

KEYNOTE ADDRESS
THE GREENBELT CONFERENCE ON NEW TOWNS
IN CELEBRATION OF GREENBELT'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

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BY WILLIAM E. LEUCHTENBURG
WILLIAM RAND KENAN PROFESSOR OF HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT CHAPEL HILL

Greenbelt was born out of the convergence of two unique events: the greatest economic crisis in the history of this country and the most imaginative governmental response in the history of this country.

On Thursday, October 24, 1929, the New York Stock Exchange opened quietly, and prices were firm. But volume was heavy, and soon prices began to fall at such a pace that the ticker could not keep up. By eleven o'clock, writes John Kenneth Galbraith, "the market had degenerated into a wild, mad scramble to sell. By eleven thirty the market had surrendered to blind, relentless fear." Before President Hoover left office, blue chip stocks like U. S. Steel would fall from 262 to 21; General Motors from 73 to 8.

3 — In the next three years, partly as a result of the stock market crash, the bottom dropped out of the economy. By the end of 1921, American industry was operating at only half its 1929 volume, and the price of wheat fell to its lowest level since the reign of Charles II. One figure says it all. In the 1920s, manufacturers of locomotives sold American railroads an average of 1300 a year. In 1932, manufacturers of locomotives sold American railroads none.

The cutbacks in production had a devastating effect on working people. The number of unemployed, only 500,000 in October 1929, had increased by the beginning of 1930 to more than four million. Before the year was out, the number had doubled; and there were more than eight million jobless. By the beginning of 1931, the total of the unemployed had passed the 12 million mark. By the end of the Hoover era, it would go beyond 15 million.

It may help to place these figures in the perspective of our current troubles. We have been justifiably concerned about an unemployment rate of 7 percent. In March 1933, at the depth of the Great Depression, the rate of unemployment reached at least 31 percent. And that counts only those who were totally without jobs. Many millions more worked only part-time - and in a period with no national system of unemployment compensation.

Consider the situation of the country's biggest manufacturer. In 1929, U. S. Steel had 225,000 full-time employees, nearly a quarter of a million; on April 1, 1933, the total of the full-time labor force at U. S. Steel was zero. Only part-time workers remained, and they comprised only half of those employed full-time in 1929.

In particular communities, the figures are chilling. In the coal region of Illinois, the town of Coello had a population of 1,350: the total number of people employed in that town was two.

To get a sense of the extent of unemployment in these years, imagine 100,000 people in a huge football stadium. And imagine that as they leave the stadium each person is handed a slip saying that he or she is fired. Imagine that the following week another 100,000 enter the stadium and that as they file out, each of them is handed a slip saying, "You no longer have a job." And imagine that happening each successive week for 52 weeks of the year. For three straight years. You will then have approximated the totals of unemployed in America in early 1933.

Few classes seemed to have cheerier prospects than the one that was graduated in the spring of 1929. But many in that class would find no work in 1930, 1931, 1932, 1933. Indeed, full employment would not be restored to America until 1942, an appalling 13 years after the crash, and by then many of the young men of the class of 1929, and some of the young women, would be in uniform. Those of the class of 1929 who survived the war would not know peacetime prosperity for the first time until 1946 - by which time they would be about 38 years old.

It was even harder on older workers - for many men and women in their fifties and sixties who were laid off in the early years of the Great Depression would never hold a regular job again.

The social consequences were appalling. The novelist Thomas Wolfe reported on the winter of 1930-31 in New York: "I saw half naked wretches sitting on park benches at three in the morning in a freezing rain and sleet: often I saw a man and woman huddled together with their arms around each other for warmth, and with sodden newspapers, rags, or anything they could find over their shoulders." At the end of 1931, a Philadelphia relief authority announced: "We have unemployment in every third house. It is almost like the visitation of death to the households of the Egyptians at the time of the escape of the Jews from Egypt."

There were also dreadful civic consequences. By 1932 and in early 1933, local government was crumbling across the country. Cook County, Minnesota, unable to afford feeding prisoners, opened its jails. Municipalities that ran short of money to maintain zoos shot their animals.

During these years, the nation seemed both leaderless and anxiety-ridden. One periodical sought the club to the period in Shakespeare's lines:

I find the people strangely fantasied:
Possess'd with rumours, full of idle dreams;
Not knowing what they fear, but full of fear.

At first it seemed that the depression would last only a few weeks or a few months. Even when it ran on for a year, for two years, for three years, people kept hoping to find recovery "just around the corner." But the longer the depression lasted, the harder it was to sustain such hopes. And after a while, a chilling thought arose which could not be downed: Maybe recovery would never come. In the summer of 1932, the British economist John Maynard Keynes was asked by a journalist whether there had been anything before like the Great Depression. "Yes," he said,. "It was called the Dark Ages, and it lasted four hundred years."

It required a crisis of this magnitude to shake up conventional thinking enough to make an experiment like Greenbelt possible, to open up the possibility that, with traditional ways of doing things going so badly, maybe some new ideas might be tried.

But the crisis alone was not enough. To create a community as innovative as Greenbelt, it was necessary for there to be a national leader and a national program hospitable to new departures. And it was the crisis in turn that made possible the emergency of such a leader and such a program.

In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt became the first Democrat to be elected President with a popular majority since Franklin Pierce eighty years before. In that year of 1932, a couple, who four years earlier had christened their newborn son "Herbert Hoover Jones," petitioned the court, "desiring to relieve the young man from the chagrin and mortification which he is suffering and will suffer," and asked that his name be changed -- to Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones.

