

Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time

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University library shelves on both sides of the Atlantic groan under the weight of synoptic studies of the era of FDR. Academic efforts to understand this pivotal period in American and global history, represented by the world economic collapse of the 1930s and the devastation wrought by the Second World War, began in earnest in the 1950s with multi-volume works by Frank Freidel and James MacGregor Burns, quickly followed in 1963 by William Leuchtenburg's magisterial survey. More recently, Anthony Badger and David Kennedy have presented critical but sympathetic portraits of the Roosevelt presidency, while the likes of Amity Shlaes and Conrad Black have injected a strong dose of neoliberal scepticism into the mix.⁽¹⁾ This list, far from exhaustive, represents only the broad survey literature on the subject of FDR, the New Deal, and the Second World War. So when I was first asked to review this new offering by acclaimed Columbia political scientist Ira Katznelson, my first instinct was to wonder what new perspective could be brought to bear on such a well-combed subject.

The answer is robustly stated in the introduction to the book. Katznelson wishes to recast our understanding of Roosevelt's New Deal in a number of interconnected ways, of which two stand out as paramount. First, he wishes to place the response of the United States to the global economic calamity of the 1930s more firmly into an international perspective, weaving discussion of the corporatist approaches of totalitarian states in Europe into his narrative about New Deal policymaking, and placing FDR's response to the threat of Fascism and the global descent into war at the centre of the story of New Deal statecraft. The American state that emerged from the Second World War owed as much to the planning and political transformations of the war effort itself as it did to the policy experiments of the 1930s. Secondly, Katznelson seeks to utilize his

considerable expertise as an analyst of Congress and of the complex dynamics of the levers of American governance to shift our attention from the executive branch towards those political actors whose support or opposition to New Deal measures would ultimately determine the fate of the reform impulse in American politics in these years: members of Congress in general, and white southern segregationists in particular.

This is in large part a study of the Faustian pacts with political forces at home and abroad deeply hostile to any attempt to take the New Deal to its logical conclusion and smash both racial segregation at home and totalitarianism abroad. It is a story of the considerable and ambitious revolution in American governance between 1933 and the late 1940s, as the federal government both remade the relationship between the state and the people at home and also constructed a vast national security state that would alter the lives of Americans and countless others around the world for the rest of the century. It is also the tale of the limits of that revolution in the constitutional compact between the government and the governed, demonstrating how the political structure of the United States allowed southern Democrats to shape the New Deal and to limit its transformative power over American society, particularly in terms of racial equality. ‘Crucially,’ Katznelson argues, ‘the South permitted American liberal democracy the space within which to proceed, but it restricted American policymaking to what I call a “southern cage,” from which there was no escape’ (p. 16). The role of segregationist politics in making – and sometimes breaking – the New Deal is the centrepiece of the book, informing both the discussion of domestic policymaking and of foreign policy. Indeed, the author goes so far as to claim that the role the southern political system played ‘in national politics is the most overlooked theme in almost all previous histories of the New Deal’ (p. 15).

This claim explains some of the issues I have with the book as a whole, but it is important to stress first of all the important contribution it makes to the debate over the New Deal. Ira Katznelson brings his enormous experience of and expertise in the history of American politics and institutions to bear on this vast subject, and his impressive command of the material shows on every page. He has read widely and deeply, and has mined primary as well as secondary sources to paint a wide-ranging and satisfyingly rich portrait of this pivotal period in American and world history. His main argument concerning the ‘southern cage’ is forcefully made, and he reaches beyond the standard narrative of southern hostility to the later New Deal to show how southern congressmen translated their early support for the expansion of the state at home when it left untouched traditional racial hierarchies into later strong support for the construction of the national security state. ‘An equation that correlated economic growth with military spending had taken hold in the South’, he argues, ‘and defense spending came to supplant in many ways the region’s prior agricultural dependency’ (p. 427). His ability to see the connections between early 20th-century agrarian southern politics and the emergence of the modern South in the context of America’s rise to global hegemony is interesting and fresh, especially to a non-specialist audience.

