

Will Biden Be Another Roosevelt?

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Perhaps the most frequently discussed question lately is: Will President Joseph Biden be another Franklin D. Roosevelt? FDR's presidency, from 1933 to 1945, transformed the United States with its New Deal, a collection of social welfare programs that rewrote the nation's social contract. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, with banks collapsing, corporations contracting, small businesses failing, and 25 percent unemployment, FDR created massive jobs programs, expanded government relief, and most important created Social Security retirement program and passed the National Labor Relations Act, giving unions the right to organize. Roosevelt also built the New Deal Coalition, made up of labor unions, Black Americans, and corporations that produced consumer goods, which became the base of the Democratic Party for the next 75 years.

Now, many ask, with the United States facing another crisis, the coronavirus pandemic and the accompanying economic depression, will Biden succeed in carrying out a similar transformation? He would not be the first to do so. In the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson carried out a similar national reconstruction, passing the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts that enfranchised southern Blacks, and to help the poor created his War on Poverty his Great Society health and education programs, especially Medicare for the elderly and Medicaid for the poor.

FDR and LBJ both acted in response to tremendous social pressure. The labor upheaval of the 1930s with waves of strikes that included mass picket lines, factory seizures, and confrontations with police and national guard led FDR to take action, while LBJ acted under the pressure of the Black civil rights movement with its boycotts, sit-ins, and mass protests. Today, Biden faces no pressure from the social movements but instead has had to deal with the unique issue of the coronavirus pandemic. Can progressive social legislation be passed without popular and working-class agitation?

What is Biden trying to do? He is trying to get Congress to pass legislation that will cost \$6 trillion

dollar—paid for by taxing the rich and corporations—and establish many new programs for the economy, racial justice, and the environment. He is motivating his package by arguing that the United States must remain competitive with other nations, China above all. That is, the progressive domestic policy is motivated by a desire to rebuild America so as to reestablish the global hegemony of American imperialism.

So far, only the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan to deal with COVID has passed. Two other plans remain: the \$2.3 trillion American Jobs Plan and the \$1.8 trillion American Family Plan. With the Senate divided 50 Democrats and 50 Republicans it will be difficult to get these through Congress, especially with antiquated rules that usually requires 60 votes to pass a bill.

The debate has been framed in terms of a program to rebuild the nation's infrastructure. The Republicans define infrastructure as roads, bridges, railroads, and perhaps broadband communications, while Biden and the Democrats argue that things such as childcare, expanded health insurance, and two years free college education must be included. Biden's plan to deal with climate change by expanding renewable energy sources is opposed by the Republicans and the oil companies, but it is also criticized by environmental groups that argue that it is not big enough. Progressive Democrat Alexandria Ocasio Cortez says it should be four times larger.

The Democratic Socialists of America backed Senator Bernie Sanders, but Biden has, in effect, adopted Sanders' program, which was also the program of DSA. Perhaps DSA members believe they have been successful in moving the Democrats. We should remember that the same thing happened in the 1930s when FDR pragmatically adopted much of the program of the Socialist Party of America, leading that party to dwindle as socialists became Democrats.