
How FDR's Original Green New Deal Challenged Jim Crow

BY

PAUL J. BAICICH / RICHARD A. WALKER

The Civilian Conservation Corps, FDR's original Green New Deal, cared for the environment and gave jobs to the unemployed. And though its record on racial equality was imperfect, it helped undermine key parts of Jim Crow.

With President Joe Biden's victory last November, the year 2021 has drawn comparisons to the situation faced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) as he entered office in the midst of the Great Depression, and calls for reviving parts of the New Deal have been heard from many quarters. This is not idle speculation, because today's challenges of inequality, injustice, unemployment, and global warming are so grave that they can only be met by sweeping federal policies comparable to the New Deal of the 1930s.

For example, in his 2020 presidential campaign, Senator Bernie Sanders pushed a plan for spending \$171 billion for a Civilian Climate Corps. By late April of this year, Senator Ed Markey and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — leading proponents of a Green New Deal — had also unveiled their ambitious plan for a Civilian Climate Corps that would employ a diverse group of 1.5 million young people over five years.

Recruits would work on projects to address climate change (land, water, and energy conservation), community development (schools, clinics, parks, and social services), and environmental justice (impacted communities would provide half the recruits and receive half the projects). In the meantime, President Biden included a Civilian Climate Corps as part of his own American Jobs Plan (AJP), looking to provide perhaps \$10 billion over ten years to drive the program. A new Civilian Climate Corps continues to be one of the programs that progressives in Congress are pushing to include in the \$3.5 trillion spending bill that is expected to be put into final form and voted on next week.

Why did these politicians hit on the model of Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) for their Civilian Climate Corps? There are four good reasons. First, the CCC was the most popular of FDR's programs — with the men who served, the local communities that benefitted, and the general public. Second, the CCC employed more than 3 million young men from 1933 to 1942, saving them from despair and their families from destitution. Third, the CCC gave recruits the opportunity to do useful work, learn self-discipline, develop job skills, and acquire basic education (many were illiterate). Fourth, the CCC was the "greenest" of the New Deal programs, working across the country to repair a century of rampant deforestation, soil exhaustion, and pollution.

At the same time, the CCC's record on race and gender has often been criticized. Women were excluded entirely and African American men were often passed over by racist recruiters. There was a lack of people of color in most skilled and supervisory positions, and CCC camps were mostly segregated. These failings of the

original CCC would almost certainly will not be repeated today, given social changes over the last century.

Still, the record of the original CCC deserves a closer look, as a matter of historical accuracy and of political urgency. On the one hand, there's a need to address a set of misleading and ahistorical — but unfortunately widespread — arguments that portray the New Deal as fundamentally racist. Not only is that a profoundly misleading depiction of the New Deal; it's an argument that could well be deployed in the future to weaken support for anything echoing the New Deal — including the idea of a new Civilian Climate Corps — even though those kinds of bold federal initiatives are essential to the welfare of all working people in this country.

This article is an attempt to assess the record of the CCC on race — both the facts of the case and the context of government and civil society in Jim Crow America. In our view, the failings of the CCC were due less to inherent flaws in the program than to the overwhelming facts of life of the 1930s.

In brief, the CCC began under a clear antidiscrimination rule; fell into line with segregation under external pressure and internal capitulation; bettered its performance with African Americans over its life; and did relatively well by other people of color. By the end, it had provided jobs for hundreds of thousands of young African Americans and other men of color, affording them with much of the same benefits as white people. Overall, the CCC was flawed — but it was better than the country it served.

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Achievements of the Original CCC

Working out of three thousand camps across the country, the CCC helped restore millions of acres of public forest and private agricultural land devastated by two centuries of relentless exploitation, and opened up the vast public domain to mass recreation by its improvements to public parks, forests, and refuges.

CCC enrollees planted 2.3 billion trees for the US Forest Service and millions more in shelterbelts for the Soil Conservation Service (SCS; now the Natural Resources Conservation Service). With the SCS and Grazing Service, they built tens of thousands of erosion barriers, water works, and other improvements on ranches and farms. Under the US Biological Survey (later the Fish & Wildlife Service), they helped develop scores of wildlife refuges and stocked 1 billion fish in America's fresh waters.

Most famously, the CCC worked with the National Park Service and nascent state park authorities to improve recreational and maintenance facilities in all the country's existing national parks, monuments, and forests, along with more than seven hundred state parks. CCC teams created over ninety thousand acres of campgrounds, a hundred forty thousand miles of foot, horse, and truck trails, and forty-five hundred rustic cabins and hiking shelters, as well as rehabilitating thirty-four hundred acres of public beaches.

