Document #1: Senator Huey Long

Senator Huey P. Long of Louisiana helped Franklin Roosevelt win the Democratic party’s nomination for the presidency in 1932. But Long quickly made himself a thorn in Roosevelt’s flesh, especially with his demands for radical redistribution of the nation’s income. Roosevelt worried Long might emerge as a rival for leadership of the Democratic party, but Long’s career was cut short by an assassin’s bullet in 1935. Long was a flamboyant personality and a sulfurous speaker. His radio audiences included millions of spellbound and supposedly sympathetic listeners.

Now, we have organized a society, and we call it share-our-wealth society, a society with the motto “Every man a king.”

Every man a king, so there would be no such thing as a man or woman who did not have the necessities of life, who would not be dependent upon the whims and caprices… of the financial martyrs for a living. What do we propose by this society? We propose to limit the wealth of big men in the country. There is an average of $15,000 in wealth to every family in America. That is right here today.

We do not propose to divide it up equally. We do not propose a division of wealth, but we propose to limit poverty that we will allow to be inflicted upon any man’s family. We will not say we are going to try to guarantee any equality, or $15,000 to families. No; but we do say that one third of the average is low enough for any one family to hold, that there should be a guaranty of a family wealth of around $5,000; enough for a home, an automobile, a radio, and the ordinary conveniences, and the opportunity to educate their children; a fair share of the income of this land thereafter to that family so there will be no such thing as merely the selected to have those things, and so there will be no such thing as a family living in poverty and distress.

We have to limit fortunes. Our present plan is that we will allow no one man to own more than $50 million. We think that with that limit we will be able to carry out the balance of the program. […]

- Senator Huey Long, “Every Man a King,” March 1, 1934

1. What do you think the source of Long’s appeal was?

2. How responsible were these proposals?

3. Do you think Long posed a legitimate alternative to Roosevelt’s New Deal?
Father Charles Coughlin, a Canadian-born, Roman Catholic priest, was a master of the new medium of radio, rivaled perhaps only by Franklin Roosevelt. Speaking from the pulpit of his parish church in the modest working-class community of Royal Oak, Michigan, he commanded audiences of millions of listeners for his weekly broadcasts in the 1930s. At first, Coughlin supported the New Deal, but he grew more critical and more viciously anti-Semitic, as well as passionately isolationist, as time went on.

..., These shall be the principles of social justice towards the realization of which we must strive:

1. I believe in liberty of conscience and liberty of education…
2. I believe that every citizen willing to work and capable of working shall receive a just living, annual wages which will enable him both to maintain and educate his family according to the standards of American decency.
3. I believe in nationalizing those public resources which by their very nature are too important to be held in the control of private individuals.
5. I believe in upholding the right to private property, but in controlling for the public good.
6. I believe in the abolition of the privately owned Federal Reserve Banking system and in the establishment of a Government owned Central Bank.
8. I believe that one of the chief duties of this Government owned Central Bank is to maintain the cost of living on an even keel and arrange for the repayment of dollar debts with equal value dollars.
9. I believe in the cost of production plus a fair profit for the farmer.
10. I believe not only in the right of the laboring man to organize in unions but also in the duty of the Government, which that laboring man supports, to protect these organizations against the vested interests of wealth and of intellect.
16. I believe in preferring the sanctity of human rights to the sanctity of property rights; for the chief concern of government shall be for the poor because, as it is witnessed, the rich have ample means of their own to care for themselves.

-Father Charles Coughlin, “A Lecture on Social Justice, 1934”

1. To what social groups does Coughlin appear to be speaking?

2. What does he mean by “social justice?”

3. How much of an alternative to the New Deal did he represent?
Dr. Francis Townsend was an obscure sixty-six-year-old physician in 1933 when he penned a letter to his local newspaper in Long Beach, California, that set off a tidal wave of enthusiasm for his old-age pension plan. Within weeks, “Townsend Clubs” sprouted up all over the country to promote Dr. Townsend’s proposal, and by the following year the clubs claimed to have over 2 million members.

It is estimated that the population of the age of 60 and above in the United States is somewhere between nine and twelve millions. I suggest that the national government retire all who reach that age on a monthly pension of $200 a month or more, on condition that they spend the money as they get it. This will insure an even distribution throughout the nation of two or three billions of fresh money each month. Thereby assuring a healthy and brisk state of business, comparable to that we enjoyed during war times.

Where is the money to come from? More taxes? Certainly. We have nothing in this world we do not pay taxes to enjoy. But do not overlook the fact that we are already paying a large proportion of the amount required for these pensions in the form of life insurance policies, poor farms, aid societies, insane asylums, and prisons. The inmates of the last two mentioned institutions would undoubtedly be greatly lessened when it once became assured that old age meant security from want and care. A sales tax sufficiently high to insure the pensions at a figure adequate to maintain the business of the country in a healthy condition would be the easiest tax in the world to collect […]

Our attitude toward Government is wrong. We look at Government as something entirely foreign to ourselves; as something over which we have no control, and which we cannot expect to do us a great deal of good… But the fact is, we must learn to expect and demand that the central Government assume the duty of regulating business activity. When business begins to slow down and capital shows signs of timidity, stimulus must be provided by the National Government in the form of additional capital… This function of government could be easily established and maintained through the pension system for the aged.

1. What were the main features of Townsend’s idea?

2. How practical do you think this idea was?

3. To what extent did the Social Security Act of 1935 owe to pressure from the Townsendites?
Document #4: The 1936 Republican Party Platform

In 1936, the Republicans nominated Alfred M. Landon for president. The Democrats renominated Franklin D. Roosevelt. Before his nomination, Landon telegraphed the Republican convention to express agreement with the platform. The excerpts below illustrate the intense opposition of conservative Republicans to Roosevelt’s New Deal.

America is in peril. The welfare of American men and women and the future of our youth are at stake. We dedicate ourselves to the preservation of their political liberty, their individual opportunity and their character as free citizens, which today for the first time are threatened by Government itself.

For three long years the New Deal Administration has dishonored American traditions flagrantly betrayed the pledges upon which the Democratic Party sought and received public support.

The powers of Congress have been usurped by the President.

The integrity and authority of the Supreme Court have been flouted.

The rights and liberties of American citizens have been violated.

Regulated monopoly has displaced free enterprise.

The New Deal Administration constantly seeks to usurp the rights reserved to the States and to the people.

It has insisted on the passage of laws contrary to the Constitution. […]

It has been guilty of frightful waste and extravagance, using public funds for partisan political purposes. […]

It has created a vast multitude of new offices, filled them with its favorites, set up a centralized bureaucracy, and sent out swarms of inspectors to harass our people. […]

It has destroyed the morale of our people and made them dependent upon government.

Appeals to passion and class prejudice have replaced reason and tolerance. […]

-National Platform of the Republican Party (1936)

1. What elements of the New Deal might have led to the assertion that “political liberty” and “individual opportunity” have been threatened by the New Deal?

2. To what extent does this platform reflect ideological differences between Republicans and Democrats concerning the proper role of the federal government?

3. Do you agree with any of these critiques?