support of Chicago's black wards. Few blacks had been in the North long enough to forget the southern lesson that the Republican Party was the black's friend, the Democratic Party his racist enemy. . . .

Yet despite Chicago blacks' unflinching loyalty to the Republicans during the 1920s, by the late 1930s, they were securely in the Democratic camp. Nothing demonstrates so well the extent to which working people reoriented themselves politically during the 1930s as this shift of black voters from Republican to Democrat. Dependable voters in the twenties, blacks turned out in still larger numbers in the thirties. The 61 percent of eligible blacks who voted in 1932 grew to 70 percent by 1940. And blacks increasingly voted Democratic. With them as with ethnics, New Deal programs alone did not make Democrats. Local and national Democratic administrations complemented each other. Cermak, and even more

so Kelly, wooed black supporters with traditional lures of the machine, like patronage jobs and benign neglect of illegal gambling, as well as with symbolic actions such as banning the film "Birth of A Nation" and ceremoniously naming boxer Joe Louis "mayor for ten minutes." In time, Kelly would even defend integrated schools and open housing, much to his own political detriment. . . .

There is no denying, however, that Kelly and Roosevelt's efforts to make Democrats out of Chicago's blacks were helped by New Deal programs. Despite charging that the NRA functioned more as a "Negro Removal Act" than a "National Recovery Act" and that relief and job programs discriminated against them, blacks found themselves dependent on whatever benefits they could wring from federal programs as they tried to cope with the ravages of the depression. "Let Jesus lead you and Roosevelt feed you" replaced "Stick to Republicans because Lincoln freed you." . . .

By 1937 black workers were giving . . . the same message as their ethnic peers: Our survival depends on a strong federal government, and the Democrats, both in Chicago and Washington, are the only ones who can give it to us. . . .

### **From Welfare Capitalism to the Welfare State**

Voting in national elections and participating in the unemployed movement gave workers greater expectations for the state. Benefiting from New Deal programs made them dependent on it. Living as we do today in a world so permeated by the federal government, it is easy to lose sight of how much people's lives were changed by the expansion of federal responsibility during the 1930s. Even the conservative politicians of the late twentieth century who repudiate a strong federal government take for granted that working people will receive Social Security benefits upon retirement, that bank accounts will be insured by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC), and that anyone who works will be assured a nationally set minimum wage. A world without these protections is hardly imaginable.

Despite the indisputable expansion of federal authority engendered by the New Deal, critics at the time, and even more so historians since, have nonetheless emphasized how improvisational, inconsistent, almost half-hearted the New Deal was. The reasons were varied. The Roosevelt administration was politically

cautious, more oriented toward meeting emergencies than solving long-term problems, and most importantly, ambivalent, sometimes even fearful, about the growth of federal power that it was orchestrating. Critics rightfully point out that New Deal reforms failed to make the major social transformations, like the redistribution of wealth, that many progressives . . . hoped for. The American welfare state born during the depression turned out to be weaker than that of other western industrial nations such as England, France, and Germany. But a new direction nonetheless had been set. Most significant, workers made a shift from the world of welfare capitalism, where employers and voluntary associations cared, however inadequately, for their needs, to a welfare state, a reorientation that they would not easily reverse. This transition was particularly powerful for Chicago's workers because the basic services that they had looked to their ethnic communities and bosses to provide—welfare, security, and employment—and the depression endangered were taken over by the federal government. Although the New Deal may not have gone as far as many workers hoped it would, by providing welfare services, securing their homes and life savings, and offering them new jobs or reforming their old ones, the federal government played a new and important role in the lives of Chicago's working people.

The New Deal provided workers with federally funded relief programs, and eventually a permanent Social Security system, to take the place of the welfare previously dispersed by private organizations, often sponsored by their ethnic and religious communities. Federal assistance actually had begun through loans to the beleaguered states under Hoover's Reconstruction Finance Corporation. But it was the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), one of the first and most expensive creations of Roosevelt's New Deal, that regularized the national government's role in relief. Illinois was in such dire straits by the time Roosevelt took office in March 1933 that it became one of the first seven states to receive FERA funds. By the end of 1933, more than a third of Chicago's working population, including 44 percent of the city's blacks, looked to Washington for at least some of their keep, which put slightly more Chicagoans "on the dole" than was typical nationally.

