

Politics and Popular Culture during the Great Depression

- "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" vs. "Happy Days are Here Again"
 - in the first song, no benefits to fall back on from his military service
 - Today, U.S. has a pretty good system of compensating veterans for their service, was not the case in 1930s--"Al" in "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" is a case-in-point example of that
- One important point to take away/big picture: Just how **perfectly in alignment of the popular culture in the 1930s is with the political reforms of the 1930s**--really good overlap between the two
- 1928-loved by everyone when he was elected, hated by 1932 when he was up against FDR
 - Hoover approved the orders that led to American military men shooting down other soldiers, so yeah
- "Happy Days are Here Again"
 - Not everything w/ regard to the popular culture or the political culture of the 1930s focuses on the doom and gloom--more complicated than that**
 - Although there was nothing practical to be happy about in 1932, there was a sense of optimism that things could get better--and Roosevelt does a really good job of capitalizing and centering his campaign around this--became his campaign song, practically
 - Roosevelt campaigns by promising the American people a "New Deal"--not very specific on what that will look like, but he promises something better than 25% unemployment, etc...
- **The First Inaugural-FDR**
 - "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself...which paralyzes needed efforts"
things will get better
 - absolutely nothing specific in the part of the speech heard in class, or any of the rest of it apparently an incredibly radical speech--he talks about making a much more powerful presidency
 - talks about the possibility of Congress failing to act
 - talks about what he will do as president of the United States if Congress fails to act to meet this national emergency
 - He will seek the same degree of power in this instance as if the country was to face a foreign foe
 - (Irony in a way, because Congress has been trying very hard to act at this time but was fighting obstruction from the Hoover White House)
 - FDR sets Congress up to be a bad guy, but at this point in time Congress hasn't really shown any bad behavior yet
 - He is saying *he will get the job done*
 - Roosevelt's grim smile in real life (knew he was coming into the presidency at a very perilous time) vs. The New Yorker cover with a huge smile
- **Franklin D Roosevelt**
 - A president that we have deified (or vilified depending)
 - He was an average C student in college
 - someone who had good family connections-- a well to do family (former president Teddy Roosevelt was his cousin)
 - Had served during the Woodrow Wilson presidency
 - served as Governor of New York
 - He is someone who could have gone either way as president--really great or mediocre
 - Professor Young would argue that it was just as much what was inside of FDR that made him a great leader as much as it was the time of his presidency
- **"The First Hundred Days"**
 - almost cliché to judge a president by the first 100 days during his presidency
 - this benchmark came into being because of the diff. time period that Congress met versus today
 - 1933: Congress not set to meet again to create legislation until the end of the year after inaugural address--wasn't going to be any great moment of legislation; however, banking in country almost shut down and unemployment through the roof during this time period
 - a big problem that needs immediate solution--cannot wait until December
 - FDR calls for a special meeting of congress--100 days after his inauguration it lasted until March
 - no set end date for the special session
 - they just happened to stay in session for 100 days, an accident--so that 100 days test became a test that all later presidents were held up to in the future
 - would argue that its very artificial for subsequent presidents, but very real for FDR's presidency
 - 15 major pieces of legislation came out of Congress during that 100 day session--would like to think its all FDR but really only 2 legislative moves were pure FDR but really when looking closer only 1 was fully FDR's doing/thinking/creation
 - all other pieces of legislation were something that someone else in Congress had really been

working on--yet becomes known to public as all FDR

Banking and Business

- we have to have access to our banks--so that's the most important problem
 - 2 remedies put into place
 - **Emergency Banking Bill**
 - requires all remaining banks still open to close until they can have their books inspected to see if they are sound and prove to auditors that they have enough funds in reserve to back up their deposits--if all looks good, then they can re-open (quick fix--a bandaid)
 - **FDIC**
 - Longer term reform bill passed towards the end of this session to do 2 things
 - First component/most important part: the part that Roosevelt did not like very much-->FDIC
 - this bank guarantee component was not a Roosevelt idea, he thought it was a very bad idea and that it would protect bad banks--didn't want it put into place; this measure came out of congress--and ultimately was a very good piece of legislation
 - less about backing it up and more about the faith we have in our money being secure

Agriculture

- we all like to eat, but don't consider ourselves in an agrarian economy today
- Agriculture was much more important to many more people in the 1930s than would be the case today
 - solution they come up with: a limitation on the crops that can be produced
 - ultimately, they pay farmers to produce less (has something to do with the FDIC but we're not going into this...)