To carry out such projects, CCC recruits added a huge amount of infrastructure to public lands, such as hundreds of miles of roads, forty thousand bridges, a hundred seventy landing fields, eighty-nine thousand miles of telephone wire, and thousands of miles of water pipes. Their fire protection work was legion, as they built thirty-eight hundred fire watchtowers, cleared thousands of miles of fuel breaks, and fought hundreds of fires.

CCC enrollees were recruited from all around the country for six-month stints. The majority were sent far from home, mostly out west to parks, forests, farms, and range lands. The young men received food, accommodation, clothing, and medical care, and they were paid a modest \$30 a month, \$25 of which had to be sent home to their families.

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They rose early and worked full days in challenging conditions of hot sun, dense forests, steep mountains, poison oak and ivy, and inclement weather. After work, recreational sports, movies, and music were encouraged and educational courses offered, from basic literacy to botany. Saturdays were set aside for leisure or visits to local communities and Sundays included time for religious services. Enrollees overwhelmingly reported that they finished in better health and better educated than when they entered, with large numbers re-upping.

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The young men of the CCC were mostly from the bottom of the working class. An internal survey in 1937 showed the typical recruit had never held a full-time job, had been jobless for seven months prior to enrollment, and was from a family whose male head of household was unemployed; less than a third had experienced on-the-job training of any sort. As James McEntee, the CCC's second director, put it: "They were drawn almost entirely from that third of the population which President Roosevelt has described as 'ill-fed, ill-housed and ill-clothed.'"

This enormous endeavor was not accomplished with the wave of a magic wand. It took rapid planning and on-the-fly adjustments at every stage of the process: recruitment and assignment, setting up camps, company management, identifying projects and tasks, training and education, and more.

The paucity of administrative capacity in government at the time meant that the way to get the program up and running quickly was to call on the US Army. The CCC was organized into companies and camps, whose commander was a career army officer or, later, a reserve officer. At first, noncommissioned officers carried out orders from the officers in day-to-day operations; later on, more civilians were brought in to serve in these positions.

Launching the CCC

The CCC was close to President Roosevelt's heart; he was a committed conservationist and admirer of the Boy Scouts. The federal program was modeled after New York state's Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA), when FDR was governor. Yet, today it can be hard to imagine the speed with which the CCC moved forward.

Roosevelt's inauguration took place on March 4, 1933, he made a request to Congress for an Emergency Conservation Work Program on March 21, and SB 598 passed both houses of Congress and was signed on March 31. The induction of the first CCC enrollee came on April 7 and the first CCC camp was established at the George Washington National Forest in Virginia ten days later.

Three serious problems were exposed at the start. The first was labor competition. The unions, represented by the American Federation of Labor, were initially opposed to the CCC arguing that enrollees would displace free laborers, that low pay would depress wages and undermine the contractual rights of workers. In an era of fascist mobilization, labor leaders also expressed concerns that the CCC could lead to "militarized labor."

The unions were eventually won over, and fears about undermining prevailing wage rates proved unfounded. Roosevelt brought the unions on board by appointing labor officials to direct the CCC: Robert Fechner, general vice president of the International Association of Machinists (IAM) and James McEntee, also of the IAM.

A second issue was that the CCC was planned entirely for and by men. A few critics raised objections — most notably Frances Perkins and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt — who worked behind the scenes to create a parallel program for women, administered by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration led by Harry Hopkins, popularly known as the "She-She-She." But it was limited in scope and short-lived, reflecting the general patriarchy at a time when women had only recently won the vote, had few legal rights, and were

regarded as unsuited for manual labor.

A third problem dogging the CCC from the beginning was race. Unsurprisingly, given that this was the height of the Jim Crow era, racial justice was not a priority. An amendment introduced by Congressman Oscar S. De Priest, a Republican from Chicago and the only African-American member of the House of Representatives, barred discrimination in the CCC based on race, color, or creed, and was incorporated into the final legislation. The amendment was supported by FDR, who wanted to win over progressive critics and who followed up with an antidiscrimination Executive Order in 1935.

If the shortcomings of the CCC around labor, gender, and race were clear from the outset, only the first was resolved — in large part because unions were there to defend the interests of workers. The Roosevelt administration was focused on economic recovery and its leadership moved quickly to bring the working class into the New Deal coalition. Race and gender were another matter.

One of the hardest issues CCC leaders would have to cope with was the country's rigid racial order, which in the early 1930s went almost completely unchallenged in mainstream politics. The interwar period was the high tide of Jim Crow, a system rooted in the South but instantiated throughout the country. The law could declare discrimination illegal, but how it was carried out proved to be a different thing.

