



IMPRIMIS

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I Must See the Things; I Must See the Men; One Historian's Recollections of the 1930s and 1940s

By Russell Kirk

Editor's Preview: Renowned scholar and author Russell Kirk recently spoke at a seminar sponsored by Hillsdale College's Center for Constructive Alternatives in a three-part series on "The Legacy of the New Deal."

His topic was: Did the New Deal avert a revolution in the United States? The following essay provides a fascinating glimpse of his early years in Depression-era Michigan and offers a taste of the story-telling skills which have made Kirk's writing as readable as it is insightful.

Introduction

The Greek historian Polybius gave us what is called the "pragmatic method" of historical study, dealing accurately with important events and offering explanations for them; ascertaining, so far as possible, the how and the why of those events; thus providing instruction to seekers after prudence, pointing the way toward right conduct through knowledge of both the blunders and the successes of the past. Writing principally about his own time during the third and second centuries before Christ, Polybius travelled at an advanced age from the Pillars of Hercules to the shores of the Black Sea, seeking out monuments and inspecting archives and battle-sites, so that he might get at the truth of reports of events.

To write a truthful history, as Hilaire Belloc reminds us, one must know the towns, the country houses, the landscape, the whole physical setting, of the country of one's studies; one must talk with old men and women, besides reading other people's books; one must peer imaginatively behind the veil



of publications about the New Deal were written without much judicious criticism; but in the fullness of time there were counterblasts, often on radical premises, from writers no more impartial. Temperate treatments of the subject also have been published, true; yet too often the "neutral" authors seem content with generalizations, as if they lacked close personal knowledge of the people and events that they discuss.

Neither will it do to rely altogether upon the memoirs of leading men of the period, few of whom were perfectly ingenuous; nor upon "court histories" of that period. For in a democracy, the beliefs, interests, moods, and passions of the mass of the people are more powerful causes of historical events than are the polemics of eminent politicians and publicists.

"The circumstances of people with much-reduced incomes between 1929 and 1933 were not nearly so desperate as certain school textbooks would have us believe."

of yesteryear. As Edmund Burke said concerning a prudent statesman's attention to grand policies, "I must see the things; I must see the men."

In particular, the New Deal needs to be examined afresh, with candor, now that people no longer are roused to partisan political passions by discussion of the Roosevelt era. For some years the majority

A decade from now, surviving men and women who were even children when Herbert Hoover lost the Presidency will be few enough. So, with a view to a truthful art of history, it is well for some of us to set down our own recollections of the events of the Twenties and Thirties and Forties, and of the circumstances and notions behind those events. This is my apology for present-

ing to you here a pragmatic description of certain events and opinions in this state of Michigan, during the Thirties, as seen and experienced by a very young man of a reflective turn of mind.

I offer you, in short, a microcosmic glimpse of American life and opinion in the times of Presidents Hoover and Roosevelt — not in New York or Washington, but mostly in the neighborhood of Detroit, hard hit by the Great Depression; and not among the prosperous, but among what the British would call the working class, and American journalists today call blue-collar people. I will confine myself principally to this question: *Did the New Deal avert a violent revolution in the United States?*

One Youth's Recollection

Sometime in 1928, at the age of ten, I begin to read the *Detroit News*, *Detroit Times*, and *Detroit Free Press*. I took a precocious interest in political news, but ignored the financial pages — as, indeed, I ignore financial pages still. Thus I was vexed when on the front page of the paper appeared a lengthy boring account of the suicide of Ivar Kruger, the Swedish “match king,” and the consequences of his death; thus I was still more annoyed when the papers devoted their headlines to fluctuations on the New York Stock Exchange. Yet in the fullness of time I was made aware that such financial transactions did indeed concern the material interests and the social prospects of even a ten-year-old boy in the town of Plymouth, Michigan, twenty miles west of Detroit's city hall.

