

The Demise of the Civilian Conservation Corps: a Casualty of War

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While the Great Depression is best known for leaving millions of Americans jobless, it came with countless other problems. Included in these side effects was a shift in the nation's priorities. Lost in the scramble to right the sinking ship of the nation's economy were smaller projects that eventually became neglected as President Hoover focused on recovering jobs and saving businesses. One of these abandoned pieces of government responsibility was conservation, which was not considered as important as the depression relief effort and took a backseat in the early 1930s.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected President in 1933, and with him came a whole new brand of government. Hoover had dipped his toe into relief work with the Emergency Relief and Construction Act of 1932, but Roosevelt took job creation to a never-before-seen level in the U.S. Within his first two years the President created the Civil Works Administration and the Public Works Administration, both designed to put the unemployed to work on different service tasks around the country.

While Roosevelt was immensely proud of all of his New Deal programs, his crown jewel was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The CCC put eighteen to thirty-five year old men to work on conservation and infrastructural projects all over the United States, combining the nation's need for unskilled labor jobs with Roosevelt's personal love of nature. The program quickly became immensely popular; hundreds of thousands of men joined and most of the nation rallied in support for the CCC.

Despite remaining one of the most successful of the New Deal programs, within a decade CCC enrollment declined and the relief agency was liquidated in 1942. The reason such a successful agency could be abolished within just ten years of its inception is a question historians disagree on. Calvin Gower argued that the CCC was liquidated due to "World War II and other developments." These "other developments" included Congress's concern that making a relief agency permanent would convey a belief that the U.S. would have a "continuing unemployment problem."¹ John Salmond disagreed with Gower. In his book, Salmond argues that Congress's problems with the CCC went deeper than the war; he believes that they were a result of "uneasiness against increasing federal power which had been engendered by the court-packing issue."²

My initial research question for this paper was why the Civilian Conservation Corps was never made a permanent government agency. While this question is relevant to the actual topic of my paper, through my research I found that the failure to make the CCC permanent was only a portion of why the program was abolished. When President

Roosevelt began campaigning for a second term in 1936, he began advocating for a permanent CCC, using the public love for the Corps to boost his political appeal.³ He continued to fight with Congress for a permanent CCC, but was continually rebuffed on the grounds that the nation should be more optimistic about the future of their unemployed men.⁴ In early 1937 it seemed that a permanent Corps was all but a guarantee, but by 1939 the prevailing sentiment in Congress was only to temporarily extend the agency. On August 8th, 1939, President Roosevelt signed legislation extending the CCC until 1943.⁵ It is unclear what caused Roosevelt to stop fighting for a permanent Corps. One theory is that Roosevelt could see WWII on the horizon and did not think it would be appropriate to continue a relief agency. Another is that the President assumed he would be able to continue temporarily preserving the CCC and make it permanent at a later date. It remains unclear whether FDR sold out on ensuring the future of his beloved project or merely compromised.

Had the program been made permanent in the early 1940s it would almost certainly have survived World War II, but the Corps could have been preserved even without being made permanent. It initially seemed that the politics behind Roosevelt's angering of Congress and his failure to pass the CCC permanence bill were the key factors that led to the demise of the agency, but my research revealed that the end of the Corps had more to do with the war and its confounding factors than anything else. World War II conflicted with the CCC in a multitude of ways: the army and the Corps drew from the same population and needed similar resources, the economic boom that came as a result of the war eliminated the need for relief agencies, and many Americans felt that non-military spending should be a low priority during wartime. It was the combination of these factors that led to the demise of the Civilian Conservation Corps.

Court-Packing Gone Awry: Payback for a Failed Reform Plan

In the early days of the New Deal, President Roosevelt had little tension with Congress. He flooded the legislative and judicial branches with programs and legislations ranging from the Civilian Conservation Corps to the Federal Emergency Relief Act to the Agricultural Adjustment Act. For the most part, Congress complied. Roosevelt managed to avoid any major conflict with the Supreme Court until what became known as "Black Monday": May 27th, 1935. The Supreme Court struck down one of the most crucial provisions of FDR's National Industrial Recovery Act in *Schechter Poultry v. United States*. In a unanimous decision, the court ruled that the Federal government had no right to interpose on the production of the Schechter Poultry, a company whose sales were almost entirely in-state. Subsequent rulings, including *United States v. Butler*, further weakened the New Deal. Roosevelt was furious at the Supreme Court, saying in a press conference that they were relegating him to the "horse-and-buggy definition of interstate commerce."⁶ The President felt trapped by his judges, and needed a way out. Roosevelt's proposed plan, announced on February 5th, 1937, was to add a new judge for every current sitting judge who had served ten or more years and had declined to retire at

seventy years old. He used several other pieces of the bill, including a clause to add more judges to lower courts, to make the case that Federal judges were overworked and could be made more efficient.

