

David W Fletcher, Summer 1999

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THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II, 1929–1945

The seventh of eight titles in The Scott Foresman American History Series, edited by David M. Potter and Carl N. Degler, Thomas C. Cochran's slender work—a little over 200 total pages—on this immensely significant transitional period in modern United States history functions well as a basic survey. First, the Great Depression in America, its impact on society, and the particular responses both public and private are outlined. Next, the events leading up to the Second World War are followed by a sketch of the war itself in both European and Pacific theaters with some attention given to the domestic effect of the global struggle. While the series editors mean to fashion something more than a “usual survey text,” for example, extending beyond a framework or skeleton of events to “the unity or essential thrust of the period—in short, its meaning” (see editors' Foreward), Cochran's volume fails to achieve this purpose for a retrospective analysis of 1929 through 1945 on one major account. The meaning of World War II in light of the Great Depression merely is assumed but never analyzed thoroughly. Although Chapter Four, Social Democracy and Cultural Change, links both the Great Depression and World War II to significant American cultural transitions, Cochran never really, in my opinion, ties the two together as though they interacted on each other. From the big perspective, the book reads like two small volumes in one. Chapters 1–3 treat the Great Depression. Chapters 5 and 6 deal with World War II. Chapter Four relates the two major epochs to a massive cultural change but not necessarily as affecting each other greatly. Two “soul-shaking” and thorough-going national events seemingly act independent of each other but toward a common end of radically

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revolutionizing the American psyche. The synthesis or “unity” for this time span, 1929 through 1945, envisioned by the series editors does not seem to materialize in Cochran’s work. Perhaps the addition of a seventh chapter would have helped solve this deficiency as well as give the book a less abrupt conclusion, for example, “Victory in the Pacific” with no development of overview for World War II.

This major deficiency aside, Cochran has produced a concise work worthy of respect, yet predictable and conservative in its thrust of interpretation. He is naive somewhat in his foreshortening of the historic enterprise. He wrongly assumes, “Although some interpretations may be changed by the passing of still more time, we are now far enough away from these turbulent years that the main structure of synthesis seems likely to endure” (see author’s Preface). Cochran does make an exception for the arts and with Communist secret documents. But what about other exceptions? What about Allied secret documents? What about social history from primary sources such as participants in the events as yet unspoken and unwritten. We could raise lots of questions about Cochran’s flawed philosophy of history evinced in the preface to his book.

Further, he writes in 1968, which is only about a quarter of a century removed from the actual events. As history is caricatured by what one omits rather than what one includes, it seems incredible to think that myriads of later historians, with increasingly more data to work with, could not add consequential synthesis to such grand events. Nevertheless, the basic thrust of Cochran’s argument, that “the period 1929 to 1945 seems to separate an older society inherited

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from the nineteenth century from one that seeks to adjust to a new world” (author’s Preface) is sound. A New American Capitalism and the eternal death knoll of the Monroe Doctrine are the grand effects of the depression and the war respectively.

In *Economic Collapse, 1929–1932* (Chapter One), the details of the background of the depression and the inability of the Hoover administration to deal with the ensuing crisis are detailed nicely. Four foundational theories of the Keynesian Revolution, as well as philosophical underpinnings of both Hoover traditionalists and other economic approaches are quite illuminating. His contrasts and comparisons, if understandable, are very useful. Domestic and international repercussions to particular phenomena of the depression, such as agricultural production, bank failures, and so forth, are presented, and the impact on domestic politics is stressed.

One rare bit of synthesis by Cochran concerning Hoover’s America and Hitler’s Germany is offered. Despite the depression, America suffered no threat of revolution nor any significant rise in political radicalism. “The American cultural traditions of self-help and individual responsibility seemed, for the most part, to make the sufferers feel guilty and perhaps sullen and resentful, but not ready to rebel and fight for a new order” (pages 14-15). Yet, in Germany, a radical group of discontents allowed Hitler to seize power and project a remarkable program. In America, the organizational structure of those disgruntled enough to fight the existing government failed. While Cochran’s synthesis on this point is lacking in thoroughness, at least the broad contrast is instructive.

