

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William Leuchtenburg. *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. xiii + 377 pp. \$18.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-08299-0.

Reviewed by Stephen James Randall (University of Calgary)  
Published on H-Pol (September, 1998)



## The Roosevelt Legacy

Those familiar with the career contributions of William Leuchtenburg to the study of Franklin Roosevelt will recognize in *The FDR Years* many of the ideas that have appeared in his earlier publications. Those who may not be familiar with Leuchtenburg, including his most recent publications, *The Supreme Court Reborn* and *In The Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to Bill Clinton* will find *The FDR Years* an excellent synthesis of much of his previous scholarship. The volume will also appeal to the reader with a more general interest in the Roosevelt era (in particular because, as with all of Leuchtenburg's work, this one is engagingly written and cogently argued).

All nine chapters in this volume have appeared earlier in a variety of publications, and they cover the author's remarkable career of almost half-a-century. Each essay has been significantly revised, however, to bring it into line with subsequent scholarship, new sources, and Leuchtenburg's own evolving thinking on the themes he addresses. Usefully, he provides a thorough introduction to each chapter, outlining how his views on an issue have changed (when they have), and relating the current chapter to the previously published version. The result is that the collection adds to our knowledge of the era whether we are a specialist or a general reader, and the volume becomes particularly valuable for undergraduates, seeking to understand not only the nature of the New Deal and Roosevelt's politics but also the ways in which that era has been interpreted over the past several decades.

The essays are disparate in theme, ranging from his

opening essay on Roosevelt as the first modern president to the important concluding chapter, "The Europeanization of America, 1929-1950." In the other chapters he examines the appropriateness of the use of the analogy between New Deal efforts to tame the depression and the waging of war; he has a thoughtful and readable chapter on Louisiana Democrat Huey Long—the Kingfish—and his relationship with Roosevelt; another chapter specifically examines the critical election of 1936, with the construction of the modern Democratic Party and its broad coalition of labour, women's interest groups, blacks and immigrants; one essay is an examination of the importance of the Tennessee Valley Authority, not only within the New Deal context but also its larger significance in the evolution of the role of the state and the private sector in American politics. As he notes in this chapter's introduction, his view of the and its impact on the region in which it operated has become more critical than in his earlier treatments, as it has with many of the more recent scholars working in the field. He retains some of his positive views of the project, however, and still reflects in his conclusion that it remains a remarkable achievement.

Chapter Six, "Hurricane Politics," is drawn from Leuchtenburg's doctoral dissertation at Columbia University and a 1953 Harvard University press volume, *Flood Control Politics: The Connecticut River Problem, 1929-1950*. Here, the author reflects not only on his strong faith at the end of the 1940s in what the TVA had achieved, but also on his evident conviction that the TVA model should have been applied to other regions in the nation, in this case the Connecticut River. He notes that

in attempting to understand the factors which ultimately led to the ending of the New Deal, historians have tended to concentrate on such macro-historical factors as the Supreme Court packing plan; but Leuchtenburg suggests that the Connecticut river situation underlines our need to devote equal attention to the myriad of local and state political conflicts that contributed to an undermining of support for New Deal statism.

Some readers may recall Chapter Seven as the most novel contribution to this volume. It is drawn from the 1970 volume edited by John A. Garraty, *Interpreting American History: Conversations with Historians*. Garraty's study was based on extensive interviews with a number of leading American historians in the late 1960s, one of which was William Leuchtenburg on the New Deal era. The interviews were also part of the valuable Columbia University Oral History Project. One of Leuchtenburg's observations in that interview clearly encapsulates his view of the depression and of the New Deal, an interpretation that he shares with most historians of U.S. history from this period: "The Depression was a watershed in American history; no explanation of the 1930s or subsequent years is satisfactory if it does not recognize what an enormous blow the Depression was, what a tremendous sense some people had that an era was ending" (p. 211). Here, Leuchtenburg also emphasized that he did not agree with some of the revisionist, New Left scholarship of the 1960s, which had criticized Roosevelt and the New Deal for its failures to make an significant impact on the lives of women, blacks, South-

ern sharecroppers and in particular the poor of America as a whole. There is nothing in this volume that suggests he has been swayed from his interpretation thirty years ago. In chapter that follows, "The Achievement of the New Deal," originally presented as the Harmsworth Professorship Inaugural Lecture at Oxford in 1972, Leuchtenburg stresses once again the accomplishments of the New Deal in social security policy, labour relations, business regulation, among other areas.

In the past twenty years, in particular with the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, the accomplishments of the New Deal and the values which the Democratic Party of Franklin Roosevelt held dear came into much disrepute. It is difficult for those who continued to share the liberal values and optimism of that generation to hear basic American liberalism now treated as a term of derision by right-wing critics. Although the pendulum has happily begun to shift back from that extreme, the presidency of William Clinton has demonstrated the degree to which there has been a fundamental departure in American politics from the Roosevelt era. Yet, the political debate that continues to engage Americans underlines the fact that Leuchtenburg's treatment of the New Deal remains fresh and continues to resonate as we near the end of the twentieth century.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

**Citation:** Stephen James Randall. Review of Leuchtenburg, William, *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. September, 1998.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2297>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).