ACTION, AND ACTION NOW

FDR’s First 100 Days

Special Exhibition at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum
At the Capitol, President-elect Franklin Roosevelt steadied himself on his son James’s arm as he approached the rostrum to take the oath of office. Paralyzed below the waist since 1921, FDR could not stand without heavy leg braces. He had perfected an ability to “walk” in public by supporting his weight on a cane and a strong companion and pitching his body forward.

Breaking precedent, the president-elect recited the entire oath of office, instead of simply repeating “I do.” Then, as the crowd grew quiet, he opened his inaugural address.

The mood of the enormous audience waiting to hear the new president was grim. Along with millions of their fellow citizens listening on the radio, they were gripped by fear. For on March 4, 1933, America was in the midst of the fourth year of a massive economic depression—the worst in our history.

Washington D.C. was cold and overcast on Inauguration Day, 1933.

Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes administers the oath of office to FDR on the east portico of the United States Capitol, March 4, 1933.
America, 1933

The dark months before FDR’s inauguration had been the bleakest of the Great Depression. One in four workers was unemployed. One in five Americans barely survived on meager charity and state and local relief. The stock market was down 75 percent from 1929. Exports were at their lowest level since 1904. In just four years, the suicide rate had tripled.

In rural areas—where almost half of Americans lived—sharply falling crop prices brought disaster. Farmers defaulted on bank loans and lost their land. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers faced eviction. Farm laborers’ wages were slashed.

As the nation suffered, its government seemed paralyzed. President Herbert Hoover had tried to combat the Depression, but he believed in limited government and relief through private charity. Though he eventually approved credit assistance for banks and businesses and some public construction spending, Hoover was reluctant to fund massive public works projects, provide extensive federal relief money to the unemployed, or increase government regulation of the economy. By 1933, he was reviled and exhausted.
In the weeks before FDR took office, conditions went from bad to worse. During the winter of 1932-1933, the country’s banking system began to collapse. In January and February, four thousand banks were forced out of business. Because bank accounts were not government-insured, millions lost their life savings. Panicked depositors rushed to the remaining banks to withdraw their money. These bank runs threatened the entire financial system.

In desperation, 32 states declared “bank holidays”—temporarily shutting their banks to prevent depositors from removing cash. Remaining states put strict limits on withdrawals. In many places barter, IOUs, and money substitutes called “scrip” replaced cash transactions. America’s economy faced destruction.

This was the state of the nation on March 4, 1933 as FDR prepared to begin his inaugural address. Americans faced a daunting task. The path forward was unclear. And Roosevelt had given few public clues about what he would do.
During the banking crisis many people resorted to privately printed currency called “scrip.”

Anxious depositors line up to withdraw their money during a bank run.

Jobless men outside a San Francisco soup kitchen, 1933.
FDR opened his inaugural address with words of reassurance. “This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive, and will prosper.” Then, in bold language that reverberates in our public memory, he proclaimed, “So first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself. . . .”

This now-famous line got little reaction. The greatest applause came near the end of Roosevelt’s speech, when he declared that if Congress didn’t act, he would ask for “broad Executive power to wage a war against the emergency as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.” Americans were ready to grant FDR sweeping power. As he asserted, “This nation asks for action, and action now.”

Tickets and commemorative items from the 1933 Inauguration.
FDR delivers his inaugural address, March 4, 1933.

FDR used this distinctive pair of pince-nez glasses at the inaugural.

On loan from Henry Morgenthau III

FDR’s reading copy of his inaugural address includes a new opening sentence that the President-elect wrote in pencil while waiting for the inaugural ceremonies to begin.
Immediately after the inaugural ceremonies, FDR confronted the banking crisis that threatened to destroy the nation’s economy. On his first full day in office he called Congress into special session to pass emergency banking legislation. The next day, he issued a proclamation temporarily closing every bank in the nation.

Treasury officials, assisted by holdover members of the Hoover Administration, feverishly began work on a bank bill. It included many elements originally advocated by Hoover—though Hoover had lacked the resolve to enact them. Rushed to Congress on March 9, the Emergency Banking Act was approved within hours. It gave the government authority to examine bank finances and determine which banks were stable enough to reopen.

At several points in his life, FDR tried to keep a diary. These efforts never continued for more than a few days. One attempt began when he became president. His diary entry for March 5, 1933 deals chiefly with the banking crisis.

G.T. Channing of Mercer Island, Washington wrote FDR on March 12, 1933 after hearing the president’s first Fireside Chat.
The healthy banks would reopen on March 13. But would people trust in them? FDR decided to go on nationwide radio on March 12 to convince Americans to return their money to the banks. America’s economic recovery depended upon their response.

Roosevelt’s radio address made a powerful impression. Instead of an oration, he used a relaxed speaking style that made people feel as if he were sitting in their homes speaking directly to them. “I can assure you,” he said, “that it is safer to keep your money in a reopened bank than it is to keep it under the mattress.”

