Blacks and the New Deal

While the Great Depression dealt blacks a severe blow, with the New Deal the federal government addressed the issue of black poverty for the first time. In doing so, the New Deal marked a turning point in American race relations. Blacks needed government intervention, since they suffered severe economic dislocation in the Depression: by the mid 1930s the proportion of blacks on relief doubled that of whites, and in some southern cities 80 percent of the black population needed public assistance.

The Black Family

The Depression severely disrupted lower-class black family life. Rural black poverty was extreme in the late 1920s, but the Depression made it still worse. Payment for picking cotton dropped to a low of sixty cents for a fourteen-hour day. Sharecropping families were given as little as ten dollars a month for a family of six or eight to live on. The Depression also erased the host of menial "Negro jobs" that had provided employment for blacks, especially in the urban South. Instead, unemployed whites took jobs they formerly disdained: street cleaning, garbage collection, elevator operation, domestic service. Whites organized vigilante groups such as the Black Shirts and the Ku Klux Klan to terrorize blacks and take their jobs. By 1932 half of all blacks living in the urban South could find no work. In the North, where three million blacks lived in the 1930s, conditions were equally bad. The median income of skilled workers declined 48.7 percent. Kelly Miller, a Howard University sociologist, estimated in 1932 that one-third of blacks were unemployed and another third were underemployed, commenting that the African American was "the surplus man, the last to be hired and the first to be fired."

Blacks in the North

Many northern businesses refused to hire blacks; two-thirds of Manhattan's hotels had no African American employees. Black families suffered under the compound stress of unemployment, poverty, and racism. Mortality rates were high among black men. In Chicago two out of five black women were without husbands. In one neighborhood on Chicago's West Side, half of all black households lacked a husband or a father. Nationally, nearly 30 percent of black households were headed by women. High rates of unemployment, the lack of stable jobs, and low wages made it impossible for lower-class black men to function as breadwinners and to survive. Black women were left caring for their children, and they often relied on relatives for help. But the employment prospects for black women were equally dismal. In 1935, 25 percent of all black women workers were on relief, and two-fifths of these were heads of households. Menial occupations that typically employed black women declined; families could no longer afford to hire domestics. Black families turned to their churches and charitable institutions to help sustain them through the Great Depression, but these organizations could do little, and by 1932 most private charities had exhausted their resources. Detroit's charities granted the destitute fifteen cents a day to get by—until they went out of business.
Relief

For the Roosevelt administration and the New Dealers, black poverty was one among many problems. New Deal agencies were reluctant to address black issues independent of overall New Deal programs for fear of alienating Roosevelt’s political support among Southern Democrats. The Federal Housing Administration, for example, constructed segregated housing for the poor and refused to make loans to blacks buying homes in white neighborhoods. Roosevelt himself did not publicly associate with black leaders or causes until 1935. Behind the scenes, however, the New Deal quietly began to address the special needs of blacks. In 1933 Roosevelt approved of the appointment of a white civil rights activist, Clark Foreman, and a black academic, Robert Weaver, to assume responsibility for the fair treatment of blacks by his administration. Early programs that provided food, shelter and clothing helped blacks significantly. These included the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the National Recovery Administration (NRA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) and the National Youth Administration (NYA). Implementing these programs at the local level was no simple matter, since federal officials encountered customs and laws that led to racial discrimination and inequities. Roosevelt attempted to overcome this by issuing an executive order forbidding discrimination in the WPA, but the order was ignored. In Atlanta average monthly relief checks to whites totaled $32.66; to blacks, $19.29. The Tennessee Valley Authority rarely hired blacks to work on its construction projects. Mississippi, with blacks forming more than half the population, permitted only 1.7 percent of its participants in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to be black. Federal officials, reluctant to antagonize southern support, tolerated such discrimination.

Other Programs

Elsewhere in the nation New Deal programs, notably the CCC and the National Youth Administration (NYA), operated with minimal discrimination. In 1935, the peak year of the CCC, there were more than half a million boys in integrated conservation camps. The NYA, for which Mary McLeod Bethune served as administrator of Negro Affairs, provided young men and women with student relief programs that enabled them to stay in school. In distributing more than $40 million, the NYA provided significant help to black youth. The Public Works Administration (PWA) turned more than one-third of all the housing units it built over to blacks, many times in integrated apartment buildings. Despite the best efforts of the PWA’s director, Harold Ickes, the agency remained segregated in the South, but its contributions to black communities in the form of schools, hospitals, and recreational facilities was substantial. The WPA’s educational and cultural program gave wholehearted support to the work of blacks. Nearly a quarter of a million blacks were taught to read and write by the WPA. Black music, literature, and art—including that of artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Samuel Brown—were produced by the Federal Art Project in the WPA. The Roosevelt administration, especially via the efforts of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, also won other victories for the African American cause, such as securing increased funding for Howard University and Freemen’s Hospital in Washington, D.C. The Roosevelt administration placed the first African American on the federal bench and peopled the judiciary with friends sympathetic to the cause of racial equality. Eleanor Roosevelt was seemingly tireless in her pursuit of racial equality, securing important posts for blacks within the administration (tripling the number of blacks working for the federal government) and pleading the cause of racial tolerance in speeches, radio broadcasts, and newspaper editorials. By 1935 Roosevelt was being unofficially advised by what the press termed “the black cabinet,” a score of African American New Dealers, including Rayford Logan and Ralph Bunche, as well civil rights activists.
outside the administration, including NAACP head Walter White and union leader A. Philip Randolph. The administration even supported a three-day National Conference on Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth in Washington, D.C., in 1937. Such efforts, symbolic and substantial, impressed blacks, gave them hope, and caused them to switch their political allegiance to the Democratic Party. The attitude of blacks toward the New Deal was summed up by a group of black social workers who visited Hyde Park in 1939: "For the first time Negro men and women have reason to believe that their government does care."

Sources:


Harvard Sitkoff, A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue, Volume I: The Depression Decade (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978);


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