Nevertheless, the New Deal itself brought a remarkable upheaval on many fronts of American life, and it would set in motion changes that would help build the civil rights movement, give greater autonomy to native tribes, and advance women's standing in society. These were felt to a limited degree within the confines of the CCC program, but much more beyond, as the New Dealers responded to a changing electorate, outside pressure, and inside activism, especially by black activists.

Over the course of the 1930s, the New Deal expanded federal employment of people of color, desegregated federal offices, enforced nondiscrimination in Public Works Administration contracts and Works Progress Administration equal pay rules, expanded National Youth Administration employment of minority professionals, created the first federal Office of Civil Rights, and integrated military contracting.

Even if the CCC was not at the forefront of most of these developments, it still scored some significant achievements for access and inclusion. In this regard, a closer review of the situation for African Americans, Native Americans, and others is called for if the CCC is to be judged accurately on both its accomplishments and failures.

African Americans in the CCC

The CCC did not exclude African Americans, as is sometimes claimed. In fact, more than three hundred thousand young black men and thirty thousand black veterans served during its ten-year existence. For tens of thousands of young African-American men, participation in the CCC provided a refuge and sustenance at a time when millions of black people were awash in poverty and hopelessness.

Nevertheless, there were substantial barriers to full participation in the CCC. To begin with, the number of African Americans was capped at 10 percent of all enrollees — the rough percentage of African Americans in the United States population. This was seen as a “fair” rule of thumb by Director Fechner, even though it was decidedly less than adequate when measured against the disproportionate unemployment and poverty of African Americans. Worse, recruiters in most Southern states rarely accepted “Negro” recruits into the



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CCC, considering white people as more deserving of help and arguing that black people were needed at home for growing and harvesting cotton — a reflection of the South’s fundamental reliance on extremely low-paid African-American labor.

Contrary to common opinion, segregation of CCC camps was not the rule from the beginning. In the South, of course, integration was a dead letter. In the North and West, however, several camps started out with black and white people in the same companies. Notably, this experiment with integrated camps came more than a decade before the military was integrated in 1948 and despite army resistance.

Nevertheless, integrated CCC camps — and even all-black camps — faced hostility from neighboring communities, which sent letters of complaint to the director, Congress, and the president. On top of this, internal relations between black and white enrollees could be tense, leading to fights and general discord.

The result was that black and white CCC companies and camps were soon separated, and the experiment with integration ended in 1935. It did not help that Director Fechner came from Tennessee. Fechner danced around the requirements of the De Priest amendment, offering the standard separate-but-equal ideology of *Plessy v. Ferguson* as an excuse in a letter to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP): “This segregation is not discrimination and cannot be so construed. The Negro companies are assigned to the same types of work, have identical equipment, are served the same food, and have the same quarters as white enrollees.”

The resegregation of the CCC infuriated civil rights groups, but their sway was limited. Political pressure did succeed, however, in forcing the CCC to promote more African Americans into supervisory and skilled positions. In August 1935, FDR had the army call up a number of African-American reserve officers to fill CCC administrative positions, and by 1936 African-American officers commanded two CCC companies in New York and Pennsylvania.

Simultaneously, African-American enrollees began to be assigned positions of authority and responsibility at the camps, such as squad leader, company clerk, and educational advisor; and were recruited for skilled jobs instead of being consigned to the most demeaning tasks.

The CCC Educational Program was particularly important for enhancing the responsibilities given to black men. While the start was slow, more than a dozen African-American educational advisors were in place by mid-1934, and by September 1935, African Americans were being appointed as educational advisors throughout most of the country. By 1940, few of the 153 African-American companies lacked such advisors. These men had a leading role at the camp level, including crafting classroom instruction and providing on-the-job training programs.

Many of the projects undertaken by CCC teams — both white and black — required only the simplest types of common labor, yet African-American CCC veterans, like their white counterparts, regularly reported that the CCC taught them habits of cooperation and conscientiousness, and that they appreciated learning skills such as equipment operation, carpentry, mechanics, electrical repair, and construction.

The limits on opportunity for African Americans in Jim Crow America must be recognized, however, and many of the skills acquired did not translate to post-CCC jobs — especially in fields such as botany, forestry, and wildlife management. Skills in journalism, radio, and photography also added little to black men’s future employability in a world of intense racial discrimination. Once again, the good intentions of the CCC ran into the harsh reality of Jim Crow America.

