

GREAT DEBATES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Unit 9: To What Extent Is the Federal Government Responsible for the Welfare and Security of the Individual?

The Issue

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal offered federal assistance to millions of needy Americans during the bleakest years of the Great Depression. The New Deal greatly expanded the role the federal government plays in the lives of most Americans. At the same time, Roosevelt's social programs stirred a debate over how much responsibility government should have in providing security for its citizens.

Background

Before the Great Depression many Americans viewed their country as a land of unlimited opportunity—a free society with special privileges for none. According to this ideal, the proper role of government was to guarantee a system of free enterprise that would provide all citizens with the opportunity to manage their own economic affairs. Thus, Americans were considered responsible for their own welfare, and their success or failure was thought to be a reflection of their character, ingenuity, and willingness to work.

Despite the ideal of unlimited opportunity, American society has always made some provision for the needy. Traditionally, aid to the poor was considered the responsibility of churches and private charity groups. Economic assistance was kept to a minimum in the belief that relief made the individual less self-reliant.

In earlier times most of the poor in the United States were indentured servants, black slaves, and tenant farmers. As the nation industrialized in the 1800s, these poor were joined by large numbers of men, women, and children who labored long hours for low wages in factories and mines. By the early 1900s urban poverty and unsafe working conditions led to the reforms of the Progressive Era and increased government involvement in the welfare of individual Americans. It was not until the arrival of the Great

Depression, however—when nearly 15 million family heads were unable to find work—that the federal government intervened in a major way to provide assistance to the desperately needy.

The Readings

The following debate begins with a speech that Franklin Delano Roosevelt delivered during his 1932 campaign for the presidency. In this speech Roosevelt explains his plan to help the nation's poor and unemployed citizens.

In 1939 Robert A. Taft, Republican Senator from Ohio, delivered his assessment of Roosevelt's program. His nationally broadcast radio address is a clear statement of Republican principles.

Update

Poverty continues to be a way of life for nearly 40 million Americans. To meet their needs the federal government has increased its social spending in recent decades with programs such as Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, food stamps, aid to the unemployed, job training and employment, and Aid to Families with Dependent Children. The dramatic expansion of these programs and the persistence of poverty has intensified the debate over federal responsibility to provide social service benefits.

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Franklin D. Roosevelt, *President of the United States from 1933–1945*, delivered this campaign address in October 1932.

TODAY, in our boasted modern civilization, we are facing just exactly the same problem, just exactly the same conflict between two schools of philosophy that they faced in the earliest days of America, and indeed of the world. One of them—one of these old philosophies—is the philosophy of those who would “let things alone.” The other is the philosophy that strives for something new—something that the human race has never attained yet, but something which I believe the human race can and will attain—social justice, through social action.

From the days of the cave man to the days of the automobile, the philosophy of “letting things alone” has resulted in the jungle law of survival of the so-called fittest. The philosophy of social action results in the protection of humanity and the fitting of as many human beings as possible into the scheme of surviving. . . .

In the same way, there are two theories of prosperity and well-being: The first theory is that if we make the rich richer, somehow they will let a part of their prosperity trickle down to the rest of us. The second theory—and I suppose this goes back to the days of Noah—I won’t say Adam and Eve, because they had a less complicated situation—but, at least, back in the days of the flood, there was the theory that if we make the average of mankind comfortable and secure, their prosperity will rise upward, just as yeast rises up, through the ranks. . . . And so, in these days of difficulty, we Americans everywhere must and shall choose the path of social justice—the only path that will lead us to a permanent bettering of our civilization, the path that our children must tread and their children must tread, the path of faith, the path of hope and the path of love toward our fellow man.

It may interest you to have me read a short quotation from my message to the legislature in 1931:

What is the State? It is the duly constituted representative of an organized society of human beings, created by them for their mutual protection and well-being. One of the duties of the State is that of caring for those of its citizens who find themselves the victims of such adverse circumstances as make them unable to obtain even the necessities of existence without the aid of others.

In broad terms, I assert that modern society, acting through its government, owes the definite obligation to prevent the starvation or the dire want of any of its fellowmen and women who try to maintain themselves but cannot. To these unfortunate citizens aid must be extended by the government, not as a matter of charity but as a matter of social duty.

“The first obligation of government is the protection of the welfare and well-being, indeed the very existence, of its citizens.”

Franklin Roosevelt

That principle which I laid down in 1931, I reaffirm. I not only reaffirm it, I go a step further and say that where the State itself is unable successfully to fulfill this obligation which lies upon it, it then becomes the positive duty of the federal government to step in to help.