Sixty million Americans listened to FDR’s speech. Their reaction was overwhelming. The next day, newspapers around the country reported long lines of people waiting to put their money back into the banks. The immediate crisis had passed.

Roosevelt had quickly forged a powerful bond with the public. The press labeled his speech a “Fireside Chat.” It became the first of many informal radio addresses FDR made during his presidency. Mail flooded the White House. Before 1933, relatively few people wrote to the president. Herbert Hoover’s mail averaged 5,000 letters a week. Under FDR that number exploded to 50,000. Roosevelt had begun to revolutionize the public’s relationship with the presidency and Americans now felt comfortable communicating directly with their president.
FDR’s quick action to save the nation’s banks was the crucial first step in meeting the crisis of the Great Depression. But it was only the opening act in the busiest period of presidential activity in American history.

During the next one hundred days, Roosevelt issued proclamations and executive orders and pushed a steady stream of legislation through Congress to relieve economic hardship, stimulate recovery, and forge lasting reforms. In one hundred days, he built the foundation for the New Deal and fundamentally changed the role of the federal government in the lives of the American people.

Roosevelt believed recovery was impossible without massive government action. He would use government to restore confidence in financial markets, relieve distress, and pump money into a failing economy in which employment, wages, profits, and savings were falling.

Roy Justus, Sioux City (Iowa) Tribune, March 15, 1933.
100 DAYS OF ACTION
March 9—June 16, 1933

FINANCIAL REFORMS
March 9    Emergency Banking Act
March 20   Government Economy Act
April 19   Abandonment of the Gold Standard
May 27     Securities Act
June 5     Abrogation of Gold Payment Clause
June 13    Home Owners Loan Act
June 16    Glass-Steagall Banking Act

JOBS AND RELIEF
March 31   Creation of Civilian Conservation Corps
May 12     Federal Emergency Relief Act
June 16    National Industrial Recovery Act
June 16    Emergency Railroad Transportation Act

RURAL REFORMS
May 12     Agricultural Adjustment Act
May 12     Emergency Farm Mortgage Act
May 18     Tennessee Valley Authority Act
June 16    Farm Credit Act

PROHIBITION
March 22   Beer-Wine Revenue Act
Financial Reforms

During his first week as president, Roosevelt had rescued the banking system. In the following weeks, the Emergency Banking Act was used to help additional banks that needed federal aid. The Act permitted the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC)—an agency created under Hoover—to buy preferred stock in these banks to get them on their feet.

But further financial reforms were needed to restore the nation’s confidence.

FDR acted quickly to curb unsound banking practices and protect bank depositors. The Glass-Steagall Banking Act further stabilized the banks, reducing bank failures from over 5000 in 1933 to just 57 in 1934. To protect depositors, the Act created the Federal Deposit Insurance...
securities markets. The 1929 stock market crash exposed the lack of regulation in America’s financial markets. Investor fraud, risky credit deals, and other abuses were widespread. The Securities Act aimed to curb such abuses and encourage investment. For the first time, the federal government became directly involved in policing the securities markets. The Act required companies that issued stock to file detailed information about new securities with the Federal Trade Commission. False statements could lead to criminal prosecution and civil suits.

Finally, Roosevelt pursued a policy of monetary expansion, abandoning the gold standard and devaluing the dollar. The goal was to reverse the devastating deflation brought on by the Depression.
When FDR took office the unemployment rate was 25 percent. Millions of Americans were barely surviving on dwindling aid provided by overwhelmed charities and state and local governments.

Roosevelt moved immediately to put people back to work. His goal was to provide swift assistance to jobless Americans, increasing their purchasing power so they could buy more goods and services and help boost the nation’s economy.

He launched the largest public works program in American history and directed billions of federal dollars to fund relief for the unemployed. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) provided states and cities with billions of dollars to finance local work projects. From 1933-1935 it completed over 235,000 projects. At its peak, it employed almost 2.5 million people. The Public Works Administration (PWA) put additional people to work building highways, dams, and other infrastructure. The PWA accounted for one-third of all construction in America in 1933. From 1933-1939, it funded over 34,000 projects, including the Grand Coulee Dam, the Triborough Bridge, and the Lincoln Tunnel.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) put unemployed young men aged 17-24 to work on...
conservation projects around the nation. Within three months, the Corps enlisted nearly 250,000 young men. Eventually, the CCC would employ nearly three million. They planted over two billion trees, fought forest fires and floods, built trails, campgrounds, and reservoirs, and aided with soil conservation programs.

FDR also committed the government to an unprecedented effort to regulate prices and wages and improve business and labor conditions. The National Industrial Recovery Administration (NRA) sought to end cut-throat competition brought on by the Depression that was reducing wages and prices to disastrous levels. It encouraged businesses in hundreds of industries to create codes of “fair competition.” The codes set maximum hours and minimum wages, guaranteed union rights, and prohibited child labor. Companies adopting the codes were exempt from anti-trust laws.