On balance, for young black men the CCC was a valuable, though limited, program hobbled by the conventional practices of white America. In some ways, it was ahead of its time by attempting the integration of companies and the elevation of African Americans to commanding positions — practices that arrived in the US military only during and after World War II.

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In general, the CCC experience was better than the alternative of unemployment or sharecropping — which was the situation for about 80 percent of all black people. Once in the CCC, young people could engage in useful projects in parks, forests, seashores, and other natural landscapes that offered opportunities for personal development and, just as important, gave them a genuine sense that they had contributed to making their country a better place.

Native Americans, Latinos, and Islanders in the CCC

The New Deal brought about a major reversal in the treatment of Native Americans in the 1930s. The transformation in federal policy toward native peoples was embodied in the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, popularly known as “the Indian New Deal,” spearheaded by the US Commissioner of Indian Affairs, John Collier. It ended the devastation of the Dawes Act of 1887, which converted 90 million acres (two-thirds) of tribal treaty land to private holdings in an ill-conceived plan to make indigenous people into small farmers. Almost all this privatized land ended up in white hands.

Under the 1934 act, tribal self-government was implemented, tribes were allowed to incorporate businesses and run education programs, and employment opportunities were enhanced. By 1940, a hundred thirty-five tribal constitutions had been written, voted on, and put into operation; millions of acres were restored or added to tribal lands, and employment of tribal members was greatly increased in the federal Office of Indian Affairs (renamed the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1947).



A member of a CCC-ID crew cementing the joints in a pipeline built on Santa Clara Pueblo lands for irrigation and drinking water in December, 1940. (W. J. Mead / National Archives)

The course of the New Deal for Indians was by no means smooth, and it ran into persistent opposition from white Westerners in Congress and the old guard of Indian agents, as well as from many Native Americans — who had good reason not to trust another round of paternalistic and universalizing policy from the US government. Nevertheless, it brought a sea change in federal policy.

Part of this more enlightened policy was the creation of a parallel CCC, the Indian Emergency Conservation Work (IECW) program. A separate program was requested by Native Americans, who objected to having army-led CCC camps on tribal lands, given the brutal history of conquest. FDR approved almost \$6 million in funding for the start of the IECW, later renamed the Civilian Conservation Corps Indian Division (CCC-ID).

The CCC-ID employed some eighty thousand to eighty-five thousand indigenous men during the years of the Great Depression. This was about 3 percent of the CCC workforce and slightly more than the Native American portion of the population. The Office of Indian Affairs and tribal governments oversaw CCC-ID

projects, and the age limitations of enrollees was not as restrictive as the regular CCC.

The program was focused on tribal lands to restore degraded rangeland, improve water supplies, and promote sustainable grazing. Projects involved road construction, erosion control, reforestation, fish hatcheries, and dams, reservoirs, and water distribution systems. CCC-ID teams worked on two hundred reservations in twenty-three states. The CCC-ID also built dams, roads, trails, and fences on land near reservations. By the end of the CCC-ID program, portions of fifty million acres had been improved. In the words of Collier, “No previous undertaking in Indian Service has so largely been the Indians’ own undertaking.”

The CCC-ID was of great value to native peoples simply by providing jobs for people who had suffered from unemployment and dire poverty long before the Great Depression. For example, jobs for half of the male breadwinners on the Sioux reservations in South Dakota and almost half the income of the Papago tribe in Arizona came from the CCC-ID in the mid-1930s.

Native American men received training in gardening, animal husbandry, safety practices, and academic subjects, in the same manner as other CCC recruits, and they felt that they were working to improve their tribal communities as well as themselves. As one enrollee put it: “This work has provided an income for us and has enabled us to keep alive while, at the same time, it has given us a better perspective on our goals in life.”

The Depression did not begin well for Latino Americans. Mexicans and Mexican Americans were hit hard by white xenophobia and violence against migrant workers in the Southwest. Under the presidency of Herbert Hoover, deportations soared, often with the enthusiastic aid of local governments and employers.

The situation changed significantly once FDR entered the White House. Deportations dropped by roughly half, relief programs came to the aid of impoverished workers and their families, and the State Department joined Mexican American activists to block a case to exclude Mexicans from immigrating to the United States. The CCC recruited thousands of young Mexican Americans across the Southwest, but noncitizen Mexicans did not qualify.

Other than African Americans, Latinos were the largest minority group in California’s CCC camps. They were apparently not singled out for racial discrimination as intensively as black people, even though at some locations identification was split between “W-1” for white and “W-2” for Mexican American. In the reconstruction of La Purísima Mission at Lompoc, the treatment of Mexican American men appears to have been very good, including their use as skilled workers (in sharp contrast to the way white people drove black people out of the Lompoc camp).