About the Author

For more than three decades, Russell Kirk has been in the thick of the intellectual controversies of our time. Dr. Kirk writes and speaks on political thought and practice, educational theory, literary criticism, ethical questions, and social themes. The author of twenty-three books and countless periodical essays and short stories, he had addressed audiences on more than 400 American campuses. He has often been a Distinguished Visiting Professor on the Hillsdale campus.

In 1981, President Reagan hailed Russell Kirk for helping “to renew a generation's interest and knowledge of these ‘true ideas,’ these ‘permanent things,’ which are the underpinnings and the intellectual infrastructure of the conservative revival in our nation.”

My father was a locomotive engineman, and we lived very close to the Pere Marquette depot, the spreading railway yards, the round-house, and the riptrack; the steam locomotives hooted and thundered past our house round the clock. For us boys of the Lower Town, literally on the wrong side of the tracks, the yards were our playground for games of Prisoners' Base and other sports including miniature wars with defective discarded B.B. guns pilfered from the scrap-heap of the Daisy Air Rifle Company. In 1928-29, we had no bathroom in our house, and no automobile; ours were Gray's “short and simple annals of the poor.” We Kirks were not of the number of FDR's “malefactors of great wealth.” Neither were we Marchers in the Dawn toward some terrestrial Zion.

bumped from his post by an older man from Detroit, he took a job as an ordinary section-hand, swinging a pick along with the Mexican laborers—and gradually worked his way back up. Having sometime to spare, Eddie and my father enrolled in a course in bricklaying at a proprietary trade-school in the city, paying scarce cash for instruction; my father never actually obtained work as a bricklayer in consequence, but Eddie did. President Hoover's much-ridiculed anecdote about folk who kept themselves off relief by selling apples on street corners did not seem patently absurd to us Kirks—not that we were especial admirers of Mr. Hoover. One of my uncles, who had been foreman in a foundry, on losing his job took up selling magazine subscriptions—and did rather well

“The hardest knocks of the Depression did not hit Plymouth, indeed, until President Roosevelt, so soon after taking office, proclaimed his national bank-moratorium.”

Upon us there descended, by degrees, the Great Depression. On the Pere Marquette Railroad the volume of freight diminished. Under the seniority system of the Railway Brotherhood, my father was “bumped” repeatedly from the more desirable assignments, so that presently he was working only half-time. We could not pay our accustomed rent; the landlord, pleasantly named Doomstrike, reduced it. A few months later we could not afford even the reduced rent; Mr. Doomstrike reduced it yet more. Still my father's wage-packet shrank, so that we decided to move in with my widowed grandmother, who had a biggish house. Mr. Doomstrike begged us to stay on, paying no rent at all until better times, not wishing his rental property to stand empty and defenseless; but we deserted him and shifted to my grandmother's house—yet closer to the tracks. If this narration seems digressive—why, I am suggesting that the circumstances of people with much-reduced incomes between 1929 and 1933 were not nearly so desperate as certain school textbooks would have us believe.

Railwaymen, somewhat fulsomely called “the artistocracy of labor,” were fairly resourceful in adversity. When our family friend Eddie Ebert, the yardmaster, was

out of it. Another uncle who ran a small dry-cleaning business kept his doors open when he could pay his help no longer by enrolling his employees in a profit-sharing plan. It succeeded.

The hardest knocks of the Depression did not hit Plymouth, indeed, until President Roosevelt, so soon after taking office, proclaimed his national bank moratorium. That measure dismayed and much inconvenienced the people with some small savings; but it did not ruin many of them. One such family in Plymouth, who raised chickens on a small farm, were reduced to eating little but eggs, chicken in a variety of forms and their own vegetables for three years; their health did not suffer.

Across Mill Street from my grandmother's house stood the Hotel Anderine, Italian-operated, where drink could be obtained, Volstead Act or no Volstead Act. (The town marshal lived next door.) Some rough customers were to be encountered there—all of them, though, in justifiable awe of my formidable grandmother's huge bulldog, Towser. In Italy, say, the Hotel Anderine might have hung out the sign “Albergo Karl Marx;” in Plymouth, the American flag was displayed from the hotel's cornice on every possible

occasion, and now and again the strains of a patriotic melody of the First World War might issue from the barroom.