The President had majorities in both the Senate and the House, and initially had no reason to believe that his bill would not pass quickly.⁷ What he did not count on, however, was that by drafting the bill in secret, Roosevelt had done nothing to generate assured support for his court-packing legislation. Weeks of debate followed the announcement of the court-reform bill, but a sudden shift in the voting ideology of Justice Owen Roberts from anti-New Deal legislation to pro-New Deal legislation eventually rendered the reform plan almost unneeded. Within a few months, Roosevelt had three big wins: *West Coast Hotel v. Parrish*, the upholding of the National Labor Relations Act, and the upholding of the Social Security Act.

While what became known as the “Switch in time that saved nine” eliminated most of the need for Roosevelt’s court-packing plan, reverberations from the reform bill echoed long after the legislation had been put to rest. A cartoon in the Richmond Times Dispatch titled “What Came Out of It” depicts FDR smiling at a plump apple labeled “Overwhelming New Deal victory” in one panel, and in the other panel, an old apple with two worms, one labeled “Supreme Court Plan Defeat” and the other “Democratic Party Split”.⁸ This cartoon aptly displayed that despite the fact that the plan never went into effect, President Roosevelt had cast a shade over the New Deal, making his once-strong plan seem full of holes. He alienated many of his supporters, as evidenced in a Gallup Poll that showed that fifty-three percent of the nation was against his reform plan including thirty percent of the Democrats, the majority of his voting base.⁹ As a man who relied on creating personal connections and fostering a sense of confidence with the American people to gain support for legislation, the distrust that came as a result of the court reform bill would prove an obstacle for Roosevelt’s further New Deal plans.

Congressmen, angered by Roosevelt’s reform bill, needed a way to express their displeasure while not overtly taking action against the President. They sought to take something away from Roosevelt that was big enough to sting and warn him that he should not try to put one over on Congress, yet without hurting the nation too seriously. The cartoon “Back Talk from the Ventriloquist’s Dummy” from the *Boston News Bureau* outlines both Congress’ anger at Roosevelt and their process for picking a way to retaliate. The cartoon depicts President Roosevelt with his hand inside of a dummy labeled “Congress”, while the dummy exclaims “T’heck with packin’ the Supreme Court! I think you’re all wet! As for the economy, how about economizing on some of your pet projects?!!!”.¹⁰ The cartoon illustrates that Roosevelt was attempting to be a puppeteer with his court reform plan, but only succeeded in angering his puppet. Congress sprang on Roosevelt’s explanation that the bill would free up overworked judges to pass more legislation to strengthen the nation’s economy and used that against him, saying that some of his favorite projects should be cut out of the nation’s budget.

The CCC had long been considered Roosevelt's "pet project", or "his baby".¹¹ He fought tirelessly to maintain its budget and eventually make it permanent, but his largest legislative attempt on the latter was ill-timed. The House of Representatives debated FDR's CCC permanence bill on May 11th, 1937, just three months after the introduction of the court reform bill. Support for the argument that many Congressmen, especially Democrats, felt they had to affirm their independence by preventing the CCC from being permanent can be found in the fact that the CCC itself was never under criticism during the permanence debate. Indeed, Congressmen were quoted as saying they were "100 Percent for the C.C.C camps" and believed the CCC was a "fine organization".¹² Despite having no problems with the Corps, when it came time to decide on the bill to make the CCC permanent, Congress voted it down, likely putting an expiration date on the lifetime of FDR's "baby". Although the Corps was a very successful relief agency, it was the political fallout from FDR's court packing plan that closed the door on the its fight for permanence.

The Economic Boom of War

War has the uncanny ability to recalibrate a nation. It kills reform, yet spawns revolutions--war is the ultimate priority-changer. The United States was revolutionizing in the years leading up to World War Two; a wave of New-Deal progressives, led by President Franklin Roosevelt, was revitalizing the nation and creating distance from the relatively laissez-faire governments of Herbert Hoover and Calvin Coolidge. The Second World War threw a wrench in FDR's works, forcing him to shift his political priorities as American citizens began looking to him as their Commander-in-Chief rather than their president. The casualties of this ideological change were many, not least of which were New Deal programs that, one way or another, were abolished or allowed to wither as a result of WWII.

