

Economic and Social Crisis in America: FDR Wasn't FDR ... Until His Hand Was Forced By Civil Disobedience

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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Progressives are disappointed that – contrary to the [hype](#) – Obama is no FDR.

But FDR himself wasn't who we think of as FDR until he was forced by protests, strikes and other forms of civil disobedience.

As historian Howard Zinn [wrote](#) in March 2008:

In 1934, early in the Roosevelt Presidency, strikes broke out all over the country, including a general strike in Minneapolis, a general strike in San Francisco, hundreds of thousands on strike in the textile mills of the South. Unemployed councils formed all over the country. Desperate people were taking action on their own, defying the police to put back the furniture of evicted tenants, and creating self-help organizations with hundreds of thousands of members.

Without a national crisis—economic destitution and rebellion—it is not likely the Roosevelt Administration would have instituted the bold reforms that it did.

Today, we can be sure that the Democratic Party, unless it faces a popular upsurge, will not move off center. The two leading Presidential candidates [i.e. Obama and McCain] have made it clear that if elected, they will not bring an immediate end to the Iraq War

They offer no radical change from the status quo.

They do not propose what the present desperation of people cries out for

They do not suggest the deep cuts in the military budget or the radical changes in the tax system that would free billions, even trillions, for social programs to transform the way we live.

None of this should surprise us. The Democratic Party has broken with its historic conservatism, its pandering to the rich, its predilection for war, only when it has encountered rebellion from below, as in the Thirties and the Sixties. We should not expect that a victory at the ballot box in November will even begin to budge the nation from its twin fundamental illnesses: capitalist greed and militarism.

For instance, the mortgage foreclosures that are driving millions from their homes—they should remind us of a similar situation after the Revolutionary War, when small farmers, many of them war veterans (like so many of our homeless today), could not afford to pay their taxes and were threatened with the loss of the land, their homes. They gathered by the thousands around courthouses and refused to allow the auctions to take place.

The evictions today of people who cannot pay their rents should remind us of what people did in the Thirties when they organized and put the belongings of the evicted families back in their apartments, in defiance of the authorities.

Historically, government, whether in the hands of Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or liberals, has failed its responsibilities, until forced to by direct action: sit-ins and Freedom Rides for the rights of black people, strikes and boycotts for the rights of workers, mutinies and desertions of soldiers in order to stop a war.

Voting ... is a poor substitute for democracy, which requires direct action by concerned citizens.

Similarly, Zinn [said](#) in 2008:

The obstacles are a kind of resignation that things will go on as before. That's always the obstacle to change. The obstacle to change is not that people don't want change. People want change. But most of the time, people feel impotent. However, at certain points in history, the energy level of people, the indignation level of people rises. And at that point it becomes possible for people to organize and to agitate and to educate one another, and to create an atmosphere in which the government must do something. I'm thinking of the 1930s; I'm thinking of Franklin D. Roosevelt coming into office not really a crusader.

Roosevelt came into office, you know, with a balance-the-budgets history. It was not clear what he was going to do, and I don't think he was clear about what he was going to do, except that he was going to be different from Hoover and the Republicans. But when he came into office, he faced a country that was on strike. He faced general strikes in San Francisco in Minneapolis. He faced strikes of hundreds of thousands of textile workers in the South. He faced a tenants movement and an unemployed council movement. And he faced a country in turmoil, and he reacted to it, he was sensitive to it, he moved. That's what we will need.

We will need to see some of the scenes that we saw in the '30s.

Liberal Harvard Law School professor Lawrence Lessig [pointed out](#) last week that – instead of mocking the Tea party – progressives should emulate it's energy:

Many of my friends have been puzzled that I have not been a strong critic of the Tea Party. Indeed, quite the opposite, I stand as a critical admirer.... I am a genuine admirer of the urge to reform that is at the heart of the grassroots part of this, perhaps the most important political movement in the current political context.

My admiration for this movement grew yesterday, as at least the Patriots flavor of the Tea Party movement announced its first fight with (at least some) Republicans. The Tea Party Patriots have called for a GOP moratorium on "earmarks."

This disagreement has thus set up the first major fight of principle for the Tea Party. As leaders in the Tea Party Patriots described in an email to supporters,

For two years we have told the media and the rest of the country that we are nonpartisan and that we intend to hold all lawmakers to a higher standard.

This, they insist, is their first chance for that stand with the new Republican Congress. And the Tea Party Patriots have now mobilized their list to pressure Republicans to support this first and critical reform in the new Congress.

Earmarks are ... an essential element in the corruption that is Congress today.... they have become the key to an incredible economy of influence that effectively enables lobbyists to auction too many policy decisions to the highest special interest bidder. That economy won't change simply by eliminating earmarks. But eliminating earmarks is an essential first step to starving this Republic-destroying beast.

We do face a common enemy. Special-interest-government is anathema to both the true Right and the limping Left. Progress would be to work together to end it.

Lessig is not alone.

As I've previously pointed out, progressives such as [Dave Lindorff](#), [political science professor Peter Dreier](#), [economist Dean Baker](#), [Daniel Ellsberg](#), [Jonathan Capehart](#) and many others say that we should be emulating the protest energy of the Tea Party, because we have to raise some hell before anything will change.

In fact, as I've repeatedly noted, the whole left-versus-right thing is just a distraction trick. It's really the American people versus the giant bankers, captains of the military-industrial complex, and [handful of others who are benefiting by shafting the average American](#).

Remember that one of the founders of the Tea Party - Karl Denninger - has [slammed](#) the current Tea Party (which was quickly co-opted by the mainstream GOP) for serving the rich and the Republican party instead of fighting against the giant banks, and is [calling](#) for non-partisan, Gandhi-style nonviolent resistance to take on the banks.

And remember that "liberal" George Soros is [paying](#) a top aide to "conservative" Sarah Palin,

Note to conservatives who dislike FDR: Glass-Steagall and other regulations against fraud wouldn't have been passed unless the public had raised hell through protests and strikes.

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