During those late years of Hoover and early years of Roosevelt, I was no political ignoramus. As a junior in high school, I read with much interest Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*, with Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* as antidote. (These studied privately, of course, not as a general classroom exercise.) I was alert to tones of political opinion. My principal school chum, Jack Sessions, thought of himself as a socialist. Years later, when director of political education for the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union in Manhattan, he would become a most effective and intelligent opponent of Communist influence, abroad and in the United States. With Comrade Trotsky at the back of my mind, I kept an ear open for whisperings of sedition.

A great storm-cloud of public disapproval menaced President Hoover by 1932; and General Douglas MacArthur's dispersal of the Bonus Marchers at Anacostia Flats undid the Hoover Administration altogether. The newspapers fulminated steadily against Mr.

the mob without stepping on anybody's toes, and that I ought to go watch them some time. My mother was an optimist, a progressive, conscious of being poor, suspicious of the rich; but no thought of serious social upheaval ever entered her kindly mind. At one time our family funds sank to a single twenty-dollar bill, concealed in my mother's copy of Kipling's novel *The Light That Failed*. To small Russell A. Kirk, Jr., that sum seemed wealth beyond the dreams of avarice.

There arrived weekly in our mailbox copies of the Railway Brotherhood's newspaper *Labor*. The editors rejoiced in cartoons representing the villain Capitalist as a very rotund person perpetually in evening dress, with a silk top-hat, puffing at a cigar fat as himself. The paper's editorials regularly reviled the wicked owners of the nation's railroads, though by this time many lines had gone into receivership, the stockholders having lost their investment and the bondholders having taken over. I read avidly the joke-column in *Labor*, that being rather good, but my father scarcely glanced at the paper. It printed pretty much the same abuse from week to week. Clearly the paper's editors fancied it their moral obligation to denounce

against the New York Stock Exchange in particular. He knew avarice for the deadly sin of the twentieth century, and very right he was. There was in him, nevertheless, no spark of political radicalism. So far as he thought about socialism at all, he thought it silly. He was a reactionary, rather, in that he would have shifted Wayne County and the neighboring counties of Michigan back into the rural life of 1890, had he enjoyed magical power.

The swelling spirit of public unrest did not spare him, for all that, by the summer of 1932. He said to my mother and me, with some emphasis, "If something isn't done, there's going to be a revolution."

Though I had rent Mr. Hoover's photograph asunder, I was not disposed even then to turn radical. "Who is going to fight in this revolution, Daddy?" I inquired skeptically. "Are you?"

"Oh, no," he replied. "I don't want any revolution. I'm just saying that there are people who would start a revolution."

He had read hints of that sort not merely in *Labor*, but in the daily papers, particularly in the Hearst paper, *The Detroit Times*, then ardently Democratic. Mr. William Randolph Hearst was bound and determined to expel Mr. Herbert Hoover from the White House. There was appearing in the newspapers of the Hearst chain, read chiefly by blue-collar families, an ominous serial romance entitled *Gabriel Over the White House* (which was soon made into a film, still available today) that foretold the coming of an angel-inspired dictator of the United States, who would put down crime, disorder, and malefactors of great wealth, not scrupling to overturn civil rights in the performance of his appointed mission.

Newspaper editors, radio commentators, voters economically hard pressed and the popular rhetoric of Franklin Delano Roosevelt proceeded to pull President Hoover down from the seats of the mighty. If this had not occurred, and if Mr. Roosevelt's New Deal had not been unfolded very swiftly thereafter, might there have come to pass a violent revolution in the United States of America? Let us examine that question.

It has been argued quite sincerely that had no New Deal been contrived, the Constitution of the United States, the American competitive economy, and, indeed, the whole pattern of American society, would have been swept away by a rising of the indignant masses against an inhumane domination that had thrust them into want. One still encounters declarations of this sort today. Only recently, a Michigan journalist of my acquaintance, in the course of criticizing cer-

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Hoover. For my part, in the principal radical act of my life, I pulled down a big photograph of the President that our school superintendent had posted on the chief bulletin-board, tore it in half, and flung it in the trash can. (I refrained from telling of this episode to Mr. Hoover himself, when long later I breakfasted with him in his suite at the Waldorf-Astoria.) If became clear that Mr. Hoover and his cabinet were on the way out.