New Deal assistance was substantial for Puerto Rico. The Roosevelt administration funded a public works program larger than anything previously seen on the island and New Deal work relief programs, including the CCC, employed thousands of Puerto Ricans. The island’s CCC camps housed over twenty-four hundred men. As on the mainland, the CCC built many of the trails, lookouts, buildings, and roads in various federal and insular parks and forests, including in the majestic El Yunque National Forest.

In the Pacific, Hawai’i received considerable aid under the New Deal and gained many public work projects. The CCC set up several camps on the Hawai’ian Islands, doing mostly forestry and park work. The corps was also active in Alaska, working with indigenous peoples, such as the Aleuts and Tlingit. Most famous of the CCC works in Alaska was the salvage, repair, and carving of native “totem poles,” as part of a US Forest Service effort to employ Alaskan natives and conserve native cultural assets.

The CCC in Retrospect

The CCC disbanded in Summer 1942 when Congress ceased funding it. FDR wished to keep it going, but Southern Democrats and Republicans saw an opportunity to end the program — in part because they could

not abide the inclusion of African Americans in the CCC. FDR's offer to integrate the National Youth Administration into the CCC was refused.

Looking back from the twenty-first century, how should we judge the CCC? How much good work did it do? Did its performance measure up to its intentions? How did it compare with other elements of the New Deal and with American society in general? These are not simple questions and they are rendered more problematic by the difficulty of putting ourselves in the shoes of those living in another time. As one sage put it, "The past is another country."

It can be safely said that the CCC did a great deal of good for the country in terms of resource conservation and outdoor recreation — though even here, times have changed, and environmentalists have criticized many of the ideas about fire suppression, pest removal, stream channelization, and so forth that were popular in the 1930s and that guided CCC activities.

The positive effect of the CCC on its 3 million enrollees is hard to deny. In the midst of the greatest economic collapse in the nation's history, it saved many of them, along with their families, from poverty, homelessness, and despair. It also taught them about the virtues of hard work, the benefits of teamwork, and how to care for land and living things, along with giving them useful skills, greater literacy, and new experiences. The evidence is overwhelming that CCC enrollees held this view themselves, commonly looking back on their time in the corps as one of the best of their lives.

With regard to race, the record is clearly uneven. While the CCC did not exclude African Americans and even integrated some camps at the outset, it quickly ran up against Jim Crow in the South and white racism most everywhere. As a result, the number of black enrollees might well have been higher and more should have served as supervisors and skilled workers. Yet, there was improvement over the decade in the total number and promotion of black enrollees. The early experiment in integrated companies was unprecedented, but segregating camps was a sad capitulation to the racial order of the day. Nevertheless, African-American CCCers still enjoyed many of the positive experiences, as well as economic benefits, enjoyed by whites.

Notably, the NAACP opposed the shutdown of the CCC. In a letter to a Senate committee chairman, the organization "pointed out the great benefit . . . to Negro citizens, as well as to Whites, and re-emphasized its conviction that it would do more harm than good to abolish [it]."

The CCC's performance with regard to other people of color was much better. The CCC Indian Division was well regarded by many tribes and allowed for a high degree of autonomy. Latinos were not singled out or segregated, and the CCC appears to have been a welcome presence in Puerto Rico, Hawai'i, and Alaska.

Of course, the CCC was only one of dozens of New Deal programs, some of which, like the Works Progress Administration, performed better on racial grounds. There was also improvement in the CCC and other relief programs in the treatment of African Americans, thanks to the growing ranks of black officials within the federal government and increasing awareness of racial injustice among white New Dealers — chiefly due to an expanding black electorate in the North, its wholesale shift from Republican to Democrat, and the heightened militancy of African-American activists.

Clearly, while the New Deal revolutionized many aspects of American society and government, it did not confront the country's entrenched racial order. Many of its leaders and programs rose above the general state of affairs, but others acquiesced to the prevailing caste system. Nevertheless, the impact of the New Deal, followed by the World War II, shook the country's political order in a way that loosened the shackles of white domination and helped unleash the struggle for civil rights that would eventually break the mold of Jim Crow America.

Many of the burdens that the CCC and the New Deal had to overcome have been lifted from our own shoulders by the long battle for racial justice. Yet we, too, will be judged and found wanting in the future, so let us approach the tasks ahead in combatting climate change, economic injustice, and racial oppression with care and a degree of humility.

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