It is true that FERA was designed as a shared undertaking between the federal government and the states. Of the \$500 million

first appropriated, half was intended to match dollars spent by the states, the other half as a discretionary fund for FERA's use whenever the need was greatest. But without a doubt, the national government shaped, and underwrote, this relief program. Between 1933 and 1935, the federal government provided 87.6 percent of the dollars spent on emergency relief in Chicago, in contrast to contributions of 11 percent by the state and 1.4 percent by the city. Even though state and local authorities administered the federal funds, everyone knew that the power lay in Washington. From the many relief recipients and unemployed organizations that lodged complaints against local relief operations directly with FERA chief Harry Hopkins or President Roosevelt to the case-workers who feared Washington's reproof enough to beg clients not to write "as it causes . . . [us] a lot of trouble," it was generally agreed that the national government ruled relief. Mayor Kelly, in fact, fought efforts to return more of the administration of relief back to Chicago. The added patronage jobs were not worth the increased financial and social responsibility.

The alarm of the Catholic Church in Chicago over this expanded relief role for the federal government testifies to its radical implications. The church recognized just how undermining of previous loyalties workers' new dependence on the federal government could be. Beginning in the summer and fall of 1932 and with increasing intensity over the next year as federal funding of relief grew, private charities withdrew from offering the kind of welfare they had struggled to provide before the national government stepped in. With FERA requiring that only public agencies could distribute its funds, private expenditures for relief in Illinois declined from a high of \$8.3 million in 1932 to only \$942,500 in 1935. Most agencies were grateful to be relieved of carrying a burden they were ill equipped to handle and redirected their energies toward helping families with specialized, often psychological problems such as domestic discord, vocational maladjustment, and parent-child conflict. They were willing, moreover, to pay a price for their reprieve: that people would depend on the government the way they once had depended on them.

The Catholic Church, however, resisted this retrenchment. The Church hierarchy, which had long been working to consolidate its hold over Chicago's diverse Catholic population, mustered the considerable political clout it wielded in the city and in Wash-

ington, . . . and in August 1933 had its Central Charities Bureau and Society of St. Vincent de Paul named a unit of the Illinois Emergency Relief Commission (IERC), the state's distributor of FERA funds. In other words, the church became an agent of the government in distributing federal and Illinois relief dollars. Disregarding the outrage of Chicago social workers, who denounced the ploy as a violation of both professional standards and the constitution's separation of church and state all the way up the relief bureaucracy to FERA chief Hopkins, the archdiocese took comfort that needy Catholics would benefit from new government aid while still being accountable to the Catholic Charities, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and the priest. The lengths to which the Chicago Catholic Church was willing to go to coopt this new federal welfare presence suggests how undermining it potentially was of workers' old dependence on private welfare agencies and benefit societies.

It has become almost an axiom among analysts of the Great Depression that Americans were ashamed to be on government relief because they saw dependency as one more sign, along with loss of work, that they had failed. The testimony of unemployed and underemployed workers that has survived from the Chicago experience, however, suggests a different story. Although some claimed to be too proud to go on relief and many preferred work relief to hand-outs, the vast majority defended the propriety of looking to the government for help. In the months before the federal government bailed out the struggling local relief effort, Thomas Jablonski complained bitterly, "America! What does America care for its children that it allows them to go hungry?" Another Polish-born Chicagoan argued for government intervention, "We are citizens of the United States, have been paying taxes . . . and are in dire need."

Chicago workers felt that their American citizenship, voting records, and even military service so entitled them to relief benefits that their letters to Washington often revealed anger against foreigners who had not "earned" the privilege. For example, William Bowles, "an unemployed ex service man" who served his "Country and State since 1916, in the Regular Army and National Guards until August 1932 . . . born a Republican, Democrat by choice" wrote Roosevelt to complain of poor treatment at his Black Belt relief office: "Foreigners go there and get anything they ask for. . . . I think I am entitled to a little more justice from these people."



Likewise, Edward J. Newman, who had worked thirty years for employers including U.S. Steel and International Harvester, asked the president for help securing the “food, coal and cloathing and the necessity of life which we are deserving of as good Americans citizen. . . . I cannot see where Americans comes first you say this in your speeches why dont we Americans get what we are intitled to” [*sic*]. . . .

These Chicago workers, like many others, were voicing new expectations for the state along with their prejudices. A social worker who had long held jobs in working-class districts of Chicago observed the change in attitude by 1934: “There is a noticeable tendency to regard obtaining relief as another way of earning a living. The former stigma attached to a family dependent on relief is gone and each family in a given neighborhood knows what, when, and how much every other family in a given neighborhood is obtaining from an agency. The men spend most of their time in the relief offices where they gather for recreational purposes while they await their turn to discuss their needs with the case workers.” . . . Rather than feeling like beggars, workers felt they deserved benefits as citizens and more specifically for supporting FDR and the Democratic Party. It became more common for people to complain about the inadequacy and unsteadiness of relief benefits than to lament their own dependence on them.