An iron-jawed elderly spinster teacher of English took Jack Sessions, me, and some classmates to meetings in Ann Arbor of the Leagues Against War and Fascism, and that sort of thing; but we joined nothing and demonstrated against nothing. In Detroit, riots broke out downtown, and the rioters were dispersed by mounted police. I called the police Cossacks, but my mother laughed, and said that the horses merely danced toward

capitalism root and branch, without cessation; but they did not expect any rising against this infamy to occur, ever. They knew perfectly well that railwaymen desired no overturn; their radicalism resembled the compassion of butchers, in the witticism of Samuel Johnson: "When a butcher says his heart bleeds for you, he means nothing by it." By reading *Labor* in those years, I learnt to abjure cant.

My strong father, reared as a farm boy, had been apprenticed to a veterinary; but as horses vanished from the roads, the elder Russell Kirk had been claimed by the iron horse. Although a reliable worker, sober and punctual, he resented industrial discipline, intensely disliked the inhumane scale of modern industry, and (though a very mild-mannered, good-natured man) was hot against speculators in stocks and bonds, and

tain publications of a conservative organization, reaffirmed this theory: "Half a century and more after F.D.R. gave the nation his own life-saving 'new deal,' these people are still preaching Hooverism. A real threat of armed revolution was on America's doorstep in Flint and Detroit in the '30s, and it took the foresight of federal assistance to the working class to avert it."

But who would have worked this "armed revolution"? Not my father, with his Marlin carbine for deer-hunting; not Eddie Ebert, the pistol-packing yardmaster; not the Mexican section-hands with their picks; not anybody I ever encountered in the railroad and manufacturing town of Plymouth. The labor unions of Detroit were not nearly so strong in 1932 as they became after passage of the Wagner Act, and anyway, even the most radical leading spirits among them, Walter Reuther and his comrades, had not the slightest intention of taking up arms to march on Washington. There were then no organized ideological fanatics in the United States except the little bank of Communists—who, indeed, attempted to provoke confrontations between police and strikers, or Bonus Marchers and the military; but they were no more than irritating, and their chief functions were to serve as an espionage apparatus for the Soviet Union and to try to weaken American foreign policy.

Might the Communists, or some other set of ideologues, have incited the Negroes to rebellion? No task would have been more difficult, in 1932. In the national elections of that year, Negro voters were faithful to their Republican affiliation that had grown up in Reconstruction days. The only ethnic group in Detroit that gave the Republican ticket a majority of their votes in November, 1932, were the Negroes of the precincts centering upon Paradise Valley. Two years later, the Detroit Negroes still gave the majority (though a reduced majority) of their votes to Republican candidates. By 1936, true, the flood of welfare checks into their neighborhoods had shown local Negro leaders in Detroit on what side their bread was buttered; so the Negro voters shifted to the Democratic ticket, and have remained there ever since. But in 1932 there existed few Negro radicals, and certainly none with revolutionary aspirations.

Are we to suppose that the worried farmers, north or south or west, would have risen up for some devastating demagogue as disgruntled farmers followed Daniel Shays in the rebellion which bears his name? Anyone who knows twentieth-century rural America would laugh at such a vision; and in any event, by 1932 the agricultural interest was

too few in numbers, relatively, to dream of dominating the country through force. Or are we to fancy that the Army of the United States, under command of some radical, might have seized power from Mr. Hoover? What radical—Douglas MacArthur? The Republic of the United States is not the Republic of Bolivia.

No, to make a violent revolution in a great modern state, there must exist a vast sullen class of the discontented and unfortunate, their circumstances seemingly desperate. They must be led by able unscrupulous men, so many Dantons; and they must count on neutrality, at the very least, from the military establishment. An elaborate propaganda must have subverted the loyalty, over a period of years, of many people whose stake in the existing society would incline them to support an existing political order.