The author’s determination to take together the twin stories of domestic reform and the nation’s rise to global power, narratives that often sit uneasily side by side or are treated as separate histories, gives the reader many fascinating insights. We get a sustained treatment of the thorny question of the soldier’s ballot during World War Two. There is a portrait of the Soviet judge at Nuremberg, Iola Nikitchenko, as a case study of the difficult moral dilemma democracies like the United States had to face as they forged alliances with dictatorships. There is much useful material on the role of scientific research and development in the making of the post-war American state. The major battles of the Roosevelt era, tackling both economic policy and the road to war and its aftermath, are interlinked in telling and informative ways. The book provides a rewarding and suggestive narrative arc that shows convincingly how racism and war both blunted the capacity of the United States to provide social justice for all and also sowed the seeds for future social upheaval and reform.

Inevitably a book of this size and scope will raise many questions that would repay further investigation and consideration. Certainly this reader, having read widely in the field and having taught the New Deal era since the start of his career, was both fascinated and frustrated by the book and its arguments. It was good to see the analytical framework predicated upon race and the southern dominance of the American political system that has informed some of Katznelson’s previous work, notably his peerless 1993 article on the southern veto in Congress and his 2005 book, *When Affirmative Action Was White*, placed into a broader

historical treatment for a wider audience.⁽²⁾ The author cites the latter work in his introduction, whilst also arguing that few other works (he mentions only one, by Freidel) place the white South at the centre of New Deal statecraft. 'Despite its centrality, southern power has always hovered at the fringe of most New Deal portraits,' he claims (p. 22). This assertion, poorly supported in the endnotes to the introduction, does historians like James T. Patterson, who wrote about congressional conservatives and the New Deal back in 1967, and Tony Badger, who has long married analysis of the New Deal order and the South, a disservice.⁽³⁾ Perhaps it is fairer to say that a general readership of a trade book on the New Deal will find Katznelson's important central thesis new and unexpected, but it is not a fair description of the specialist historiography, which includes Katznelson's own prior work.

Katznelson's placing of the 'southern cage' at the heart of his argument is convincing and makes the book distinctive among the array of synoptic works already available, but it also creates problems. Foremost amongst these is the organisation of the book. There is no narrative arc to speak of in the first two sections but rather an attempt to place New Deal policymaking at home and abroad into the context of southern racism and an ambivalent relationship with dictatorship in Europe by interspersing analysis of key policies and events over time with vignettes and case studies of particular individuals or policies that illustrate the racist constraints. The rationale for choosing these illustrative diversions over others is not always clear, and is not helped by the lack of chronological framing of the case studies. The first half of the book leaps about chronologically and thematically before the third and fourth sections restore a narrative and chronological structure to the work. The book is at once a general history of the New Deal and Second World War period in the United States and a detailed analysis of Southern control over political institutions and the impact of the shadow of totalitarianism on the United States. The result is an overlong and unwieldy tome that might have benefited from some abridgement and consolidation. For instance, the comment of Senator Carter Glass that the New Deal was 'an utterly dangerous effort of the federal government to transplant Hitlerism to every corner of the nation' appears on page 161 and again on page 255, for the simple reason that the second citation comes when the author has, in effect, re-started the book in section three and so needs to re-issue much of the context provided earlier in the section on the South. The organisation of the work also makes for some unusual emphases: Italian Fascist aviator Italo Balbo gets a third of a chapter devoted to his rapturous reception in the US after his transatlantic flight (a reception due in large part surely to the fact that he had flown the Atlantic, not because he was a Fascist), but key congressional New Dealers (a vital counterweight to the Southern bloc in Congress and influential in shaping much New Deal social and labour legislation) get little treatment. At times I had to work hard to keep the big issues at the forefront of my mind.

Most notable by its absence from the history presented here is the wider institutional and constitutional context in which Southern white hegemony over the political process played out. Only mentioned in passing is the crucial role played by the United States Supreme Court in the shaping of the relationship between government – state and federal – and its citizens in the early 20th century. Political hostility to a regulatory state transcended the white South: the New Deal arrived at the end of a 30-year period in which the fifth and 14th amendments were repeatedly affirmed in law to mean government had no legal right to intervene in contractual arrangements between individuals or organisations. Few of these Justices were southerners, but their legal regime of 'freedom of contract' did much to constrain the boundaries of state power and to blunt the social impact of government until the late 1930s. Furthermore, the author convinces in his fresh appraisal of the radicalism of the National Recovery Administration, passed into law with Southern support, but it was the rushed and sloppily conceived drafting of the legislation in the febrile early days of the administration that doomed it to destruction at the hands of a unanimous Court. When the Committee on Economic Security was formed in 1934 to begin drafting what would become the Social Security Act, their legal team was acutely aware of the constitutional constraints that would force the administration to work within certain parameters if the law was to stand. The notion that it was southern racism that was alone responsible for the glaring inadequacies of New Deal legislation simplifies a more complex story in which Southern Democratic control of congressional politics is part of a constitutional system of governance that has often impeded the creation of a more just economic and social citizenship. I appreciate that constitutional jurisprudence is not the central focus of the book, but its near absence makes the work lop-sided and wrenches the impact of Southern lawmen from the larger context. Interestingly, the book nods towards the New Deal as a harbinger