Working-class people were more likely than middle-class ones to feel justified taking government relief during the thirties. An extensive survey of the Indianapolis population completed in 1941 indicated that a greater orientation toward independence made middle-class citizens more resentful of their need for relief than workers. An aide to Hopkins made a similar observation in a letter to him in 1934: “Clients are assuming that the government has a responsibility to provide. The stigma of relief has almost disappeared except among white collar groups.” This situation concerned rather than pleased New Dealers, however. Ironically, the Roosevelt administration, which made federal relief possible, also began to teach people that they should feel ashamed to take it. Hopkins once admitted that in order to win acceptance of a work program to replace FERA, New Dealers “overemphasized the undesirability of relief.” By the time recipients of federally funded WPA jobs got their official *Workers' Handbook* in 1936, they were being instructed:

What happens to us when we are on the dole?  
We lose our self-respect. We lose our skill. We have family rows.  
We loaf on street corners. Finally, we lose hope.

No sooner had workers shifted their dependence from the institutions of their local communities to the federal government than they began to be told that the state that offered them a hand could also bite. That the government went out of its way to teach working-class people to feel ashamed for being “on the dole” suggests that workers felt differently.

The federal government's new involvement in providing welfare was not limited to emergency relief measures. The Social Security Act, signed by Roosevelt in August 1935, established a permanent system of unemployment compensation, old age insurance, and aid for disabled and dependent children. Despite all the limitations of the act—the exclusion of many kinds of workers, the regressive payroll tax method of funding it, the small benefits, the administration of much of the system by the states—it is important not to lose sight of the strong impression it made on workers who had never before been offered any security by the government. Social workers at the Chicago Commons Settlement were convinced that the residents of their neighborhood felt inspired by the creation of Social Security. “As the Social Security laws have begun to operate through the unemployment insurance act, the old age annuity and the old age pension, there has come to each individual a sense that he is joining with government and industry in an effort to build for the future,” they wrote in the Commons Annual Report for 1937.

Social Security also influenced people's day-to-day decisions about their lives. For a worker like Florence Parise, the prospect of benefits sent her back to work at the Kennedy Laundry in 1937, a job she had left several years earlier. Suddenly there was a future in the job. . . . Before the New Deal, a family with someone out of a job, old, disabled, abandoned, and even dead was at the mercy of family, friends, and community charity. In contrast, under Social Security, with all its limitations, a family had the right to benefits from the government.

Welfare was not the only responsibility of Chicago's ethnic communities that the federal government took over during the 1930s. In the 1920s, workers had entrusted their future security, in

the form of savings and home mortgages, to ethnic banks and building and loan associations. People had felt confident that their investment was safe with the neighborhood banker or association officer. When these institutions encountered rough times during the depression, however, anxious depositors saw many of them fail, and the federal government came to the rescue of those that survived.

The banks that managed to endure Chicago's banking crisis of the early 1930s and reopened after the "national bank holiday" called by the president and Congress were all licensed as solvent by federal or state authorities. Customers, moreover, were assured of the federal government's continued backing through the FDIC, established under the Emergency Banking Act of 1933. "I was saved 'cause Roosevelt that time was elected" was how Salvatore Cosentino remembered the banking crisis of the 1930s. . . .

Salvatore Cosentino, whose bank savings were preserved by government action, was also among the many Chicago people who had government help holding onto another valuable asset, his home. Cosentino's home was one of the more than a million in the nation saved from foreclosure by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), which offered long-term, low-interest mortgages to eligible homeowners in urban areas who were unable to meet the terms of mortgage holders and faced loss of their property. Between 1930 and 1936, one in every four nonfarm dwellings in the Chicago area had been foreclosed or refinanced by the HOLC, which saved more than half of the threatened homes through granting 45,500 loans between June 1933 and June 1936. . . .

Some critics have assumed that the HOLC was only helpful to the middle classes. A closer look proves that assessment incorrect. In a city like Chicago, many workers were homeowners, and in the midst of the depression, many of these people faced foreclosure. The HOLC, moreover, went out of its way to lend to owners of small and inexpensive homes. Sixty percent of the loans given in Chicago were in neighborhoods rated C or D in a system where A represented the most prosperous.

Chicago's factory workers, who had sacrificed so much during the 1920s to buy their homes, were very grateful to the federal government for protecting them from foreclosure. Their reaction when they were turned down for HOLC loans, moreover, reveals how quickly they came to expect this government intervention as a right due them, much like relief. "My children served in the recent

World's War, to make our United States a safe place to live in and protect our homes," complained Anna Cohen, a widow whose property was refused a HOLC loan because it included a store she rented out. Flory Calzaretta, disqualified on some other technical grounds, made a similar defense to President Roosevelt: "I am an American citizen for the past 30 years and my children were born in America, and as such I believe I am entitled to some consideration. Your Excellency made these loans possible for destitute cases just like mine." Barbara Ann Carter blamed foreigners for depriving her of a fair shake: "When we first applied and tried to get this loan over two years ago we found, by sitting there hours and hours that no one was getting any attention of loans but foreigners on the South Side." No sooner had the federal government entered the mortgage business than Chicagoans counted on it being there.