Such circumstances did not exist in 1932. Indeed something resembling those circumstances did come to pass toward the close of Lyndon Johnson's administration; but we find nobody claiming that if the reforms of President Nixon had not undone the follies of the Johnson Administration, America would have suffered a violent revolution. The broad-based American republic is virtually impossible to overthrow, under any circumstances except conceivably an overwhelming military defeat abroad that should result in domestic ruin. These people who were naive, pretentious radicals in their youth, during the late Sixties and the early Seventies, now acknowledge that hard truth.

Lansing, 1937

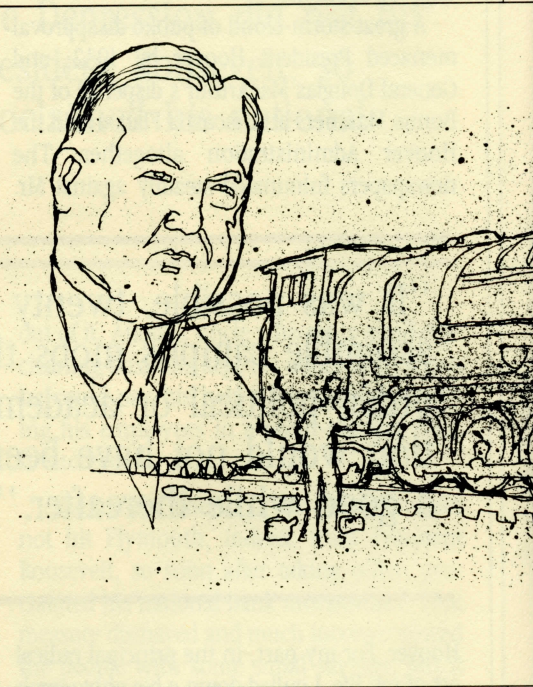
It was possible, twenty years ago and less, to assemble campus mobs that would oppose all order, political or academic. But even such affectation would not have been possible in 1932, or for a good while thereafter. College students of the Thirties, a group somewhat more select than their counterparts today, were not attracted by revolutionary doctrines. In my undergraduate days and later, I knew personally, on rather friendly terms, the tiny handful of professed Marxists at Michigan State University. They were forlorn folk, perfectly incapable of proletarian heroism.

A sufficient illustration of the campus Toryism of the Thirties—particularly at the big institutions—was the violent confrontation that occurred in the spring of 1937 at Michigan State College, East Lansing, along Grand River and Michigan Avenues. I, a freshman then, was a participant. That was the year of the United Automobile Workers' sit-down strikes at Michigan factories, distress-

ing even to President Roosevelt. We undergraduates won a battle.

In Lansing, illegal picketing by union members had been occurring at the premises of Capitol Wrecking. The union had ignored a judge's order to cease and desist; therefore some union members were arrested at night and jailed.

In wrath, and prideful because of their recent successes in the Flint and Detroit sit-down strikes, the UAW members turned out in strength the following morning. As if they were playing at revolution, they drove their cars downtown and parked them to block the principal streets to any traffic; they invaded radio stations; they tramped into the jail, but did not venture to lay hands on the armed police who barred the way to the cells where the union members were kept. In short, they shut down the municipality of Lansing for most purposes.



Toward evening, union zealots—vulgarly denominated "goons," a term derived from the comic strip that featured Popeye the Sailor—sped out to East Lansing on motorcycles, meaning to close down the places of business in that college suburb. Unhappily for the goons, they arrived at supper time; and when they attempted to shut the restaurants, the more athletic undergraduates seized upon the goons and flung them and their motorcycles into the shallow Red Cedar River.