Despite the countless problems wars have caused nations since the beginning of time, there is no questioning the positive byproduct of war: it sparks economy. War drives manufacturing and industry, heightens the need for food production and jobs in factories, on farms, and in the army. The U.S. experienced this positive change in full force during WWII. The gross domestic product of the United States tripled from the depression to the height of the war, rising from \$780 billion in 1933 to \$2.24 trillion in 1944.¹³ The war increased need for all types of products, most of which were both made and bought domestically. This commerce propped up the moribund economy of the U.S., helping bring the nation out of its largest-ever depression. The increase in buying and selling created jobs, decreasing U.S. unemployment rates from twenty-two percent in 1932 to five percent in 1942.¹⁴ While many of these jobs were in factories, the need for farms was also heightened, leading to a boom in both farm job wages and farm sizes.¹⁵ Jobs opened up, but many of the fit, young men who would have been perfect to work on farms were working for relief agencies like the CCC. This situation is depicted in a *Des Moines*

Register cartoon titled the “hidden mystery”, where a farmer is ensnared by his massive harvest while a truckload of CCC boys drives by.¹⁶ It was clear in the early nineteen-forties that relief agencies had served their purpose--they provided people jobs until the depression was over. Maintaining a depression relief program without a depression, especially a *New Deal* depression program, was a ridiculous idea to many anti-New Dealers.

While the newfound availability of jobs was enticing to many CCC workers, the major selling point of leaving the Corps for non-relief work was the higher wages. There is no mistaking that the CCC work was fulfilling and purposeful, however the influx of jobs that could offer Corps men a better standard of living called many away from the conservation agency. Throughout most of the CCC’s lifespan, the pay was thirty dollars a month, of which as much as twenty-five dollars would be required to be sent to family.¹⁷ In comparison, the average income in America in 1940 was \$1368, almost four times what Corps men would make in a year.¹⁸ While working for the CCC, men stayed in camps, using Corps facilities and interacting mostly with other members. Extra money from a higher paying job gave the previously unemployed men a chance to become self-sufficient, an opportunity the CCC did not give them.

The Civilian Conservation Corps During the War: A Game of Priorities

While World War Two signaled the end of the Great Depression, it also paved the road for the elimination of many of FDR’s New Deal programs, especially those geared towards depression relief. Many Americans felt that, in a time of such crisis, most nonessential government programs should give way to the war effort. This is evident in a *New York Times* article from October of 1943. John Bricker, the Republican Governor of Ohio, stated that the Republican minority in Congress had “Broken the back of the New Deal’s disorganized financial program”. They had saved the nation millions of dollars in “non-essential expenditures”, including eliminating the Civilian Conservation Corps’ \$80,000,000 budget.¹⁹ In a time of as much stress and pressure as World War II, American citizens wanted to feel their tax money was being put to good use. President Roosevelt’s enemies, chiefly the Republicans in Congress, seized this opportunity to strike down programs that they had long seen as unnecessary. In a letter in 1942 to the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Education and Labor, the President of the American Farm Bureau Federation, Edward O’Neal, made a strong case for abolishing the CCC. “We are engaged in the most colossal war in the history of the world,” he wrote. “We cannot have ‘business as usual’ in Government any more... The time has come for Congress to take all steps necessary for the discontinuance of non-essential Government programs.”²⁰ The seriousness of the war was so pervasive that even President Roosevelt realized that some of his programs might have to take a back seat, suggesting in 1943 that he must move on from “Dr. New Deal” to “Dr. Win the War”.²¹ While the Civilian Conservation Corps provided useful services to the U.S., its target employees, eighteen to thirty-five year old men, made it a perfect program to be attacked

by critics of the New Deal. Raymond Clapper, a noted news commentator, called programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps “products of the depression”. In an article in 1942 where he argued to abolish the CCC, Clapper asked, “if the reason for establishing [relief agencies] was that a need for them existed during the depression, why should they be continued if the need has disappeared? We now have a shortage of young manpower... every able-bodied young man is needed either in the armed services [or] in war plants”.²² The overlap in employment targets between the CCC and the Army made the Corps a very difficult program for Roosevelt to justify maintaining throughout the war.

In addition to potential employees, the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Army had a lot of equipment and infrastructure in common, another reason the program became targeted when the war started. A New York Times article from July of 1942 describes how the Senate finalized their vote to abolish the Civilian Conservation Corps. Not only would the CCC become liquidated, the article wrote, its “buildings, equipment, materials and supplies will be turned over, for the most part, to the Army and the Navy.” This all-in approach towards war funding was not only felt by Republicans; the article stated that “Democrats from twenty states” joined Republicans in voting down the motion that would have continued the CCC.²³

In the 1930s and early 1940s, the United States went through two major events, both very trying for the nation: The Great Depression and World War II. It was critical throughout these years that the U.S. government maintain the morale of its people in order to keep both national pride and support for leadership. The New Deal was a very good morale booster; it created jobs and propped up the nation’s failing economy, restoring American faith in the government. In the years leading up to WWII, many American Congressmen were hesitant to make the Civilian Conservation Corps permanent because it might damage people’s perceptions of how good an economic position the U.S. was in. The CCC was, from its inception, a recovery and relief program, and government officials feared that establishing a permanent Corps was a sign to the nation that the depression was not really over, and the New Deal might not be as successful as people thought.²⁴ Congressman Gerald Landis, for example, questioned how it would “affect the morale of our people” if the “Civilian Conservation Corps [were to] be a permanent agency” and if people might feel worried about the “future they have to look toward”.²⁰ Congress’ hesitance over the CCC and eventual defeat of the bill to make it permanent all but signed the Corps’ death warrant. Without backing as an official government agency, the CCC had no remedy for the steady decline in enrollment that occurred as a result of the war and was eventually liquidated in 1942.²⁵