As the national government stepped in to help workers protect their homes, ethnic institutions charged with that function became even weaker. It has already been established that ethnic building and loan associations suffered terribly in both reputation and finances during the depression. But the HOLC helped make the limping building and loan association even lamer. Building and loan associations accused the HOLC of hurting their recovery by overlooking their distressed loans and bailing out larger, more established banks instead. "The HOLC is ruining some of our institutions by prejudice against foreign people operating them," S. C. Mazankowski, Secretary of the Father Gordon Building and Loan Association and a director of the Polish American Building and Loan Association League of Illinois, complained bitterly. A more likely explanation, however, was that the HOLC rejected many association loans on the grounds that they were poor risks, having mortgages with inadequate security behind them or reflecting too high a percentage of the appraisal. Mazankowski confirmed this when he further grumbled "Our institution received from the HOLC about 46 cents for every dollar we had in property." The source of the problem was that ethnic building and loan associations had served more effectively as community institutions with a social responsibility to their membership than as sound financial institutions. When the federal government began refinancing mortgages, it preferred the business practices of more stable, usually larger banks and thereby contributed to the demise of these smaller, often ethnic competitors.

In another way, the HOLC helped workers in the short run while hurting their ethnic and black communities in the long run. As part of its program, the HOLC sponsored a massive project rating all neighborhoods A through D or I through 4 so that property values could be assessed. Although the HOLC, with its government backing, was willing to give loans to people living in C and D areas, these ratings were later picked up by banks and used to discriminate against “declining” neighborhoods in granting mortgages and assessing property. Faced with fewer alternatives after the depression to the big banks that respected these ratings, workers became victimized for years by a “redlining” that originated with these HOLC classifications. My perusal of the Chicago HOLC Area Descriptions and Residential Security Maps indicates that judgments about neighborhood stability depended very heavily on race and ethnicity. Whenever foreign or black populations were observed, areas were automatically marked as “unstable.” For example, a “blighted area of Poles and Lithuanians” near the stockyards received the lowest rating of 4 even though the report acknowledged that the “Lithuanian element” was thrifty and hence the neighborhood would probably “remain in a static condition for many years.” Further deterioration was also unlikely, the report went on, because of “no threat, yet, of colored infiltration.” Many Chicago workers saved their homes in the thirties thanks to the HOLC, but the biases of its rating system ensured that many workers would have the HOLC to blame when the property values in their ethnic and black neighborhoods later deteriorated.

Whereas once people had consigned their most valuable assets to the care of ethnic community institutions, they now sought protection from the state. A large group of unemployed families interviewed shortly before many of these federal programs went into effect universally expressed rage at the local bankers who had lost their money, urging that “they be treated like crooks.” They exhorted the government to take their place in safeguarding savings and mortgages: “If things keep up like this and the government doesn’t realize it, there’s going to be trouble. It doesn’t feel good to be kicked out of your house.” Workers like these found tremendous comfort in the government’s new activities. A hundredth anniversary book celebrating Polish contributions to Chicago, published in 1937, recognized that now Poles had someone outside their own community to thank for whatever economic suc-

cess they could still claim eight years into the Great Depression: “With the aid of our splendid President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whose humanitarian interests resulted in HOLC and other security laws pertaining to homes, investments and savings, many thousands of homes and millions of dollars have been saved.”

Industrial workers found the federal government not only ensuring their welfare and security during the New Deal but also entering a third area that had long been outside the provenance of the state, employment. This was territory that previously had belonged almost exclusively to private employers. In the first phase of the New Deal, the Roosevelt administration tried through the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) to get employers to voluntarily submit to industrywide “codes of fair competition,” setting shorter hours of work and compensatory wage rates for their workers in return for production quotas, higher consumer prices, and a relaxing of antitrust restrictions for themselves. The hope was that government-business cooperation would promote national economic recovery by stabilizing production and keeping as many people working as possible.

The voluntary character of the program, however, ensured that Chicago workers’ experiences under the NRA varied tremendously. Some workers reported an improvement in working conditions. One of those, Agnes Castiglia, worked a forty-hour week instead of her usual forty-eight and earned two dollars more at the Traficanti Noodle Company. But others concluded that the NRA only legitimized hour and wage reductions. “I was getting 44½ cents an hour. The NRA came into effect, we got cut to 41½ cents an hour. That’s the NRA,” Frank Bertucci said cynically. And Antonio Palumbo, a cook at Brachs Candy Company, agreed: “NRA helpa the capitalist; didn’t help the working-a-people” [*sic*]. Many workers shared Bertucci’s and Palumbo’s experience that spreading the work around meant less for each individual worker. To a large extent, people’s feelings about the NRA depended on how committed their industry was to the program. Employer enthusiasm ranged widely from electrical manufacturers like Western Electric who cooperated to the meatpackers who never even adopted an industry code.