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The New Deal (Chapter Two) begins with a survey of the historical literature, pro and con, on Franklin D. Roosevelt's legacy. Cochran favors the view of "the Roosevelt method of administration by experimental action" (page 38) and proceeds to illustrate four broad categories of legislation offered by FDR with such agencies as the Emergency Banking Relief Act, Home Owners Loan Corporation, Tennessee Valley Authority, Agricultural Adjustment Act, and the National Industrial Recovery Act. Cochran's treatment of the partnership between business and government includes some very detailed information about the American Federation of Labor and trade unions in general—perhaps too detailed for a general survey—and an excellent section on the devaluation of the dollar. Interesting is the role of "unorthodox opponents" of FDR, such as Dr. Francis E. Townsend, Father Charles E. Coughlin, and Senator Huey P. Long. These alternative approaches to recovery, although aberrations might be a more appropriate appellation, did nothing to stem the need for Roosevelt's "second New Deal" beginning in 1935, which Cochran critiques as a misnomer since "this title makes the legislation seem more a part of preconceived presidential policy than was actually the case" (page 55). Important programs as well as key players in the initiatives illustrate the New Deal's move toward a national welfare state with greater government "cooperation, planning, and regulation" and the resulting decrease in capitalistic fluidity and inventiveness.

Surprising is the title for Chapter Three, The Failure of Recovery. That the New Deal was not a failure is belied by Cochran's own words in the last pages of this chapter—"in the long run the New Deal was responsible for measures necessary for the orderly industrial development

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of the nation”; “the New Deal established important aids for American economic development in half a dozen different areas”; “the President . . . regarded the Social Security Act of 1935 as his most important achievement”; “through New Deal provisions farmers were able to win a uniquely favored position in the American economy”; “the minor ways in which the President’s own humanitarian interests and the innovations of the bright young men he brought to Washington improved life in the United States are too numerous for a brief summary” [from pages 91-94]. It is hard to see how Cochran can broadly call Roosevelt’s work a “failure” in recovery and then make statements like these. From the immediate perspective of the mid-1930s, perhaps yes. From a larger assessment of 1929 to 1945 as a whole, definitely not.

Criticisms aside, Cochran shows the irony of FDR’s battle over Supreme Court appointees, the empowerment of labor by administrative and judiciary support, and economic stagnation created by technological advancement, namely, the move by various industries toward operational efficiency in order to streamline and conserve resources for economic preservation during hard times. One might question, however, Cochran’s assertion that “New Deal agricultural programs were more sociological and political than economic” (page 85). It would seem difficult, if not impossible, to separate the economic impact from the sociological meaning of New Deal programs, at least from the perspective of the farmers (the political drive of such initiatives from the perspective of the President notwithstanding). It does not suffice to say, “Underlying the measures was the assumption, backed by American cultural tradition, that it was good for a man to remain a farmer. He should be kept on the land. Such conceptions helped to

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perpetuate an American backcountry population, particularly in Appalachia, living outside modern industrial society” (page 85). Cochran speaks “off the cuff” here. In this sense, his view of New Deal policies as “social work” is ill-conceived. What is social work if not economic or at the very least bearing some relationship to economic outcomes? Furthermore, precisely the opposite of what Cochran suggests—progress from agricultural backcountry toward industrialization—occurred in a large portion of Appalachia because of Tennessee Valley Authority.

Chapter Four, Social Democracy and Cultural Change, offers a synthesis of the whole 1929–1945 period. His sections about the voices or literature of social protest and the role of the government versus patronage in support of the arts is compelling. However, as noted above, while the basic thrust of the argument seems cogent—since “the nation was more democratized than in the 1920s, the mechanisms of communication that influence public thought were more controlled by corporate power, more stereotyped in a role of ‘entertainment,’ and less accessible to serious democratic ideas than in earlier times” (page 125)—the bridge between the depression and the war in relation to these cultural shifts never is clearly drawn.

