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"This is Roosevelt's World" - FDR as a Cultural Icon in American Memory

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Chapter 5: Dr. New Deal – Depoliticization for the Sake of Cultural Memory

Introduction

The Great Depression and the New Deal together remain a crucial episode in American twentieth century cultural memory. The 1930s and particularly the New Deal are essential to how FDR has been remembered in America since his presidency. As the first enormous challenge Roosevelt faced as president, the Depression, to which the New Deal was his response, has always been strongly associated with FDR in cultural memory. “Dr. New Deal” – his own coinage – remains one of FDR’s most popular nicknames.¹ However, Anthony Badger has rightly pointed out how strikingly little the remembrance of Roosevelt’s New Deal seems to have to do with the actual political measures that comprised the program. This chapter sets out to understand why the remembrance of the New Deal as an attribute to FDR tends to engage so little with the actual political program, while at the same time the New Deal remains central to the Roosevelt icon.

I have argued in the previous chapter that FDR during his presidency could be seen to occupy a locus of power through his rhetorical and ideological plasticity that ought in Lefort and Mouffe’s view to have remained empty as an essential site of democratic agonism. In a similar way, I will argue here, FDR became a persistent occupant of a key position in American cultural memory. FDR remains widely perceived the epitome of a universally beloved people’s president, and when looking at cultural representations of FDR, it seems clear that the New Deal is one of the standard ingredients contributing to that image, together with World War II, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the fact that he was disabled.

The New Deal has left a wide range of cultural legacies, which continue to provide indexical links to FDR. Some are cultural artefacts created as part of a New Deal program, including especially recognizable post offices with mural paintings, novels and films like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939-1940), the still authoritative series of Federal Writers’ Project’s *American Guidebooks* to the states, and iconic photographs like the works of Dorothea Lange and others. Other legacies of the New Deal associated with FDR are customs or cultural practices rather than artefacts. Major political changes that have evolved from the New Deal include legislation such as the repeal of Prohibition and the introduction of the Social Security Act, which more or less defined the beginning of the American Welfare State (Badger, *New Deal* 229-230), and the increase in power of the Executive branch of government, which Roosevelt claimed from Congress in his first inaugural address. It was an increase in peacetime executive agency that remained in place beyond the New Deal and FDR’s presidency (Schlesinger, *Imperial Presidency* 209-210).

¹ Alter 334; Press Conf. Dec. 28, 1943: presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=16358

Most of these legacies are no longer controversial political issues, or if they are, they are no longer blamed on FDR. Political opponents of federal involvement with healthcare and welfare issues, for instance, would now sooner blame the heritage of Johnson or Clinton than Roosevelt. Thus the New Deal has really acquired a place in *cultural* memory: it continues to be relevant as part of the cultural history of the United States, which in itself constitutes a depoliticization. On the one hand the political changes, even if they were spawned by the New Deal, have now become so detached from it that the association is all but lost. On the other, the changes in the physical and cultural American landscape are preserved as cultural and material capital, rather than as government efforts to intervene in the capitalist market economy. One of the most political legacies of the New Deal is that, because agencies like the National Park Service have to be neutral and non-partisan, the narratives they produce to interpret American history are inevitably consensual and synchronic with mainstream cultural memory.

In this chapter I will show how the New Deal, which was highly controversial throughout the 1930s, is depoliticized in cultural memory in various ways, and instead, is turned into a friendly but also ideologically vacuous attribute to Roosevelt. This process of depoliticizing the New Deal in cultural memory, I will argue, follows two routes – personalization and mediatization – both of which make use of and expand the ideological plasticity which Roosevelt himself already embodied. However, in this process of cultural memory, depoliticization can never quite escape being politically charged. As a result, Roosevelt haters still also have room to “unmask” him as a fundamentally wrong, even dangerous, politician. I will present two case studies of the production, development and proliferation of remembrance practices, one of which shows how the New Deal was depoliticized through personalization – that is, through portraying it as the key expression of Franklin Roosevelt as a good and empathetic man. The second case shows how the First Hundred Days of Roosevelt’s first term as president – the period in which most New Deal programs and measures were launched – over time was turned into a versatile media practice that new American presidents cannot escape as a widely mediatized first litmus test of their effectiveness. In conclusion, I will show how, in the margin, the New Deal, particularly its expansive and depoliticizing strategies, remains an object of justifiable frustration to political opponents. I will also address why this frustration is nonetheless unable to spark real political debate, as did happen during Roosevelt’s presidency, when the Supreme Court ruled many New Deal measures unconstitutional, and FDR in response tried, unsuccessfully, to add extra Justices to the Supreme Court.

Annie

The following scene is taken from the 1982 musical film – and Christmas television classic – *Annie*. This film must for many Americans born after 1970 have been the first cinematic representation of Franklin Roosevelt they have seen, possibly even their first exposure to his iconic character in general. Orphan Annie and her benefactor Oliver Warbucks make a trip to the White House, in order to keep away from Annie’s view the hundreds of couples who claim

to be her parents after Warbucks has offered a large reward. They are received by Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and have tea with them. The story is presumably set in 1933.²

White House lawn – Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt (FDR and ER) await the landing of Oliver Warbucks’ (OW) helicopter.