Overall, the NRA probably did more to heighten worker awareness that government could, and should, intervene in the private sector than to achieve concrete improvements. Letters from

steelworkers in the Calumet region to President Roosevelt and NRA officials, for example, are filled with angry complaints of employer violations of the NRA and pleas for more direct intervention by Washington. In many cases, workers asked the government for protections, like minimum weekly hours and wages, that NRA legislation did not authorize. Before the NRA, it was unlikely that these steel workers would have brought complaints against their employers to the government. Similarly, . . . Section 7a of the NIRA, which required employers to let employees organize and bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, proved more meaningful for giving workers confidence that the government was behind them as they tried to organize than for establishing successful new unions. The NRA experiment in government-industry collaboration served mostly to whet workers' appetite for more state regulation of their working lives.

The federal government's involvement in employment extended to the creation of actual jobs, first as a part of relief and then, after 1935 with the WPA, in place of it. Job programs for the unemployed included the CCC, the Civil Works Administration (CWA), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the WPA, and the National Youth Administration (NYA). Although these programs are often remembered best for their contributions to the nation's cultural life—to art, theater, music, folklore, and so forth—the majority of the federal dollars went to employ manual laborers to renovate public facilities like parks, streets, sewers, and schools. Factory workers who had been let down by private industrialists now found themselves working for the government. Observers commonly reported that the unemployed preferred these federal job programs to straight relief payments. "It is *work* we want, not *charity*," Mrs. Ellen De Lisle told President Roosevelt in requesting jobs for herself and her sons to supplement her husband's WPA check. The government's job programs were not perfect. Workers vociferously complained about low salaries, uninspiring job assignments, and poor administration, including corruption. But as with relief, their gripes related more to these shortcomings in the programs than to their own dependence on them. A typical attitude was, "I gave the best part of my life to the American country, and I spent every cent I made here. They owe it to me to take care of me. If there is no regular work that I can pick up, they should find something for me to do."

A wide cross section of Chicago workers flocked to job programs—seventy thousand assembled before sunrise on November 23, 1933, to register for the CWA—but blacks were particularly eager. Blacks suffered from higher unemployment than whites and knew they would be the last recalled to jobs in private industry. The typical WPA wage of fifty-five dollars a month, purposely low to discourage workers from remaining too long on the government's payroll, was welcomed by blacks who had few other options. . . . By 1939, a third of all people employed by the WPA in Chicago were black.

Blacks depended on the government for jobs, but they complained bitterly to WPA officials that they were discriminated against, always being dealt the most menial work. A group of WPA workers reassigned to common labor while their white colleagues got clerical jobs wrote President Roosevelt, "In all of your speeches, you have given us the impression that you are a God-fearing man and believe in the equality of men. If that be the correct diagnosis of your character, then we would like for you to know that the officials of the W.P.A. of Chicago, Ill are not treating us as God's children, but as God's step-children." For many blacks the government proved no less discriminatory than private employers, except for one important difference: Blacks working in a federal job program had recourse. They could write to Washington to lodge complaints about their treatment locally, and in a surprising number of cases, action was taken. In many ways, being employed by the government during the New Deal gave blacks a taste of the kind of leverage they would demand during World War II when government and defense industries were compelled to practice fair employment. . . . Consequently, even though working on the WPA was far from perfect, it was one of the New Deal programs most responsible for orienting blacks toward the federal government. As Frayser T. Lane of the Chicago Urban League put it, the WPA revealed to black citizens "just what the government can mean to them. . . ."

*Fortune* magazine asked Americans of all income levels in 1935, "Do you believe that the government should see to it that every man who wants to work has a job?" Yes, replied 81 percent of those considered lower middle class, 89 percent of those labeled poor, and 91 percent of blacks, whereas less than half of the people defined as prosperous shared this view. The editors of *Fortune* concluded somewhat aghast, "public opinion overwhelmingly favors

assumption by the government of a function that was never seriously contemplated prior to the New Deal.”