Relief

- see this primarily through building programs
- during the 1930s, hundreds of thousands of roads were built with federal government dollars going to people employed by the federal government for working on this infrastructure
- PWA workers, etc.
- Tremendous investment in infrastructure
 - what Dr. Young would go to when someone says that FDR's New Deal did not in itself pull the country out of the Depression--true, it took WWII to do that, BUT this spending on infrastructure by the federal gov't/capital investments sets up the country for future success even if all the benefits were not derived in the 1930s
 - Takeaway: an activist congress paired up with an activist President to bring about some relief/improvement/and trying to be pretty comprehensive as far as the areas of problem go--not much that gets left out in the "First Hundred Days"

Outlaw Culture and the Great Depression

- There is a continued criticism of capitalism that is popular in American culture even while these political reforms are being put into place
- **Best way to look at this criticism of capitalism is by looking at who Americans were cheering for during the 1930s**
 - didn't have to go to their local movie house to find a fictional gangster to root for, plenty of real life ones

John Herbert Dillinger

- possibly the most famous outlaws of this time period (like Bonnie and Clyde, etc)
- robbing banks, becoming anti-hero heroes
- what all these outlaws have in common: they are targeting banks
 - lots of people during the 1930s either personally lost money in a bank or know someone that did, or lost their jobs because their boss lost money in the bank and couldn't afford to pay their employees---->so bankers become the bad guy to America now
- Dillinger roamed the mid-west robbing banks
- Reward of \$10,000/\$5,000 (a lot of money back then)
 - major incentive, but not a lot of American people would see Dillinger go down, vicarious pleasure in his sticking it to the banks
 - but people also died as a result of his criminal activity
- American people also interested in Dillinger b/c he combined his bank robbing with sexual exploits
 - he'd also been arrested and broke out of jail
 - high-speed car chases, etc.
 - Dillinger is a form of entertainment
- What brings Dillinger down? ultimately, a much larger federal government brings him down

- FBI
Hoover becoming much more important in the FBI structure, but realized he's not going to keep his job unless he gets Dillinger
So in part b/c of the federal reward Congress offers for Dillinger (10 most wanted) and Dillinger gets mad because the federal gov't is consolidating its power among legal enforcement

The Second New Deal

Toward the end of Roosevelt's first term, there was a major push to go forward with even more legislation/reform

- **Works Progress Administration**

another federal government employed agency--but this type of work relief goes further, even beyond infrastructure creation

this program looks for ways not only to have dams built but also ways to have artists, actors, writers employed--federal funding for arts and the humanities

- modern example/correlation: PBS, Sesame Street

Not just pragmatic, thinking towards utilizing people's talents/making that an available option for him

- **Social Security**

FICA taking money from our paychecks--something to fall back on in mid-60s, in a perfect world..

- The poorest demographic of Americans in the 1930s were the elderly--poorest statistically in the U.S.

- There were no real employment systems (Roth IRA, etc.) in place/existent at this time unless you just happened to plan ahead by putting money aside for your old age
- makes the U.S. very much behind it's western industrial counterparts like Great Britain and Germany which had programs for this sort of issue

- *The strongest advocates of social security wanted a cradle system--that carried people from the cradle to the grave*

- **Roosevelt knew this wasn't possible--so he said lets focus on the sector or society that needs it most, the elderly**

AARP-one of the strongest lobbies on capital hill, social security isn't going anywhere--and Roosevelt knew that this was going to happen

65

- why was 65 the retirement age? average american in 1935 lived to a ripe young age of 63...social security was not intended to take care of people into the 90s--was supposed to be a very temporary bridge between quitting working and dying a year later

- **National Labor Relations Act**

forces employers to sit down and bargain w/ unions

- Results:

- tremendous upsurge in union membership as a result of this reform
- better payment/benefit for union members working

The Roosevelt Presence

- "It's a Bird, It's a Plane, It's Superman!"
- FDR had a hard time even walking after suffering from polio
- People wrote letters to FDR inviting him to come to his house for dinner for 'a meal a working man couldn't have before your presidency'---deified; yet the rich people vilified him--didn't like his economic policy