When dripping union zealots, crestfallen, carried back to union headquarters in Lansing these tidings of disaster, the UAW stalwarts came buzzing and fuming down Michigan Avenue, crying for vengeance upon the student body. Hundreds of them advanced on

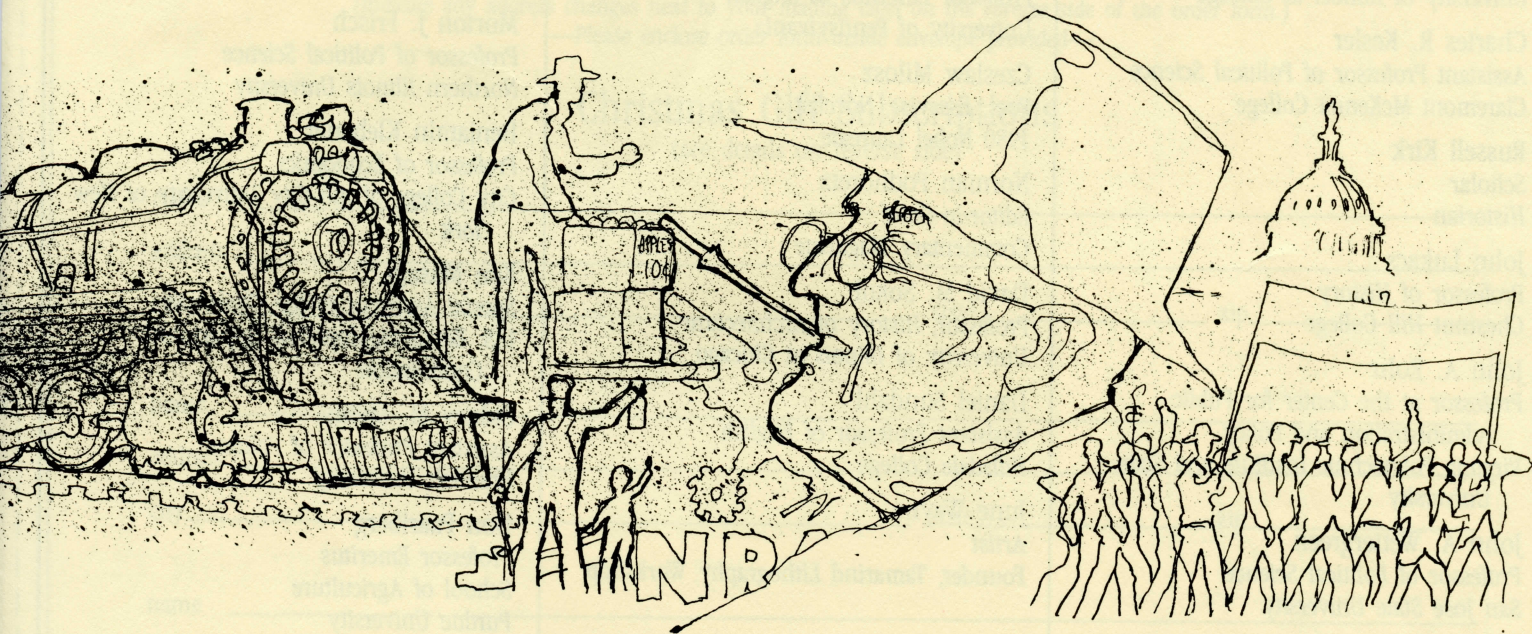
the campus; but they were met by hundreds of students, myself among them, some students armed with sticks and pipes snatched from a construction site ready to hand. At this prospect of a yet more humiliating and overwhelming defeat, and after some wrestling and shouting, the union stewards prevailed upon their rank and file to turn tail and make their way back in disorderly fashion to their Lansing fastnesses. Some students pursued them to their lairs later in the evening, but were badly thrashed for their pains. The ROTC cavalry students had hoped to charge the UAW rabble on horseback, and had so implored Governor Frank Murphy, who at the moment of the riot happened to be riding on the campus in company with the college president's daughter: would he not let them take the ROTC mounts to put down civil order? Doubtless Governor Murphy had thought he was escaping hard decisions by

otherwise—even some historians? I discern two reasons for this assertion of a radical discontent that could have been assuaged only by the measures of the New Deal.

