

# The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics

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the support of James Pierce, the influential editor of the *Iowa Homestead*, and enrolling 15,000 members in 1918. Why the NPL subsequently faltered in a state that would soon send Smith Brookhart to the U.S. Senate remains a mystery that Lansing cannot convincingly explain in the scant two pages he devotes to the Hawkeye State. In the end, Lansing has disappointingly little new to say about his fascinating topic, either in Iowa or anywhere else in North America.

*The Great Exception: The New Deal and the Limits of American Politics*, by Jefferson Cowie. *Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. viii, 273 pp. Illustrations, graph, notes, index. \$27.95 hardcover.

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Nearly three-quarters of a century after Franklin D. Roosevelt's death historians are still struggling to make sense of the New Deal. Was FDR's reform program more success than failure? Did it possess any coherence at all or was it just a hodgepodge of programs slapped together hurriedly to confront a frightening economic collapse? Did its implementation signal a decisive break with the political economy that had prevailed in the United States since its founding in the eighteenth century? Was it simply a form of corporate liberalism, as New Left revisionists insisted, that substituted modest changes to forestall radical alterations at a time when a thoroughgoing transformation seemed possible? Or, somewhere in between, was it a "halfway revolution" that established a new liberal consensus suitable for an essentially cautious population seeking a modicum of change to preserve an essentially healthy economy temporarily thrown off its game? In *The Great Exception*, Jefferson Cowie presents another possibility and offers a fresh, original look at a perennial historical conundrum.

The Andrew J. Nathanson Professor at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the author of several books on twentieth-century U.S. history, Cowie uses a wide lens to examine the meaning of the New Deal. He shows how government policies of the 1930s charted a new course and how those departures differed significantly from what followed after the 1970s. Reflecting the book's title, he posits that the reforms crafted during the Roosevelt administration constituted a singular exception to the manner in which government operated before and after the crises of the Great Depression and World War II. The remarkable expansion of the federal government's role in

American life, notably to the benefit of workers and their families, transformed economic institutions, altered class relations, commenced the realignment of the nation's two political parties, and raised important questions about traditional values. Most important, the nation thrived as never before during a brief era of equity that spanned the immediate post-World War II decades. Wages rose to unprecedented levels, trade unions thrived, consumerism scaled new heights, economic inequality declined, and economists spoke glowingly of capitalism's triumph. If white male industrial workers fared better during those years than women and minorities who remained consigned to the margins of the economic system, residual gains undeniably brought the benefits of American prosperity to all wage earners. And the legal breakthroughs of the 1950s and 1960s began to dispel the barriers that had cordoned some groups off from the societal mainstream. Yet for all its profound influence, the author maintains, the New Deal failed to establish a permanent welfare state. Even during the halcyon days of the postwar era, the New Deal edifice rested upon a fragile foundation. The beneficial changes engendered by the path-breaking legislation of 1935-1938 amounted to a temporary respite from less salutary traditions in the nation encompassing race, social class, immigration, individualism, and culture. Historic constraints resurfaced, and the inherent weaknesses of the New Deal coalition mounted during the 1970s. In this view, what has been dubbed the Reagan Revolution might better be termed the Reagan Restoration.

More extended historical essay than monograph, *The Great Exception* is a sophisticated reinterpretation of a crucial period in American history that readers will find as helpful for contextualizing recent developments as for understanding the events of the 1930s. Clearly written and cogently argued, the book should engage historians, journalists, and all readers interested in comprehending the nation's current situation—and in forecasting its future. The author's view of the New Deal as a great exception to the conservative politics that held sway during most of the twentieth century in the United States suggests that the imminent return of a period when collective economic rights flourished seems unlikely. The resurgence of the values and ideas triumphant throughout most of the nation's history, dormant for a large portion of the last century, has resulted in what Cowie sees as a new Gilded Age of economic inequality and unrestrained individualism. Resurrecting the ethos of the New Deal, which he believes led to a golden age of social responsibility and economic security in the United States, will be possible only if the American people comprehend the influences that first created and later undermined the celebrated reform period.