FDR: Aren’t Republicans ostentatious?

ER: Franklin behave! It’s astonishing that he’s here at all.

FDR: Hahaha!

(to Warbucks) What do you call this thing, Oliver?

OW: An autocopter. Don’t need an airport, just a backyard. They say it can land on a dime, whatever that may be.

FDR: Hahaha! I appreciate your coming down, it means a great deal.

OW: It means nothing. It means only that Annie wanted to meet you.

Annie: It’s nice to meet you, Mr. President Roosevelt.

FDR: My pleasure, Annie. And thank you for bringing the old goat. We’ll make a New Dealer of him yet.

OW: Inconceivable.

ER: Don’t mind him, Oliver

FDR: Come along, Annie! My uncle Theodore, Teddy Roosevelt, used to teach his children to walk on stilts. Now I can’t teach you to walk on stilts, but I can teach you to roll in a chair with wheels, my own private rollercoaster.

Inside the White House.

OW: The New Deal, in my opinion, is badly planned, badly organized and badly administered. You don’t think your programs through, Franklin. You don’t think what they’re going to do to the economy in the long run.

FDR: People don’t eat in the long run.

ER: People can’t feed their children.

FDR: The lucky ones end up in orphanages.

ER: The older ones are abandoned to steal, to starve.

OW: The business of this country is business. You have to organize...

FDR: Take them off the dole and put them to work! That is precisely what I intend to do.

ER: In the national parks, building camps, clearing trails, fighting fires, planting trees...

OW: Hold it, hold it!

FDR: I want to feed them, and house them, and pay them, not much but enough so they can send home to their parents, so they can hold up their heads again and be proud to be Americans.

² The clip discussed here is available on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2kkmCnznx4> [5:27-9:52]

Annie: That's a swell idea!

OW: It isn't a swell idea, Annie, it's mistaken foolishness! Big-hearted and empty-headed. Which parks? Which children? What will it cost? Who's going to organize it? Who's going to run it?

FDR: I, er, was hoping you would.

OW: Me?

FDR: And Annie.

Annie: Leaping lizards!

OW: Out of the question!

Annie: How could I help?

OW: Wait a minute!

FDR: You could help us recruit the young people.

OW: Now hold everything!

FDR: Many of them have given up hope, Annie, they think their government doesn't care whether they live or die. With your help, we can convince them that with a little extra effort on their part...

OW: I want to say something!

Annie: There's a song I used to sing in the orphanage, when I'd get sad, it always cheered me up.

OW: Eleanor...

Annie: Just thinking about tomorrow / Clears away the cobwebs and the sorrow / Till there's none
When I'm stuck with a day that's grey and lonely / I just stick out my chin and grin and say:
The sun will come out tomorrow / so you gotta hang on till tomorrow / Come what may...
Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love you tomorrow / You're only a day away

ER: Oh Frank...

FDR: You'll help us too, won't you Oliver?

OW: Er...

ER: Think of the children! Think of Annie!

Annie: The sun will come out tomorrow...

FDR: Sing Oliver, that's an order from your Commander in Chief!
You too, Eleanor!

ER: I can't sing!

FDR: Sing!

All sing.

All the iconic and long-standing FDR attributes are present: Eleanor, the compassionate yet shrewd wife, the armless wheelchair made of a common dining room chair, the White House,

and FDR's cigarette holder, hat, pince-nez glasses, and buoyant manner. Letting a president appear in a children's musical film in itself depoliticizes him, or otherwise, can be seen as a mark of how depoliticized he had by this time already become. However, this scene is actually surprisingly political in its content. FDR pounces on the occasion for the visit to enlist Oliver Warbucks' astronomic funds and organizing capacities for the execution of New Deal employment programs, which Warbucks as a staunch and self-made Republican obviously opposes. Roosevelt's first words to Annie – "My pleasure, Annie. And thank you for bringing the old goat. We'll make a New Dealer of him yet" – welcoming though they sound, clearly express the fact that he is mainly interested in her as a conduit for approaching her benefactor. He is in fact addressing Warbucks, and Eleanor – "Don't mind him, Oliver" – accordingly responds directly to Warbucks.

The entire scene works in a similar fashion: Annie's presence is primarily important because she enables the exchange in the first place, and because she presents a kind of live specimen case of whom the New Deal purportedly aims to help. This lends a sentimental dimension to FDR's plea, which has its effect on Warbucks as on the viewer. When Warbucks raises the quintessential rational, and with hindsight to some extent justified, argument against the New Deal – "The New Deal, in my opinion, is badly planned, badly organized and badly administered" – Roosevelt immediately steers the discussion, with his wife's help, in the highly emotive direction of poor underfed orphans. It seems as if he engages with Warbucks' argument because he repeats his phrase "in the long run", but he does not actually do that at all. Only later, when Warbucks repeats his case – "Which parks? Which children? What will it cost? Who's going to organize it? Who's going to run it?" – does Roosevelt address the issue by taking a set of more or less rhetorical questions literally, and making Warbucks himself responsible for the program. This does not only defuse Oliver Warbucks' reasoning against the New Deal as "mistaken foolishness, big-hearted and empty-headed", but also the viewer's possible hesitation. This effect is enhanced by the fact that the movie's heroine immediately decides that the New Deal is "a swell idea."