Workers were all the more enthusiastic about the government's new role in employment because their bosses deeply resented the state's intrusion into matters they considered their own prerogative. The evidence from Chicago argues powerfully against the “corporate liberal” analysis that the New Deal represented an effort by clever corporate capitalists to revitalize the economy with the help of a state that they dominated. Although industrialists may in the end have figured out ways of benefiting from reforms like the WPA, Social Security, and even the Wagner Act, they fought their introduction every step of the way. Organized business in Illinois managed to hold off the state legislation needed to implement various components of Social Security as long as possible. When the New Deal's most proindustry program, the NRA, was declared unconstitutional in May 1935, most employers breathed a sigh of relief, though they were to become much more antagonized by the next round of reforms, which included such hated legislation as the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938. This law banned child labor and set a minimum hourly wage of \$0.25 (gradually to be increased to \$0.40) along with a maximum work week of forty-four hours (to be reduced within three years to forty hours) with time-and-a-half for overtime for all work related to interstate commerce. It was not so much these relatively low standards that bothered businessmen, but rather that the federal government was now empowered to intervene in matters that had long been out of its purview. “You have in these government attempts to control labor a tendency in the direction of a Fascist control of the worker, and through him of the industries, and through both control of the economic life of the country, and therefore control of its political life,” an article in *Chicago Commerce* warned. Workers, however, viewed the state's growing involvement in their employment not as control but as needed protection against autocratic industrialists.

When workers needed welfare, security for their savings and homes, and better jobs during the 1930s, they increasingly looked to the government they had put in office, not to their old community institutions or bosses. The situation of a family like the Ferks, which opened this chapter, would have been unheard of in the previous big depression of 1921. Fourteen years earlier, rather than writing to President Roosevelt about their government relief, mort-

gage, and job, the Ferks would have been begging for handouts from family, friends, neighborhood shopkeepers, former employers, and ethnic or religious welfare agencies. President Harding's government would have offered them nothing, and they probably would never have thought to ask. The decline of community institutions with the Great Depression and the rise of an activist welfare state that people felt had a responsibility to them profoundly changed the survival strategies of families like the Ferks.

### The Meaning of Worker Statism

Chicago workers felt they were making a new deal during the 1930s when they became invested in national party politics and a national welfare state. It is important to consider, however, just how new that deal was and exactly what it meant that they made it.

Workers' faith in the state grew out of old as well as new expectations. On the one hand, they wanted the government to take care of them in much the same paternalistic way as they previously had hoped their welfare capitalist employers and their ethnic communities would do. This dependence on a paternalistic state is most clearly seen in the way workers viewed President Roosevelt. For many workers, FDR was the federal government. In the election of 1932, people voted against Herbert Hoover. By 1936 they were voting for Roosevelt on the grounds that “He gave me a job” or “He saved my home.” One unhappy husband who complained that his wife was now “wearing the pants” in the family reported that she rejected him on the grounds that now “F.D.R. is the head of the household since he gives me the money.” As evident in the testimony presented in this chapter, distraught Chicagoans frustrated by the relief bureaucracy often appealed to Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt for help. In enough instances to keep them asking, their appeals to “father” and “mother” Roosevelt were rewarded with action. Henrietta Malone was not alone in getting winter clothes out of her Chicago caseworker only after she had written the president. The files of New Deal agencies abound with letters, many on tattered pieces of paper in barely literate English, appealing to President Roosevelt for assistance. People found it easy to look to him, moreover, because he went out of his way to cultivate an image as a fatherly figure concerned for the needy.

Workers' feeling that Roosevelt was caring for them in much the same ways as their local communities and welfare capitalist employers had once promised to do helped personalize "federal power," which might otherwise have seemed so abstract. The woman who thanked the "government" for helping her out, saying "it sure is a blessing, too, to have sech [*sic*] a good government!" no doubt pictured Roosevelt personally making it all possible and rewarded him with her vote. Even when people became frustrated with specific New Deal programs, they retained their faith in government by remaining confident of the president. Lorena Hickok reported back to Harry Hopkins in May 1936 that FDR enjoyed what today might be called a "can't lose" status among workers and even the unemployed. They gave him credit for any effort to improve conditions while absolving him of responsibility for problems ("he means right"). . . .

Workers in Chicago and elsewhere in the nation were looking to the federal government as they never had before, but the shock of that transition was cushioned by the way that they used the president to personalize the state. It was a rare worker's home where a portrait of Roosevelt, whether a torn-out newspaper image or a framed color photograph, did not hold an honored place. Eleanor Roosevelt later commented that after the president's death, people would stop her on the street to tell her, "They missed the way the President used to talk to them. They'd say, 'He used to talk to me about my government.'" Martha Gellhorn's field report to Hopkins captured this strange and moving phenomenon, as true for industrial workers in urban Chicago as for the mill workers she visited in a southern textile town:

And the feeling of these people for the President is one of the most remarkable phenomena I have ever met. He is at once God and their intimate friend; he knows them all by name, knows their little town and mill, their little lives and problems. And though everything else fails, he is there, and will not let them down.