In the words of our Democratic national platform, the federal government has a “continuous responsibility for human welfare, especially for the protection of children.” That duty and responsibility the federal government should carry out promptly, fearlessly, and generously. . . .

We must economize in other ways, but it shall never be said that the American people have refused to provide the necessities of life for those who, through no fault of their own, are unable to feed, clothe, and house themselves. The first obligation of government is the protection of the welfare and well-being, indeed the very existence, of its citizens.

Source: Samuel I. Rosenman, ed. *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. I (New York: Random House, 1938).

To What Extent Is the Federal Government Responsible for the Welfare and Security of the Individual?

Robert A. Taft, *Republican Senator from Ohio*, delivered this nationally broadcast radio address in March 1939.

WE FIND an overwhelmingly difficult problem before us. After six years of New Deal rule, after every kind of experiment, and the addition of twenty billion dollars to the national debt, the fundamental problems are still unsolved. More than ten million people are unemployed in the United States today, about three million of them receiving a bare subsistence from W.P.A. Twenty million people are looking to the government for food. Millions more are receiving inadequate wages, and fall in that underprivileged class for whom New Dealers have shed tears in every speech, and to whom they have repeatedly promised prosperity and security. And yet there are more people underprivileged today, more people who have barely enough to live on, than there have been at any time except at the very bottom of the depression. . . .

The New Deal is such a conglomeration of all kinds of measures that it is interesting for a moment to try to analyze just what it really is. Its objectives undoubtedly were to help the nation, and particularly the lower income groups, but from the beginning it has been motivated apparently by a complete distrust of our entire economic and business system, extending almost to every individual business man.

What then should be the Republican program? It must combine a policy of encouragement to private industry, which can put millions of men to work, with sincere and effective administration of relief measures to assist directly the lower income groups. . . .

But the administration of this relief must be carried on with the greatest care, that it may not destroy our entire American system, and put the whole population on relief. It must be carried on with economy, because the cost of supporting those who do not work is undoubtedly borne by

those who are working. The return from capital will never support but a small proportion of the population. The greatest part of the cost of relief can only come from the income of those who are actually working, and if we impose too heavy a burden on that income, there will no longer be any incentive to work, and certainly no incentive to put other men to work.

I think we must recognize, after all, that relief will never do more than provide a bare living, and will never be a satisfactory substitute for real work in private industry. Old age pensions can never be so high as to be a satisfactory substitute for a house and a reasonable income, saved by the effort of the family which has worked successfully. . . .

For the same reason, the relief agencies must be administered so that those on relief are not better off than the people who are working. A man who has saved and built his home should certainly be better off than the man who has saved nothing. He should be better off than the man who has the good fortune to live in a subsidized apartment-house built by the government. . . .

In the second place, we must take every possible measure to cure the unemployment problem. It can only be cured by more jobs in private industry. We must, therefore, take every possible measure to encourage people to put their time and money again into the development of private industry. We must see that there is an incentive and a reward for initiative. . . .

If we can stop spending money now, if we can stop the tremendous expansion of government activity, regulation and taxation, it is not too late to resume the progress which made this country the envy of the world; but if we continue for six years more the course which we have pursued, it is a bold man who will say that we can restore them prosperity under a democratic form of government.

Source: Robert A. Taft. "A Declaration of Republican Principles" in *Vital Speeches of the Day* (January, 1940).

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Robert Taft

GREAT DEBATES WORKSHEET 9

Directions: Use the information in the Unit 9 debate to answer the following questions. If necessary, use an additional sheet of paper.

A. Comprehension

1. According to President Roosevelt, what is the social duty of government?

2. List Senator Taft's criticisms of the New Deal.

3. What is Roosevelt's justification for social service programs at a time when the federal government needs to reduce expenditures?

4. How does Taft propose to solve the problem of unemployment?

B. Critical Thinking

1. **Identifying Central Issues:** Writing from the point of view of each man, state how Roosevelt and Taft would explain the causes of poverty in the United States.

2. **Drawing Conclusions:** Roosevelt cites two theories of prosperity. How might Senator Taft evaluate each of these theories?

3. **Formulating Questions:** Assume that Roosevelt and Taft are opposing each other in a presidential election. Develop a list of four questions to ask the candidates in a nationally televised debate.

4. **Testing Conclusions:** Evaluate the arguments on both sides of the debate. Which side's arguments are most effective and convincing? Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.