When FDR says "the lucky ones end up in orphanages", Warbucks and the viewer obviously already know how bad Annie's experiences in Miss Hannigan's Dickensian orphanage have been, and how much luck a healthy and self-reliant American child needs to survive there. The same maudlin line of argument is continued by Eleanor, who introduces the aspect of the potential moral decay of the poor children – "The older ones are abandoned to steal..." – and sums up what the poor would, as part of the New Deal, do to earn money to feed their children: work "...in the national parks, building camps, clearing trails, fighting fires, planting trees." This elaborates on the emotionally patriotic line of argument that FDR has taken up earlier when he said he wanted people to "be proud [again] to be Americans." This direct link between New Deal laborers' patriotism and preserving and embellishing the American landscape was indeed very Rooseveltian, and the restored pride in America remains visible in the landscape especially in National Parks and the many other distinctive specimens of New Deal infrastructure. This has

the same depoliticizing effect here as in the 1930s historical context, because it shifts a central point of partisan disagreement to the realm of national American pride.

The weakness of this cinematic Roosevelt's argument comes at the only time when he does have to really address Annie: "You could help us recruit the young people", because after all, how many "young people" does Annie know? And are these children supposed to support the New Deal by contributing to the workforce? Recruitment for the relief programs was an administrative matter, not one of convincing the poor to accept the offered work. On an extradiegetic level, however, Roosevelt and Annie's joint effort to sell the New Deal to "the young people" does work – the fact that Annie is convinced works both to counter Warbucks' cynicism and to signal to the movie's presumably young audience that the New Deal is indeed a swell idea. This movement depoliticizes the New Deal in a way that is a blueprint for the personalization strategy: the persuasive power comes from Annie's charming and charismatic personality.

Within the universe of the film too, Annie's reaction, in accordance with her protagonist role in the narrative, does eventually resolve the situation: the song unites all present and effectively Americanizes the New Deal, even for Republicans. The early New Deal did, besides immediately and concretely helping people, function to restore confidence in a vague and generalized way, like "Tomorrow." However, the song lyrics "When I'm stuck with a day that's grey and lonely / I just stick out my chin and grin and say: / The sun will come out tomorrow..." are actually much more obviously Republican-style self-sufficient and independent than the plan Roosevelt is presenting, which is aimed at people who can emphatically not wait until the sun will come out again to save them from poverty.



Figure 12. Annie, Oliver Warbucks, the Roosevelts and George Washington (IMDb)

Ideals of self-reliance, rags-to-riches social mobility and strong family values – even for those who, like Annie and Oliver Warbucks, have no family to begin with – are visually borne out in the above still from the same scene. It casts Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt – together with the portrait of George Washington – as parental figures framing the orphan Annie and her wealthy patron Oliver Warbucks. The presidential couple and their illustrious predecessor in the White House, foster the American dream of common people that purportedly typifies the American experience. Annie is the striking presence and the focus of the picture, the others are arranged around her as exemplary historical, feminine, financial and political antecedents, offering all the ingredients Annie needs to attain her own dazzling success. Annie and Oliver Warbucks as a combination represent both ends of the classic, supposedly unassisted progress from rags to riches – although the film's plot shows the relativity of this. Annie and Oliver Warbucks also encompass both extremes of other spectrums: poor-rich, starting-arrived, female-male, recipient-benefactor, so that together they in a sense span the entire American populace, proudly surrounded and shielded by Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, as parents of the nation. The portrait of George Washington in the background nationalizes the situation still more, by lending it the validation of national history and unity. However, Mouffe and others would be quick to point out that non-whites, non-heterosexuals, and other minorities are silently marginalized as non-existent within this supposedly inclusive representation of American citizenship.

This scene or anything as crudely sentimental and overdone, obviously did not actually take place. This cinematic Franklin and Eleanor externally look very dissimilar to the historical figures they represent and there are no known cases of FDR bursting into song, using his power as Commander in Chief to get political opponents to join in, or demanding to be allowed to sing "a solo for the President." Roosevelt's Secretary of Commerce and New Dealer Harry Hopkins actually did once respond to an attack on the New Deal by saying "People don't eat in the long run" (Cohen 267-8), as FDR does here. But although the phrase is in a sense associated with the New Deal as an argument and a catchphrase, it is not Roosevelt's.