of ‘whole openings for social change that were grasped by an incipient, soon powerful, movement for equal rights for blacks’ (p. 486), but such changes would have been difficult to predict without the increasing intervention of the Courts from the 1940s onwards in civil rights matters. President Roosevelt’s judicial appointments to the highest Court in the land, confirmed in the southern-dominated Senate, were instrumental here.

This is a rich and enviably learned study of a formative period in the creation of the modern United States, a country with a hugely larger state apparatus than could have been imagined before FDR and with a significantly expanded role on the global stage. It brings timely perspective to a subject often poorly understood in contemporary political debate and yet often cited, by both liberals and conservatives, as signalling the birth of an era of governance still being played out. Yet in trying to be both a general survey of the age of FDR and a focused study of Southern politics as the central driving force of political change in the United States, it does not manage to be definitive, but instead should be read alongside works by Leuchtenburg, Badger, and Kennedy to place its major interventions onto a broader canvas. Katznelson is surely right that the politics of the South must be placed front and centre in understanding ‘the origins of our time’: it is gerrymandered southern congressional districts that help give 21st-century Republicans the edge in the House of Representatives and help frustrate President Obama’s agenda, and the South is now the heart of ‘red state’ politics just as it was the heart of Democracy a century ago. And the national security state established as the last major contribution of the New Deal administrations continues to influence both American politics and the wider world in vitally important ways. This book is a valuable contribution to helping us understand how we got here.

Notes

1. Frank Freidel, *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (4 vols., Boston, 1952); James Macgregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York, NY, 1956); Burns, *Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom* (New York, NY, 1970); William Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York, NY 1963); Anthony Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933–1940* (Basingstoke, 1989); David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929–1945* (New York, NY, 1999); Amity Shlaes, *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (New York, NY, 2008); Conrad Black, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Champion of Freedom* (London, 2003).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ira Katznelson, Kim Geiger, Daniel Kryder, ‘Limiting liberalism: the southern veto in Congress, 1933–1950’, *Political Science Quarterly*, 108, 2 (Summer 1993), 283–306; Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York, NY, 2005).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933–1939* (Lexington, KY, 1967).[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

New York Review of Books

<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/sep/26/new-deal-we-didnt-know/> [2]

New Yorker

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2013/03/04/130304crbo_books_menand [3]

Washington Post

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fear-itself-the-new-deal-and-the-origins-of-our-time-by-ira-katznelson/2013/03/01/a4030f2c-7b72-11e2-a044-676856536b40_story.html [4]

New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/07/books/review/fear-itself-by-ira-katznelson.html> [5]

Literary Review

http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/sandbrook_03_13.php [6]

London Review of Books

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n08/david-runciman/destiny-v-democracy> [7]

Boston Globe

<http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2013/03/16/book-review-fear-itself-ira-katznelson/SNrcsJh9byBKvF82HLIYXN/story.html>

[8]

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[4] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/fear-itself-the-new-deal-and-the-origins-of-our-time-by-ira-katznelson/2013/03/01/a4030f2c-7b72-11e2-a044-676856536b40_story.html

[5] http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/07/books/review/fear-itself-by-ira-katznelson.html?_r=0

[6] http://www.literaryreview.co.uk/sandbrook_03_13.php

[7] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n08/david-runciman/destiny-v-democracy>

[8] <http://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2013/03/16/book-review-fear-itself-ira-katznelson/SNrCsJh9byBKvF82HLIYXN/story.html>

[9] <http://www.essaysinhistory.com/review/2013/188>