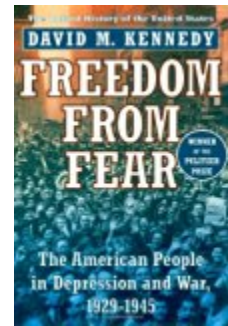


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David M. Kennedy. *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xviii + 936 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-503834-7.

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The Era of FDR

In *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, David Kennedy has produced a book for all readers. The general reader will find it an interesting and even absorbing story of one of the most fascinating eras in American history, the professional historian will find it a balanced review of this watershed period based on current research and scholarly evaluations, and the expert in twentieth-century America will find here not only the same excellent review, but also less familiar vignettes and pieces of evidence and historical judgments that will challenge his or her own.

Kennedy acknowledges that the United States faced serious economic and social problems throughout the 1920s. Too many industrial workers were unemployed and too few had financial security for the future, farmers received too little from the sale of their produce, interest on the national debt absorbed one-third of the federal budget, and speculative fever and easy money were hastening the Wall Street Crash. Immigrants were adjusting to American life only with difficulty, Black Americans confronted segregation and discrimination throughout the south, and both faced open hatred from a revived Ku Klux Klan.

Kennedy's Herbert Hoover is well intentioned, innovative, but ultimately unsuccessful. To address the farm problem, the president called congress into special session in early 1929 to pass the Agricultural Marketing Act. When the Crash occurred, he pleaded with business leaders to hold the line on wages and employment, and he un-

dertook a \$140,000,000 public works program. He signed the Hawley-Smoot Tariff only reluctantly, favoring its high duties on farm products but not on industrial goods. He was willing to experiment with new agencies—the National Credit Association, the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation—but these came too late. He early on underestimated the severity of the collapse, remained orthodox on the gold standard and balanced budget too long, and, in the author's judgment, “remained a manager, not a politician” (p. 65), unable to lead congress or the country.

His successor, Franklin Roosevelt, was able to do both. Assuming office in March, 1933, he surrounded himself with a team of academic brain-trusters who agreed on three points: that the causes of the Depression were domestic, that the Brandeisian philosophy of trust-busting was misguided, and that big government was needed to balance big industry. Despite such agreement, Kennedy suggests that it was only in 1934-1935 that the president was able to etch “the outlines of a structured and durable social philosophy that constituted the ideological heart of the New Deal” (p. 244).

The discussion of Roosevelt's New Deal program is sprinkled with interesting insights and asides. Federal relief programs served to wean the loyalties of needy families away from local political machines and towards the federal government, Harry Hopkins' Civil Works Administration spent \$200,000,000 on relief each month while Harold Ickes' much larger Public Works Administration

spent a total of only \$110,000,000 in its first six months, 95 percent of Americans were required to pay no income taxes in 1935 and John D. Rockefeller was the only person in the highest 79 percent bracket stipulated in the Wealth Tax Act that year, and, for all the violent strikes of 1934-1937, labor did not attempt to overthrow the capitalistic system but managed to keep the attraction of Socialism and Communism weak and ineffective.

The author organizes the social history of the 1930s in part around the investigations of local conditions made by Lorena Hickok, a former Associated Press reporter, at the behest of Harry Hopkins. Her investigations were thorough and her language blunt and picturesque. Thirteen million workers were unemployed in 1933 and millions more were on drastically reduced hours. The position of women in the work force was ambiguous. Married women were often the first released since their husbands were presumed to be the primary providers, but the traditionally women's jobs of teaching, telephone assistance, and secretarial service were less affected by unemployment than was heavy industry. Coal mining was hazardous and disease-ridden in the best of times, and the miners' lot became truly desperate when the price of coal plummeted. Rural America was particularly hard hit. Farm prices were too low to cover the cost of shipping goods to market, and drought and dust storms added to the tragedy. Black Americans suffered most, often evicted from the land they cultivated as tenants or sharecroppers, and faced with indifference at best and hostility at worst from society at large. Hickok expressed surprise that Communism and revolution were not more popular.

Kennedy's evaluation of the New Deal is moderate. Although it did not bring about recovery nor redistribute wealth, it did bring economic security to many—to depositors through the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, to stock traders through the Securities and Exchange Commission, to home owners through the Home Owners Loan Corporation, to farmers through Agricultural Adjustment Act payments, to the elderly and unemployed through Social Security, and to laborers through the National Labor Relations and Fair Labor Standards Acts. The New Deal brought important social reforms also: immigrants were brought into public life (and into the Democratic Party), labor unions increased in influence, rural America received electricity and modern conveniences, Black Americans were appointed to federal positions, and all Americans gained a renewed sense of confidence and pride. Complete recovery would not come until World War II, but progress had been made.

Foreign affairs dominate the second half of the book. Kennedy describes the complex background of World War II in rich detail. None of the contending nations—the United States, Great Britain, Germany, Japan, or the Soviet Union—had a clear and consistent foreign policy throughout the 1930s, as policy advisers argued among themselves within each capital. When the Axis powers finally decided on war, the United States was, step by step, suctioned into the conflict. Despite the Neutrality Acts of 1935-1937, the United States began escorting (technically different from convoying) British shipping further and further into the Atlantic. Opportunities were certainly lost and unwise decisions taken in the weeks and days before Pearl Harbor but Kennedy sees no evidence of conspiracy. Hitler's increasingly brutal treatment of the Jews is described in detail, but it is still not clear when other nations should have intervened. Even in 1943, Justice Felix Frankfurter was not sure he could believe accounts of the Holocaust (p. 797).

The narrative of World War II includes brilliant strategies and tragic miscalculations, international teamwork and petty sniping, heroic stands and daily boredom. Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin disagreed heatedly over the timing of the western front and, within the American military, the navy strongly favored the war in the Pacific and the army the conflict in Europe. "One thing that might help win this war," a usually diplomatic General Dwight Eisenhower once remarked, "is to get someone to shoot (Admiral Ernest) King" (p. 570). In contrast to the British, Americans hoped to reduce civilian casualties through precision-bombing but eventually adopted area-bombing against Tokyo, Dresden, and Berlin to shatter enemy morale. With formation flying still in its infancy, 49,000 Allied airmen died in combat over Europe but another 36,000 from air accidents. Many in the West hoped that Russia would not advance too rapidly in World War II and be in a position to dominate more of Europe in the postwar world. Americans have long been familiar with the atrocities committed by the enemy (Auschwitz, Bataan, etc.) but Kennedy describes Allied atrocities also.

The home front is also well portrayed: Roosevelt's early and often clumsy efforts to reorganize the federal bureaucracy to cope with wartime demands; the Manhattan Project's formation to develop an atomic bomb; military construction under brilliant industrialists Henry Kaiser and Henry Ford; the tragic internment of Japanese-Americans and the almost equally tragic discrimination against Black Americans; wartime labor unrest and race riots in Detroit and California; the entrance of millions of women into the work force and the im-

part of this on social customs; the threatened March on Washington by A. Philip Randolph and the establishment of the Fair Employment Practices Committee; the GI Bill of Rights and its influence on American education.

The title of this work, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*, may deserve comment. The central theme throughout is the search for security, amid economic collapse in the 1930s and in face of totalitarian aggression in World War II. Despite the subtitle, the book is not primarily social history. The political and military history of the period is the narrative's

basic chronological core, but the impact of Depression and war in the daily lives of Americans—farmers, soldiers, women, industrial workers, Nisei, Black Americans, the unemployed—is thoroughly portrayed. It is political and social history at their best.

This review was commissioned for H-Pol by Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>

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