However, many elements of this Roosevelt representation are strikingly faithful in one way or another to Roosevelt's autofabricated public image. He famously claimed the role of Commander in Chief in peacetime, a role previously reserved for presidents during wartime only, which brought him increased executive power during the Depression, even if he did not in practice bypass Congress in making key decisions (Schlesinger 209). The entire rhetoric surrounding this, casting the New Deal as a war against want, which FDR started in his First Inaugural, has remained extremely influential, and has often functioned to stress the New Deal's victory in restoring American morale, even if it was not overly successful economically. Roosevelt soon took the opportunity to link the New Deal to the threat of war and the survival of American democracy, saying on June 27, 1936: "Here in America we are waging a great and successful war. It is not alone a war against want and destitution and economic demoralization. It is more than that; it is a war for the survival of democracy." Such reasoning has taken attention off the

memory of the New Deal's economic problems and focused it on remembering its moral success, and following that, the success of the democratic United States in World War II. As Jonathan Alter has formulated it in his national bestseller *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope* (2006): "The first time he saved democracy, in 1933, he accomplished it more on his own, by convincing the American people that they should not give up on their system of government. Before he confronted fascism abroad, he blunted the potential of both fascism and communism at home." (xv) Examples such as this one show how the New Deal has become depoliticized in mainstream American memory: attention moved away from controversial economic measures, towards much vaguer democratic and patriotic ideals that were harder to disagree with.

"Tomorrow", in all its vagueness about what exactly it is that will bring relief, equally exemplifies that shift of attention from the economic details of the New Deal to its triumph in saving American morale. The song offers restored confidence more than material relief, mirroring both the Republican stance at the time and the main remembered outcome of the New Deal. However, there of course was a difference between the Hooverian confidence in Emersonian rugged individualism and the New Deal's social activism, as Alter notes:

The result was a new notion of social obligation, especially in a crisis. In his second Inaugural, in 1937, FDR took stock of what had changed: "We refused to leave the problems of our common welfare to be solved by the winds of chance and the hurricanes of disaster." (xv)

There is an obvious political dispute here about the role of government in a crisis, but also an intriguing agreement between Roosevelt's rhetoric, and that of "Tomorrow." When referring to "the winds of chance and the hurricanes of disaster", Roosevelt couches chance and disaster in terms of unsettling weather circumstances, a simile which was peculiarly appropriate during the Dustbowl years. Although the song essentially, unlike FDR, advertises waiting for better weather – "The sun will come out tomorrow" – both thus invoke meteorological metaphors. These metaphors are depoliticizing by the nature of the weather as a quintessentially uncontroversial and apolitical conversation topic. Moreover, they invoke a much older national frontier discourse of both enduring, but also fighting and subjugating weather circumstances.

Despite this for a children's musical film relatively unapologetic political content, the 1982 *Annie* has come a long way in terms of loosening and ritualizing the ties with the actual political New Deal, and thus in depoliticization, compared to its forebears. The film was based on a 1977 Broadway musical written by Thomas Meehan (book) and Martin Charnin (lyrics). The Broadway musical included songs like the scathing "We'd Like to Thank you Mr. Hoover" and "A New Deal for Christmas" and featured, alongside Franklin Roosevelt, a number of his New

Deal staff.³ In "We'd Like to Thank You Herbert Hoover" a chorus of impoverished Americans sarcastically comment on Hoover's broken election promises:

Prosperity was 'round the corner
The cozy cottage built for two
In this blue heaven
That you gave us – Yes!
We're turning blue!

They offered us Al Smith and Hoover
We paid attention and we chose
Not only did we pay attention
We paid through the nose.

In ev'ry pot he said "a chicken"
But Herbert Hoover he forgot
Not only don't we have the chicken
We ain't got the pot!
(*Annie Libretto/Vocal Book*, I-3-17 and 18)

Such personal Hoover-bashing, written more than forty years after Hoover had left office, suggesting that Hoover cheated his people in the elections and had not got the least idea of the extent of their poverty, echoed the Roosevelt campaign of 1932. "Prosperity is just around the corner" is a legendary Hoover quotation repeated endlessly by the Democratic campaign, even though Hoover never actually said it (Alter 89). The scene is set in a "Hooverville" – a popular name for the shanty towns of the unemployed and homeless erected during the Depression – a coinage from one of FDR's ghostwriters, Charles Michelson (Alter 88). That Roosevelt was personally involved in the hate campaign against Hoover is clear from the following memo, which he dictated to Howe:

Here's a subject for a campaign cartoon:
Caption: Are you carrying the Hoover banner?
Below this: Picture of a man holding his trouser pockets turned inside out
Underneath: The words "nuff said." (quoted in Alter 88)

The 1932 FDR campaign expressions "Hoover flag" for empty pocket, and "Hooverville" both survive in American idiom. While Hoover did not make social security for all American citizens

³ Louis Howe, Henry Morgenthau, Cordell Hull, Francis Perkins, Harold Ickes – *Annie Libretto/Vocal Book* II-3-11.

a federal responsibility, his administration did more to battle the Depression than Roosevelt's campaign suggested, and Roosevelt largely continued Hoover's domestic policies to fight the Depression (Badger, *New Deal* 190). Nonetheless, renderings of New Deal cultural memory like the *Annie* Broadway musical show that the memory of a dramatic break from total stagnation and indifference to the despair of the multitudes under Hoover to confidence and support from Roosevelt has survived in mainstream popular culture. Such anecdotes indicating the emotionally radical nature of the shift from Hoover to Roosevelt evolved at a very early stage. Jonathan Alter cites the famous story of Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to the "Bonus Army", a group of impoverished First World War Veterans who marched on Washington early in 1933 to demand advance payments on their war pensions, and whom the Hoover Administration sent the Army to disperse. As one marcher said: "Hoover sent the army and Roosevelt sent his wife" (Alter, ill. 34). Even though FDR did not advance the veterans' money any more than Hoover did, this sums up the sentiment underlying most surviving narratives and anecdotes from the early New Deal and Roosevelt's assumption of office.