At the same time that workers projected their old paternalistic expectations of ethnic community and welfare capitalism onto the state, however, they were developing a new and somewhat contradictory notion that they were entitled to benefits from the government. Alongside a pattern of dependence grew a new claim to legitimate rights. By voting, by becoming Democrats, by supporting Roosevelt, by being citizens, by serving in the military, by

spending their money in America, for all these reasons and more that workers quoted in this chapter have articulated, working people felt justified in their new sense of entitlement. With this notion of rights, moreover, workers were moving beyond the hierarchical authority relationships implicit in paternalism, which made them dependents. As contributing members of society, they made no apologies for taking relief, social security, FDIC insurance, HOLC mortgages, and CCC and WPA jobs from the state.

This sense of entitlement lay at the heart of the social vision that workers endorsed during the 1930s, a vision that is easily overlooked when the only tests applied to worker politics are capitalist or anti-capitalist, moderate or radical. As Kornhauser discovered in 1937, workers advocated a form of political economy that can best be characterized as "moral capitalism." They did not reject private ownership of property but favored a form of capitalism that promised everyone, owner or worker, a fair share. A *Fortune* survey in 1940 was surprised to learn that "the man on the street wants more income than he has, but no more than that of many a government clerk." Apparently, American workers were dreaming neither of a dictatorship of the proletariat nor a world where everyone was a successful capitalist. Rather, they wanted the government to police capitalism so that workers really would get that "new deal" they deserved. . . .

Contrasting workers' expectations of the New Deal with those of the policymakers who created it introduces the issue of how distinctive working people's politics actually were. Workers' integration into the mainstream, two-party system could suggest that they had little ambition for a class-conscious politics. Indeed, industrial workers in Chicago were far from revolutionary; few voted Communist, and fewer still joined the Labor Party of Chicago and Cook County, which had a strong affiliation with the traditional craft unions of the Chicago Federation of Labor. But that does not mean that workers had no sense of themselves as members of a working class distinct from the middle and upper classes. As a worker told an investigator in another city during the 1930s, "Hell, brother, you don't have to look far to know there's a workin' class. We may not say so. But look at what we do. Work. Look at who we run around with and bull with. Workers. Look at where we live. If you can find anybody but workers in my block, I'll eat 'em. . . . Look at how we get along. Just like every other damned worker. Hell's bells, of course, there's a workin' class, and

its gettin' more so every day." . . . By voting Democratic and supporting the New Deal, many workers felt that they were affirming rather than denying their class status. American society was polarized enough in the midst of the Great Depression that workers could feel that supporting a sympathetic mainstream party like the Democrats was a way of pursuing their class interests. Many even went so far as to consider the Democratic Party a workers' party.

One might wonder if workers were deceiving themselves in believing that the Democratic Party really had their interests at heart. But many of their experiences reinforced that view. Foremost was the political language that Roosevelt used. It was the president of the United States, for example, not some rabble-rousing radical, who pledged himself when accepting his party's nomination in 1936 to take on the "economic royalists" who were fast creating a "new industrial dictatorship" that autocratically set the conditions of labor. "Private enterprise" had become "privileged enterprise." At many other times as well, workers heard Roosevelt lash out at their bosses and commit himself to protecting "the common man" and woman. The Republicans only helped FDR's image as the working person's president, determined to turn things upside down, by lambasting the New Deal as a dangerous break with the past, "one that is alien to everything this country has ever before known."

This political rhetoric affected workers so powerfully because it fit well with the world they knew in Chicago. By the election of 1936, Chicago was polarized into political camps with definite class identities. In their factories, workers and their bosses were almost always on opposite sides. "Thes companys shure dont want you President" [*sic*], one steelworker wrote Roosevelt. Eva Barnes learned that lesson the hard way. She arrived at her job assembling radios one day wearing a big Roosevelt button. When she was told to take it off and refused, "they said, 'You're for Roosevelt, you get out, you don't get a job.'" Other Chicago employers made their preferences clear from the start by putting Alf Landon leaflets, which denounced FDR, into workers' pay envelopes.

As workers took stock of political allegiances beyond their workplaces, in the city as a whole, they could not help but notice that even a place as Democratic as Chicago divided along class lines. In 1936, 81 percent of those with family incomes under a thousand dollars a year voted for Roosevelt, as did 79 percent of

those earning one to two thousand dollars; in contrast, only 46 percent of people with family income over five thousand dollars pulled the lever for Roosevelt. Cutting it another way, FDR won 82 percent of unskilled and semiskilled worker votes and only 32 percent of major business executives and 39 percent of a white collar group like engineers. Neighborhoods where well-to-do native whites resided were conspicuous Republican strongholds. A soloist at the elite Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago recalled getting up to sing at services the Sunday before election day in 1936 and looking out into a congregation of a thousand: "It was a sea of yellow. Everybody was decorated with large yellow Landon sunflower buttons. Just the impact of the thing suddenly made me realize there is such a thing as class distinction in America." . . .