The first is the facile drawing of a parallel between the totalist revolutions of Europe from 1917 down to Hitler's triumph and American circumstances during the Thirties. But such superficial comparisons ignore the huge differences of social structure, political organization, and economic circumstances between European nations and American

disorder much more alarming than American discontents of 1932, Mussolini had represented himself as the protector of the Italian civil social order in 1922, and so had been granted power; Hitler would so pose and so succeed in 1933. In a materialistic democracy, the promise that any great possible change will be averted, and economic prosperity restored by ingenious measures, will assure a candidate's success in an hour of crisis—supposing the candidate has command of the art of popular rhetoric. It was

“If a class struggle had arisen literally in the United States, the yardmaster and the engine driver would have adhered to things established.”



forsaking his capitol office to canter by the river with Miss Shaw; but he was compelled to restrain the student cavalry in the interest of his political adherents of the UAW.

The college students of the Thirties, on a good many campuses, were more Jacobite than Jacobin. There could be found no SDS enthusiasts or Weatherman fanatics, in 1932 or 1937, to make the world over new by violence, and there were no American counterparts of the passionate student ideologues of Germany or Latin America.

“The Things” and “The Men”

If the actual peril of armed revolution was so slight in 1932 or later, how is it that some people have stoutly affirmed

society. The United States in 1932 had scarcely any proletariat, strictly speaking, and no coherent mischievous class of intellectual ideologues to organize a violent transformation of the American republic. If a class struggle had arisen literally in the United States, the yardmaster and the engine driver would have adhered to things established.

The second reason for the allegation, in 1932, that either the Hoover Administration must go or else the fabric of American society would be torn in shreds was merely an argument which had its uses for the partisans of FDR. Dread of ruinous violence strongly moves those citizens who have been called “shop-and-till” conservatives: better the genteel reformer than the anarchist, their reasoning runs. Under circumstances of

so with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The first New Deal neither averted a revolution nor made one: the scheme was falling apart four years later. But the promises of the first New Deal did restore hope to many Americans, and in that sense served a conservative function.

Having seen something of the things and the men of 1932 and later, I offer you the considered judgment of mine, on what I hope is the pragmatic method of the historian. If this be treason to the historical establishment of which my friendly adversary Mr. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. is *pontifex maximus*—why, make the most of it. Swearing fealty to old Polybius, I try to see clearly both “the things” and “the men.”

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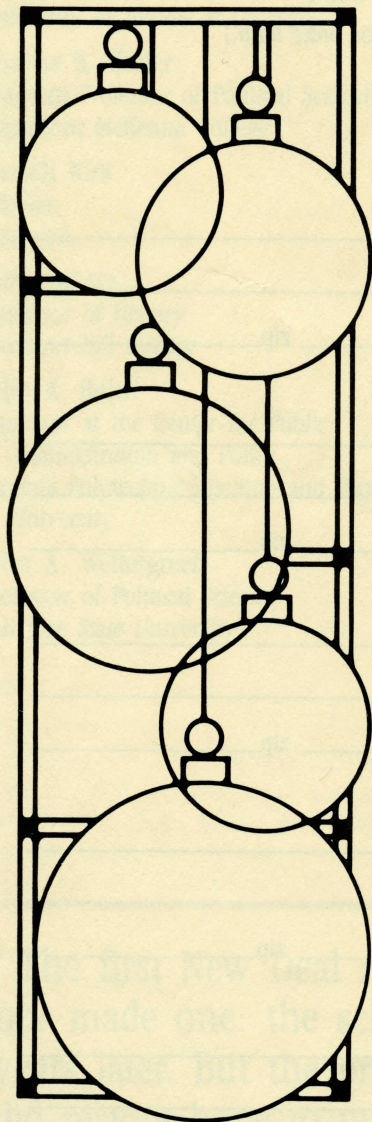
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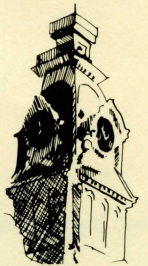
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