That the most famous musical and film performances of *Annie* are so adamant in their positive assessment of Roosevelt and the New Deal is all the more striking since Harold Gray's comic strip *Little Orphan Annie* (1924-1964), on which the musical is loosely based, did not endorse FDR's domestic politics at all. Gray was indeed highly conservative and used the comic strip to vent his frustration about the New Deal, which to his mind went against the most fundamental principles of American liberty. As he wrote in 1952: "I . . . have despised Roosevelt and his socialist, or creeping communist, policies since 1932, and said so in my stuff, so far as I was allowed to do so. (...) I hate professional do-gooders with other people's money" (Heer np). The comic, according to Jeet Heer, was not specifically conservative in the 1920s, but became so after the start of Roosevelt's New Deal which sparked increasingly virulent reactions from the political right. Over the course of the 1930s *Little Orphan Annie* became so explicitly conservative that some newspapers stopped running the comic, despite its enormous popularity (Young 107, 297-8).

All in all, *Annie* has moved from a highly politically controversial comic strip during the 1930s to a blander, but still fairly explicitly partisan musical, though with radically different colors in 1977, to a milder film, which nonetheless remains clearly nostalgic in its treatment of FDR and the New Deal. This trend is continued in a yet more recent *Annie* film: the 1999 television movie directed by Rob Marshall. This latest cinematic rendering of *Annie* in a sense confirms the depoliticizing development seen in earlier versions: Roosevelt makes a historically unlikely but iconic grand entrance in his wheelchair, and some other New Dealers, for instance left-wing Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis do appear in the movie as well, but only in direct relation to Annie's narrative, and without even the mention of broader political issues. Both the shift from New Deal criticism in the 1930s to nostalgia in later versions of *Annie*, and the increasing depoliticization of Roosevelt throughout *Annie*'s development seem representative of wider trends in the reception of Roosevelt as a cultural icon.

First Hundred Days

The diachronic development of various versions of *Little Orphan Annie* – comic strip, musical, and film – forms an exemplary case study of how the New Deal is depoliticized in cultural memory through portraying it as a character attribute of Franklin Roosevelt as a person. This case is positioned squarely in the area of popular culture remembering the New Deal. The second case study, focusing on the media practice of highlighting the First Hundred Days of a new president, is another example of depoliticizing the New Deal through another strategy. The First Hundred Days of Roosevelt's presidency were marked primarily by the unprecedented bulk of political measures, bills signed, appropriations made, agencies founded. Because the amount of new legislation and appropriations was so enormous, beating FDR's First Hundred Days in terms of legislative and executive impact became a practically unreachable goal for presidents to aspire to.

Over time the First Hundred Days have mainly become the end of a president's honeymoon, marked by catchy phrases and easily marketable potential news-making, associated with Roosevelt's astuteness in public relations, but detached entirely from the New Deal as a political program. That practice, which Roosevelt started, has turned the end of the first hundred days of any new presidency into a moment for measuring the new executive against Roosevelt, and conversely created an unofficial but important four-yearly opportunity for ritually remembering FDR's legislative success at the inception of the New Deal. As a result, the New Deal has in cultural memory lost much of its political poignancy to a blander and more general sense of nostalgia. The First Hundred Days custom is now mainly a media ritual practically divorced from the New Deal; it remains only tentatively indexically linked to Roosevelt, and even more loosely to the New Deal. This process is instrumental in the depoliticization of the New Deal for the sake of cultural remembrance.

William Leuchtenburg's *In the Shadow of FDR: From Harry Truman to George W. Bush* (2001; 1st ed. 1983) comments on how later presidents had to deal with Roosevelt's legacy to the office, the political and sometimes the cultural or media practices that he left. For instance since FDR, the president was expected to hold many informal press conferences in which journalists could ask questions without submitting these beforehand – if they did not do so, the press would complain (167-8). Leuchtenburg convincingly argues that the effect of such customs is that later presidents have had to live up to standards set by Roosevelt. The First Hundred Days of any new administration have become such a central initial yardstick and media moment for new presidents, that no presidential first hundred days can escape comparison with Roosevelt's legendary First Hundred Days. To organizations committed to nurturing the remembrance of FDR in American culture, those occasions also provide a logical moment in the American public arena to bring back to public consciousness the first hundred days of the New Deal.

As a political program the New Deal is, of the themes discussed in this thesis, perhaps the one that is still most seriously criticized, partly because left-right polarization in American politics remains relevant. However, as a feat of mass communication to restore national confidence in

the economy and government, it remains widely admired. The many historical analogies with the New Deal that have appeared since the onset of the 2008 credit crisis and Obama's election attest to this duality.⁴ They on the one hand discuss with varying outcome the question how economically successful the New Deal was, and on the other present FDR's rhetorical success in quickly restoring confidence as exemplary. Many of such analogies appeared briefly after Obama's election and re-election, and during his presidency's first hundred days.