Despite FDR’s hopes, the NRA proved ineffective. Its codes were unwieldy, often favored larger businesses, and encouraged monopolistic practices that hindered economic recovery. It was declared unconstitutional in 1935. Still, during 1933 its energy gave Americans a much-needed psychological lift.

Top Row: Sisters in Schenectady, New York promote the NRA. / The CCC only enlisted young men, but Eleanor Roosevelt helped create a similar program for unemployed young women. One of the program’s camps was located at Bear Mountain, New York. / TVA employee.

Middle Row: Employees at a FERA-funded work program for seamstresses in Massachusetts. / The NRA’s code poster featured the agency’s distinctive blue eagle logo. / TVA worker. / A CCC work crew clears land as part of a soil conservation project.

Bottom Row: FERA-funded construction project in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. / A group of women form the NRA eagle symbol during a rally in New York. / A teacher instructs a class of CCC enrollees in tractor repair.
FDR believed aiding America’s farmers was crucial to ending the Great Depression. In 1933, nearly half of Americans lived in rural areas, and more than one in five workers were farmers. As the Depression spread, prices for agricultural products collapsed. Farm income plummeted 60 percent. Desperate farmers defaulted on bank loans and lost their lands. Tenant farmers and sharecroppers were forced to accept harsh terms from landlords.

Roosevelt’s farm program aimed to rescue indebted farmers and increase their income.

Farmers could then buy products produced in the nation’s cities, aiding economic recovery there.

The centerpiece of the program was the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). It sought to raise agricultural prices by limiting production. The government paid farmers to reduce their livestock herds and leave some fields unplanted. The AAA was controversial. Critics objected to cutting agricultural production when many Americans lacked adequate food. The AAA also hurt poor farm laborers because landlords often evicted tenant farmers from unplanted land. However, the agency’s success in...
raising farm prices eased rural suffering by getting badly-needed cash into the hands of farmers.

To help struggling farmers pay their mortgages, FDR sponsored the Emergency Farm Mortgage Act. It refinanced farm loans at lower interest rates and on easier terms. The Farm Credit Act established local credit institutions for farmers to improve their access to capital.

FDR also moved to improve rural life and productivity by bringing electricity and industry to underdeveloped areas. In 1933, 90 percent of American farmers lacked electricity. FDR was determined to change this. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) was the first step. It put thousands of people to work building dams and public power plants in the giant Tennessee River Valley. The TVA controlled flooding and erosion, improved agriculture, and developed the Valley’s industry. It sparked economic growth and improved living standards in a region touching seven states. Today, the TVA is America’s largest public power producer.

Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) transmission tower.

An Iowa farmer receives his first Agricultural Adjustment Administration benefit check for reducing corn production, 1933.

Giant generators at the TVA’s Pickwick Dam in Hardin County, Tennessee.
One of the most popular bills enacted during the First Hundred Days had little to do with banks or public works. During the 1932 campaign, FDR vowed to repeal Prohibition—a constitutional ban on the manufacture and sale of intoxicating liquors enacted in 1921. While a constitutional amendment made its way through the states, Roosevelt acted immediately to ease Prohibition with the Beer-Wine Revenue Act. It legalized the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages containing no more than 3.2 percent alcohol by weight.

Happy Cleveland residents celebrate the arrival of the first beer shipment to their city, April 9, 1933.
Did it Work?

On June 16, 1933, FDR’s “First Hundred Days” ended.

Congress adjourned for the summer. The President left Washington for a vacation. And, after three months of frenetic activity, the nation could catch its breath and reflect on what had happened.

It had been the busiest legislative session in American history. Sixteen major bills had raced through Congress. Virtually everything Roosevelt asked for had become law. The press and public were nearly unanimous with praise.

But what was the result?

The Great Depression did not disappear. Indeed, it would continue for nearly a decade. Critics charge that flaws in the New Deal hindered recovery. Some argue FDR should have given more attention to international efforts to combat the Great Depression. Others cite the contradictory nature of some of his legislative program. “It simply has to be admitted,” FDR adviser Rexford Tugwell later recalled, “that Roosevelt was not yet certain what direction he ought to take and was, in fact, going both ways at once.”

FDR’s defenders maintain he pulled the nation from the brink of economic ruin, halting the economic slide and providing crucial aid to millions of Americans. Though recovery was slow and fitful after 1933, unemployment and financial disarray never returned to the levels reached during the winter of 1932-1933.

Certainly the record of the First Hundred Days is mixed. Some of Roosevelt’s initiatives succeeded. Others failed. Some programs were contradictory. But to suffering Americans, what mattered was that someone was taking bold action. As FDR put it, “The country needs and . . . the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

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 the most important element needed for recovery—hope.

“Action, and Action Now”
FDR’s First 100 Days

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Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum

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I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our nation impels. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from being honest as to the condition of our country today. This great nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So first of all let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself, - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes the needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. To bring about prosperity once more.

In the crisis of our war for Independence; in the hour of our national life, the unrest and the doubts of the early days of our constitutional government; later in the dark days of the war between the states, a leadership of frankness and vigor met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to...