Workers' identification with the Democratic Party does not mean that they did not recognize some of the limitations of the New Deal and try to push it farther to the left. In many ways the National Labor Relations Act, Social Security, and other prolabor legislation like the Fair Labor Standards Act were testimony to the power of working-class voters who pressured for progressive state action. . . . But workers' ability to achieve much of the relief and security they sought through the Democrats, as limited as some of that legislation turned out to be, reinforced their sense that they had an important voice in the party. Though workers were participating in mainstream politics, they felt they were joining with men and women of other ethnicities and races to get themselves, as workers, a new deal.

Of course, the Democratic Party was not a labor party explicitly committed to pushing an essentially anticapitalist trade union agenda in the political arena. The Democrats had to keep happy a broad-based coalition, including conservative southerners and antiurban rural interests, which made all their programs less progressive than they might have been. And Roosevelt, despite a rhetoric of class carefully tuned to scare some people and win others, had some very traditional ideas about who should hold power in American society. The result, as mentioned earlier, was that the New Dealers showed more ambivalence toward using the state for reform than their working-class supporters and explicitly rejected—through, for example, the regressive way they structured new tax laws and social security—workers' vision of a moral capitalism that would redistribute American wealth. The paradox of workers'

politicization through the Democratic Party during the 1930s was that they became invested in a party that they felt served their interests much more than it did. Workers learned to live in the American version of the welfare state so well that they accepted inequitable programs like unemployment insurance, which let states set variant and inadequate benefits, without voicing much criticism of the New Deal. To the extent that the New Deal perpetuated inequalities and offered some people more of a "raw" than a "new" deal, workers themselves bear some responsibility.

Workers nonetheless made an enormous shift during the thirties from the world of welfare capitalism to a welfare state. When their welfare capitalist employers and ethnic communities who had promised to care for them in the 1920s let them down in the crisis of the Great Depression, workers found a new protector in the state. In time, as they began to participate more in national politics, they grew to feel that that protection was something they deserved. The depression, rather than turning workers against the political system, as many at the time feared it might, tied workers to it more tightly than ever as they became party voters and the beneficiaries of government programs. It is very possible that the New Deal's impact should be measured less by the lasting accomplishments of its reforms and more by the attitudinal changes it produced in a generation of working-class Americans who now looked to Washington to deliver the American dream.

**Nancy J. Weiss**

## Why Blacks Became Democrats

**A majority of African Americans who voted in the 1932 election remained loyal to the Republican Party by casting their ballots for Herbert Hoover. Four years later, however, they voted overwhelmingly for Franklin Roosevelt and Democratic candidates, and this realignment of black voters has proven to be the most enduring legacy of the New Deal coalition.**

Weiss, Nancy, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR*, Copyright © 1983 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

Historians have often asked why black voters became Democrats. Why vote for Roosevelt when FDR had bowed to the pressure of white southerners by refusing to endorse antilynching bills, legislation to ban the noxious poll tax, or any other civil rights measure? Why vote the New Deal when the NRA, the AAA, and the CCC accepted discriminatory and segregationist practices? Why abandon the Republicans when programs such as the AAA were encouraging the displacement of black tenant farmers and sharecroppers from southern plantations?

In the selection that follows the historian Nancy Weiss attributes black America's political conversion to both the symbolic and the tangible benefits of the New Deal. In spite of the discrimination and the refusal to embrace equal rights, Roosevelt, his wife Eleanor, and the New Deal programs paid more attention to African Americans than had any previous administration since Reconstruction.

This selection is drawn from Weiss's book *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (1983).

Perceptive observers recognized the paradox in the outpouring of black support for the New Deal in the election of 1936. One need not be a diehard Republican to wonder at the marriage between a black electorate and a Democratic party that seemed purposefully to evade any important issue that smacked of race. How could a President who sidestepped on antilynching legislation, seemed outwardly unperturbed by disfranchisement and segregation, and presided over relief programs rife with discrimination, win an overwhelming majority of black votes, and, in so doing, transform the political habits of black Americans for decades to come?

New Deal racial attitudes and discriminatory practices certainly mattered. Black spokesmen—publicists, politicians, leaders of the organizations for racial advancement, and others—protested vigorously against them. But that protest related more to the ritual of black leadership than it did to actual expectations about realizable progress. Positions of national leadership among blacks were few and thus hotly contested; since the late nineteenth century, competition for them had turned on different approaches to racial advancement. For black spokesmen not to have articulated and fought for a racial agenda would have been unthinkable. No newspaper with any pretensions of speaking for the race could have failed to flay the Roosevelt administration for its shortcomings on racial issues. No leader could keep any standing among his colleagues or constituency if he failed to set forth prescriptions for