A honeymoon period at the start of a new presidency – or political leadership in general – has probably always existed in one form or another, but the specific reference to a president's First Hundred Days in office has been in vogue since FDR used it on July 24, 1933 (Alter 273). Roosevelt did so to refer to the length of the special session of the 73rd Congress – which he had called immediately after his inauguration, and which had produced a record amount of new legislation. However, it has come to be used first by FDR confidant and brain truster Raymond Moley (Alter 273) as the expression to refer to Roosevelt's first hundred days in office. Ever since, a new executive's First Hundred Days form an inescapable litmus test. The comparison of the First Hundred Days between presidents obviously gives FDR an unfair advantage: in his case the phrase was invented precisely because he had achieved so much, even just in terms of new legislation, in one hundred days, whereas for any following president the length of the period is arbitrary. Nonetheless, using and marketing the first hundred days of a presidency as an indicator of the new president's executive power and ability to make a mark, has become a tradition with considerable weight, not only within America but worldwide. This ritual of reviewing this first period is extremely popular with the press. Politicians too seem to favor the public assessment of their performance after hundred days, since on the one hand they will usually already have achieved things they are proud of, and on the other, will not yet be accused of ineffectiveness or failure to keep campaign promises, since after hundred days it is obviously premature to write off a new leadership as ineffective.

As Leuchtenburg has shown the only president who did not have to deal with the First Hundred Days custom was Harry Truman, who became president when FDR died. In the grave circumstances of world politics in the spring of 1945, it would have been inappropriate to celebrate the First Hundred Days. Even on his reelection in 1948 the phrase came up less than Truman's domestic reform agenda, the Fair Deal – obviously named after the New Deal, in part because it aimed to continue the New Deal legacy (Hamby vii). For Eisenhower it was different – journalists focused on his First Hundred Days, even if he himself as a Republican did nothing to compare his honeymoon months to FDR's. In a broader sense Eisenhower did feel he had to continue New Deal programs, perhaps to his chagrin. As he said in 1956: "Should any political party attempt to abolish social security and eliminate labor laws and farm programs, you would not hear of that party again in our political history" (Leuchtenburg 49). So by comparison, the First Hundred Days

⁴ E.g. newspaper or magazine articles with headlines like Robert Shiller's "What Would Roosevelt Do?", or David Kennedy's "What Barack Obama Can Learn From FDR."

custom was for Eisenhower possible a relatively welcome FDR tradition, because it did not actually interfere with politics. Kennedy as a Democrat with an old and well-known family friendship to the Roosevelts intended to make much of his own hundredth day as president. Indeed the speech he would hold at its occasion was written, but the event was canceled, because as Leuchtenburg says "it was painfully clear that April 28, 1961, bore no resemblance to the hundredth day of FDR's first administration" (111). Johnson was less modest, believing soon that he overshadowed Roosevelt – "This Congress is a lot more impressive than the Hundred Days Congress" – which backfired against himself, and implicitly against Roosevelt (quoted in Leuchtenburg 146). Leuchtenburg even argues that "as a result of Johnson's behavior, the Roosevelt emphases were more than ever perceived to contain ingredients of evil as well as good." (160).

With Nixon the tide changed, in the sense that Roosevelt's First Hundred Days had lost most of their political relevance, although an inhouse-memo claimed that "the nation is still suffering from the first 100 days of Johnson, from the first 100 days of Kennedy, and even, lingeringly, from the first 100 days of Roosevelt" (quoted in Leuchtenburg 170). The Roosevelt inheritance was by then however hardly directly political anymore; it was limited to the expression "first 100 days" and the custom to pay special attention to that period that had survived, a media practice that later presidents expanded – notably Clinton, but Reagan in fact much more successfully so (217, 278-9). Thus, the First Hundred Days became more of a cultural media practice than a political touchstone, practically devoid of actual New Deal remembrance, let alone remembrance of the New Deal as a controversial political program. On the other hand, it remained a moment to look back to FDR's early days, in a highly formulaic, ritualized manner.

Obama, who had in his campaign primarily positioned himself as the cultural and political inheritor and executor of Abraham Lincoln's emancipation agenda, at the start of his presidency nonetheless had to actively deal with this Rooseveltian legacy. In his speech held at the May 2009 White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, in which the president traditionally "roasts" himself, his administration and White House journalists, Obama said about this:

All in all we're proud of the change we've brought to Washington in these first hundred days, but we've got a lot of work left to do, as all of you know, so I'd like to talk a little bit about what my administration plans to achieve in the next hundred days. During the second hundred days we'll design, build and open a library dedicated to my first hundred days. It's going to be big, of course.

(...)

In the next hundred days we will house-train our dog Bo. (...) In the next hundred days I will strongly consider losing my cool. Finally, I believe that my next hundred days will be so successful I will be able to complete them in 72 days.⁵

⁵ For video footage of the speech: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0GwZFAV1Lw&feature=channel>.