Conclusion

While there were a great many casualties of World War Two, one of the most unnecessary was the Civilian Conservation Corps. Parallels can be seen between the Corps and LBJ's "Great Society"; in the same way that the "Bitch of a war" killed Johnson's dream of a Great Society, WWII killed Roosevelt's own beloved pet project. Nobody is to blame for the demise of CCC, but it is disconcerting nonetheless that such a successful program could become collateral damage and never gain traction again.

The story of the end of the CCC is a reminder that sacrifices often have to be made for the greater good of a country. There was no denying the effectiveness of the Corps, but it would have been extremely difficult to justify maintaining it while thousands of men were dying abroad in Europe and Asia. Other instances of this have occurred in U.S. history. In the 1910s, for instance, women's rights protests had to be put on hold while women took up work in factories during World War I.

While nothing on the scale of Roosevelt's CCC has been accomplished since WWII, a number of different agencies have been created around the U.S. with similar purposes. The 21st Century Conservation Service Corps (CSC), for example, puts thousands of war veterans and unemployed Americans to work on lands and public heritage sites every year. The reason programs like the CSC have not been as successful as the CCC are more good than bad. Our country has never seen an unemployment problem even close to that of the Great Depression, eliminating the need for large-scale relief agencies. What's more, conservation is being taken much more seriously today than in the early 20th century. Programs such as AmeriCorps and the National Parks Conservation Association are nonprofits that focus on protecting America's natural resources, eliminating the need for another large-scale CCC.

While the CCC didn't last more than a decade, it was critically important not just for the work it provided but for the hope it gave people. Not only did the Corps give young men a roof over their heads and money for their families, it gave them a hope for a better life in one of the largest times of crisis the nation had ever seen. The Civilian Conservation Corps gave a new purpose to the "forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid", but its effect failed to outlast the destructive wave of World War II.²

¹ Calvin Gower, "A Continuing Public Youth Work Program: The Drive for a Permanent Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942" *Environmental Review* 5, no. 22 (Autumn 1981): 39-51, JSTOR.

² John A. Salmond, *The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967), 9.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ William H. Rehnquist, "Judicial Independence," *American Bar Association* 27, No. 2 (Winter 2001): 83, JSTOR.

⁷ Office of the Clerk of the House of Representatives, *Composition of Congress, by Political Party, 1855-2017*. In 1937, Democrats outnumbered Republicans 75-17 in the Senate and 333-89 in the House of Representatives.

⁸ "What Came Out of It," Cartoon, *Richmond Times Dispatch*, July 30, 1937.

⁹ "Are you in favor of President Roosevelt's proposal to reorganize the Supreme Court?" February 5, 1937, Gallup.

¹⁰ "Back Talk From the Ventriloquist's Dummy," Cartoon, *Boston News Bureau*, May 10, 1937.

¹¹ Salmond, "New Deal Case Study," chapter 9.

¹² *To Make the Civilian Conservation Corps a Permanent Agency: Hearings Before the Committee on Labor, 75th Cong., 20th Sess. (1937)* (statement of Gerald Landis).

¹² US Bureau of Economic Analysis, *US Real GDP by Year*.

¹³ US Department of Labor: Bureau of Labor statistics, *United States Unemployment Rate*.

¹² US Department of Agriculture, *Census of Agriculture, 1945*.

¹³ "The Hidden Mystery," Cartoon, *Boston News Bureau*, November 1, 1941.

¹⁴ "Says New Dealers Peril Home Rule," *New York Times*, October 11, 1944.

¹⁵ Edward O'Neill to Elbert D. Thomas, March 31, 1942, in "Should The Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration be Abolished? Pro." *Congressional Digest* 27, No. 6 (June/July 1942): 177-179.

¹⁶ Franklin Delano Roosevelt, speech, in *A Concise History of the American People Volume 2: From 1865*, by Alan Brinkley (New York, US: McGraw-Hill, 2014), 632.

¹⁷ Raymond Clapper, *Washington Daily News* (Pamlico, NC), June 5, 1942, in "Should the Civilian Conservation Corps Be Abolished? Pro," *Congressional Digest* 27, no. 6 (June/July 1942): 177-179.

¹⁸ "Senate Ends CCC on House Demand," *New York Times*, July 1, 1942.

¹⁹ John A. Salmond, "New Deal Case Study," 9.

²⁰ Committee on Labor Hearings.

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