Very interesting in this chapter is the idea of a shift in conceptualization of “democracy” due to popularization as a slogan. The enormous changes brought about by the shift from a print culture to the electronic culture of radio, moving pictures, and television is noted. Quite right also is the labeling of the “electronic elite” or movie stars as a new aristocracy who “also acquire wealth and take over the functions of style-setting, philanthropy, and patronage of the arts” (page

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125). The section of religion during the depression aptly notes the decline in volunteer participation, but the caricature of the resulting synthesis as Christian existentialism with Reinhold Niebuhr as its leading apostle is strictly a Protestant neoorthodox view. Concerning Cochran's idea that the period of World War II in relation to the arts should be characterized as a time reflecting a "feeling of artificiality about life on both the military and home fronts" (page 121), better would be viewing the war itself as "the artistic achievement of lasting importance." The war itself lives on in all its facets—in history, in media, and in art. Like most major wars, it becomes timeless and eternal, etched on the memories of men and women who live to tell their stories and for their children and grandchildren who receive these tales and pass them on.

The Road to World War II, Chapter Five, gives the standard events prior to American involvement, although Cochran skimps on developments in Germany (for example, the Nuremberg Laws omitted), his bouncing back and forth from an American to an European to a Pacific perspective leaves the reader feeling somewhat confused, and the inclusion of certain material seems totally irrelevant (for example, Latin American involvement, pages 137-140). His treatment of the 1940 Presidential election, critical of anti-war groups like America First Committee, seems to neglect the dynamics of the time. The 1968 perspective, from which Cochran writes, is that America did intervene on behalf of the Allies for a legitimate purpose, therefore America First was wrong. But this foreshortened judgment, a common historical fallacy, fails to respect the situation at the time analyzed. At that time the horizon looked very gloomy, and they did not know for certain that America would intervene. The debate was still

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viable and influenced perceptions and decisions dramatically. But on a positive note, Cochran's treatment of Tokyo–Washington interaction prior to Pearl Harbor is full and even includes the text of General Hideki Tojo's last offer to the United States, with both concessions and demands, prior to the attack (pages 157-158).

While failing to note the wartime influence of classified military secrets in a lack of understanding between business and government, Chapter Six, The Second World War, gives an adequate overview of government organizations, like the War Resources Board, that were begun to propagate the war. Wartime production accelerated miraculously and was spurred by crucial scientific advances, chief among which was the atomic bomb. Relocation of a significant segment of the population and the building of rural industrial factories resulted in landscape changes in the Old South, Texas, and the Mountain States. The effect of this internal American migration of both work place and work force is that “in many parts of these regions, the people hold that the history of modern industrialization begins with World War II” (page 174).

Cochran properly notes that propaganda for the war failed in that it was inconsistent with civil rights for minorities, but his critique of the minimal role of the Office of Censorship and War Information Board does not take into account the role of the media, such as the President's “fireside chats,” and the fact that a war as big as the Second World War becomes a powerful force on its own that creates its own propaganda, its own life. The formal “propaganda” bureaus of the government could have “done nothing” and still succeeded.

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For battles, Cochran surveys the major theaters and combines operational details with issues at home as well as postwar planning. His emphasis on inflation, the tax bill of 1942, that “increased the number of income taxpayers from 13 to 50 million” (page 186), and postwar veteran benefits are appropriate to his overview. And, he strikes a good balance to include, by way of comparison and contrast, the “D-day” of the Pacific—the assault on the Marianas Islands, referred to by Americans as the “Marianas Turkey Shoot” (pages 193-194), but he gives more attention to the war in the West and the Normandy invasion.

For a survey, the book is very detailed with many charts, suggested reading lists, and pictorial essays at the end of each chapter. But, given the lack of Cochran’s synthesis of the Great Depression and World War II in the transitional development of a new American society and the fact that over thirty years have passed since Cochran wrote this book, I would have to recommend to readers of American history something more recent and more thorough-going in its integration of the two major events covered from 1929 to 1945.