Obama wisely embraces a tradition he cannot get away from anyway in a spirit of self-mockery: no president's first hundred days have truly measured up against Roosevelt's own massive achievements in the spring of 1933. However, Obama's anaphoric repetition of the phrase "In my next hundred days..." is not only self-mocking: it simultaneously draws attention to the rather arbitrary journalistic stress on "Hundred Days" as a particularly conclusive period of time. Thus, Obama's joke is not only directed at himself, but also at the media practice. Similarly, the references to opening a library, and to "our dog Bo" are part of – and make fun of – Rooseveltian customs that dedicated presidential libraries, and included the presidential family dog in speeches (see chapter 8).

Thus, the First Hundred Days have since Roosevelt become a cultural phenomenon that new presidents cannot avoid dealing with. However, the reverse is also true: with every new administration the First Hundred Days media practice provides an opportunity for various organizations and other agents interested in stimulating Roosevelt's cultural remembrance to give attention to the New Deal and FDR. A comment of Obama's that he had read a book about FDR's First Hundred Days massively increased the sales of all three books mentioned above that fitted the description: Jonathan Alter's *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope* (2006), Anthony Badger's *FDR, The First Hundred Days* (2009), Adam Cohen's *Nothing to Fear: FDR's Inner Circle and the Hundred Days that Shaped Modern America* (2009), even though none of these probably was the book that Obama did read (Rich).

Obama's election in 2008 also provided the ideal context for the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library Museum at Hyde Park to organize a temporary exhibition "Action and Action Now – FDR's First 100 Days." The title is a Roosevelt quotation but can also be read as "Action [then] and Action Now", and as such implicitly sets audiences up for a comparison between the economic and financial crises of 1933 and 2008. The exhibition guidebook actually cites the 75th anniversary of FDR's First Inauguration as its inspiration, but the fact that 2008 was an election year and 2009 saw the first 100 days of another new Democratic president promising change and restored confidence probably gave the exhibition its relevance more than a 75th anniversary. The exhibition's title is taken from Roosevelt's inaugural address: "This Nation asks for action and action now." (March 4, 1933), and the exhibition invoked and repeated a plethora of famous FDR maxims, including "the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid", "I pledge you, I pledge myself to a New Deal for the American people", "This is a call to arms", and "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." The exhibition more or less chronologically took visitors through the year 1933 on March 4th of which the Hundred Days started, showing photos taken in 1933, newspaper articles, cartoons, letters to FDR and recreating the presumable atmosphere of the 1930s in terms of entourage. Thus one could sit in a reconstructed 1930s living room to listen to a recording of FDR's inaugural address "over the radio", to create a sense of identification with American citizens in 1933.

The narrative started in a room titled "America, 1933", and represented the situation of the country in the depths of the Depression – the room was a black box, indicating the darkness of the situation, and showed enormous photos, mainly the iconic picture of unemployed men queuing outside a Depression soup kitchen, actually taken in 1931.

Then the immediacy of the crisis is highlighted by the chapter "The Banks Collapse", followed by the advent of Roosevelt in "A New President, A New Deal." The rest of the exhibition concentrated on the main things Roosevelt and the New Deal did: "Saving the Banks", "Constructing a New Deal", "Financial Reforms", "Jobs and Relief", "Rural Reforms" and some attention for Roosevelt's ending of Prohibition. Special attention was given to "FDR's Conversation With America", which displayed many letters FDR received after his inaugural address and first Fireside Chat. Like other original documents these came from the archive part of the library. On the whole the exhibition was, as might be expected, given the exhibition's location, organizers and fundraisers – the Roosevelt Institute – positive and celebratory of Roosevelt and the New Deal. The focus of the first 100 days is conducive to that effect: results could not yet be measured and one thing the exhibition did well was recreate the honeymoon feeling of a new presidency, which also existed in the 2008-2009 present.

The "Action and Action Now" exhibition did eventually ask "Did it Work?" and was nuanced in its analysis. The conclusion, taken from the exhibition guide booklet, is:

The coming years would be difficult. There would be many setbacks. But a confident new president had set a course, boldly committing the government to battle the Depression. In the process, he restored most important element needed for recovery – hope.

This summarizes exactly those difficulties that the rest of the exhibition, given its focus on the First Hundred Days does not have to show, like the increasing resistance from businesses everywhere, the New Deal programs that turned out to be unsuccessful and ill-organized, the Supreme Court cases about the constitutionality of many New Deal programs. This conclusion acknowledges those problems, without attributing blame to FDR – indeed the first two sentences are passive and suggest difficult circumstances rather than flaws in the president's own policies. At the same time it ritually repeats what is by now a cliché in cultural memory: if the New Deal did nothing else, it at least restored hope.

Conclusion: Impotent Opposition

Michael Kammen in *Mystic Chords of Memory* argues that cultural memory in America, especially in the twentieth century, functions as a kind of nationally shared sense of history, creating an atmosphere of consensus that can be used to overcome partisan or other political divides. This seems by now a rather naïve reading, especially in the light of the "memory wars"

of the last decades, in which various memory communities have clashed over what should be the “official” national memory of a particular event.⁶ Such confrontations have actually, especially since the 1960s, resembled Mouffe’s ideal of radical opposition in the locus of power much more than Roosevelt’s implicit model of friendly but noncommittal consensus.

Kammen, however, rightly shows that both Theodore Roosevelt at the beginning of the century and Franklin Roosevelt to an even larger extent became experts at using cultural memory to stress the unity of America rather than the fragmentation. As an example, Kammen explains how Roosevelt depoliticized American party history, through associating himself with Abraham Lincoln. Whereas Lincoln was a Republican president and Roosevelt a Democrat, many Americans according to Kammen “simply assumed that Roosevelt and Lincoln surely shared a party affiliation and represented a prominent line of continuity in American leadership” (452). FDR’s uses of the past were eventually “shrewd and self-serving” (450): he used the impression of national consensus for his partisan and controversial political aims. The same American tendency to depoliticize the past that FDR used to present himself as Lincoln’s political descendant, also occurred when Roosevelt himself became a historical icon.

This trend, however, of using the past as a depoliticizing and consensus-building force, is not purely specific to FDR. The first half of the twentieth century also saw a strong tendency towards the creation of shared cultural memory without any involvement of FDR, such as the start of many “American Studies” programs at American universities in the late 1930s (Kammen 509). It rather seems as though Roosevelt was very correctly sensing and riding a wave that was already there and had in fact started to gain momentum in the late nineteenth century (Ranger and Hobsbawm). The growing accessibility of memory sites, and thus the increased presence of ritualized remembrance practices as a force in society can and does also work the other way: the fact that a much wider range of memories were mediated and far more rememberers could find channels to make themselves heard, also created divergence in the general gist of cultural memory, and a clearer difference between various memory communities with different agendas. Both effects are visible in the cultural memory of the New Deal, but the consensus-focused, depoliticized, ritualized and generally positive assessment of the New Deal remains the dominant force in mainstream cultural memory. Both the case of *Annie* and that of the First Hundred Days practice exemplify this trend.

However, such celebratory exhibitions as that in the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library museum in Hyde Park, New York, to some extent inevitably only reached those who were already open to a positive interpretation of FDR’s political program. The opposite exists as well. To this day, highly polarized responses to the New Deal also keep appearing. Such histories are agonistically political in the way Mouffe proposes, although she seems to have expected such reactions in

⁶ See e.g. Linenthal and Engelhardt, *History Wars: The Enola Gay and the Battle for the American Past*, 1996.

general more from the political left than from the conservative right that produces them now in the case of FDR and the New Deal.

One example is Jim Powell’s popular *FDR’s Folly: How Roosevelt and His New Deal Prolonged the Great Depression* (2003). The chapter titles are all along the lines of: “Why Did FDR Seize Everybody’s Gold?”, “Why Did New Dealers Make Everything Cost More in the Depression?” and “Why Did the New Dealers Destroy All That Food When People Were Hungry?” (v). What strikes about those titles, other than their belligerence, is that they are not so much focused on FDR only. Other, more depoliticized “New Deal” memory practices more or less all tend to have lost sight of the actual New Deal, and have instead adopted a strong focus on the person of FDR, in the case of *Annie*, or on ritualized and repetitive invocations of particular phrases and media customs. *FDR’s Folly*, however, directly confronts the politics and ideology underlying the New Deal. And although most of the book’s claims are highly tendentious, there is a core of righteous indignation that Mouffe would agree with. The cultural memory of the New Deal is, as Powell repeatedly stresses, too much concerned with “Franklin D. Roosevelt’s charismatic personality, his brilliance as a strategist and communicator, the dramatic One Hundred Days, the First New Deal, Second New Deal, the ‘court-packing’ plan, and other political aspects of the story.” (Powell vii). It is striking that Powell considers these issues “political”, because they are exactly also topics that have been central to the depoliticization of the New Deal.

The political aspect for Powell lies exactly in the fact that the catchphrases he sums up actually function to create a kind of empty consensus about the New Deal as a nostalgically remembered past, when it should be treated as a phase in which liberal democracy was seriously endangered. Powell quotes law professor Richard Epstein saying:

A fine despot may do wonders for a while: public roads may be constructed, the trains may run on time, and the Dow may reach three thousand. But a bad despot, or a good despot turned bad, has quite the opposite effect. Our concerns go beyond potholes, train delays, and the bear market. We worry about tyranny, terror, confiscation, segregation, imprisonment, and death. (262).

Here, and elsewhere, Powell comes closer than most would dare to comparing FDR’s strategy of depoliticizing the political in order to claim power, to similar strategies used by Hitler and Stalin at the same time in Europe. While I do not think his negative analysis of the New Deal is correct, this latter point is to some extent true: Roosevelt remains a kind of despot in cultural memory, exactly because his autofabrication and remembrance are so consensus-focused that, in their relative emptiness, they all but eliminate the space for substantial disagreement, the locus of power which should function as a site for conflict. It is, however, indicative of the success of the depoliticization of the New Deal into the future, that arguments such as Powell’s have so little effect on mainstream representations of the New Deal. They are essentially confined to a relatively

small circle of right-wing Republicans, who cannot revive the political debate beyond their own radical margin. This may in part be because they are so radical, but primarily, because almost all other cultural representations of the New Deal have become so consensually depoliticized.