Roosevelt moved swiftly to justify that confidence. During the First Hundred Days of 1933, he submitted fifteen major proposals to Congress for stupendously enlarged federal participation, and Congress adopted all fifteen. In little more than a season, it imposed order on the banking system, appropriated unprecedented sums for relief of the unemployed, created the Tennessee Valley Authority, mandated federal regulation of Wall Street, set up a Civilian Conservation Corps that put jobless young men to work in the forests, abrogated the gold clause in public and private contracts, authorized unheard of appropriations for public works, and launched two vast experiments in government intervention: one in agriculture under Henry Wallace; the other in industry under the rambunctious General Johnson.

The French commentator, Andre Maurois, has remarked:

One cannot help calling to mind, as one writes the history of these three crowded months, the Biblical

account of the Creation. The first day, the Brain Trust put an embargo on gold; the second day, it peopled the forests; the third day, it created... three point two beer; the fourth day, it broke the bonds that tied the dollar to gold; the fifth day it set the farmers free; the sixth day, it created General Johnson, and then, looking upon what it had made of America, it saw that it was good.

But it could not rest on the seventh day.

During that halcyon springtime, and in the Second Hundred Days of 1935, the New Deal built much of the framework of the Welfare State - old age pensions, unemployment insurance, aid to dependent children, public housing projects, and relief for the impoverished on a scale that, prior to the New Deal, seemed unimaginable. During the First Hundred Days of 1933, Roosevelt put the New York social worker, Harry Hopkins, in charge of the first New Deal relief program, and in the next year, Hopkins spent a billion and a half dollars to care for some seventeen million people. It was said of Hopkins that he was "a doer of good deeds, ...Santa Clause incomparable, and privy-builder without peer." Hopkins served, too, as head of the Civil Works Administration, which got the jobless through the winter of 1933-34. How big was the CWA? Well, it recruited a work force equivalent to that of General Motors, U. S. Steel, and twenty other huge corporations combined.

The CWA proved a Godsend to millions. When Frank Walker, head of the President's National Emergency Council, heard reports of wasteful activities in which the CWA was alleged to be engaged, he decided to take a trip to his native state of Montana to investigate. He came back convinced it was doing more than any other agency to boost national morale. "I saw old friends of mine - men I had been to school with - digging ditches and laying sewer pipe. They were wearing their regular business suits as they worked because they couldn't afford overalls and rubber boots." One of them pulled out some silver coins and said: "Do you know, Frank, this is the first money I've had in my pockets in a year and a half?" Another told him: "I hate to think what would have happened if this work hadn't come along. The last of my savings had run out. I'd sold or hocked everything I could. And my kids were hungry. I stood in front of the window of the bake-shop down the street and I wondered just how long it would be before I got desperate enough to pick up a rock and heave it through that window and grab some bread to take home."

In 1935, the New Deal created an even more ambitious agency - the Works Progress Administration (WPA) with the biggest peacetime appropriation by any government in the history of the world. The WPA for New York City alone employed more people than the entire War Department.

As head of the WPA, Hopkins was not content with pick-and-shovel labor, but also made provision for white collar workers in a remarkably imaginative way, though sometimes these projects had a "make work" quality that raised doubts about their social utility. Years later, John Steinbeck recalled:

When W.P.A. came, we were delighted, because it offered work.... I was given the project of taking a census of all the dogs on the Monterey Peninsula, their breeds, weight and characters. I did it very thoroughly and, since I knew my reports were not likely to get in the hands of the mighty, I wrote some pretty searching character studies of poodles and beagles and hounds. If such records were kept, somewhere in Washington there will be a complete dog record of the Monterey Peninsula in the ... Thirties.

But Hopkin's emphasis also took much more rewarding forms, especially in the federal art projects that subsidized painters and sculptors, pianists and violinists, short story writers and - a true sign of a wise and benevolent government - jobless historians.

Inevitably, a much larger share of expenditures went not to arts programs but to public works. The WPA under Hopkins built schools, playgrounds, hospitals, airports (New York's La Guardia for one), and nearly 80,000 bridges, as well as constructing or improving nearly half a million miles of roads. Considerably larger in dimension were the projects sponsored by the Public Works Administration. The PWA under Harold Ickes, to whom Ted Dudley alluded, built thoroughfares like the Skyline Drive in Virginia and the Overseas Highway from Miami to Key West, funded the Triborough Bridge in New York, gave Chicago a new subway and the Pacific Northwest the mammoth Grand Coulee and Bonneville dams.

Out of the same appropriation that made possible the WPA, Roosevelt set up a National Youth Administration to retrain young people or help them to stay in school. The NYA made it possible for a remarkable variety of impecunious college students to get by - me for one. At the University of Michigan the NYA gave a job feeding mice to one of its undergraduates who was an aspiring playwright, Arthur Miller. Roosevelt put in charge of the NYA for the entire state of Texas a 27-year-old former Congressional assistant, Lyndon Johnson. Johnson later remembered how one NYA job had gone to the son of a sharecropper who had come "without a dollar in his pocket" to work his way through the University of Texas, John Connally. And in North Carolina, NYA employed, at 35 cents an hour, a Duke University Law student, Richard Nixon. (I am sure there must be a moral here; but it escapes me.)

It was from this same huge appropriation, too, that the greenbelt program was born. As Joseph Arnold has written:

It is not surprising that Roosevelt approved (such a program.) He had long been interested in city and regional planning. Alfred Bettman, in his Presidential Address to the 1933 National Conference on City Planning, said that "the outstanding item" in America's city and regional planning was "a President who knows and cares about planning."

In the spring of 1935, one of the original members of FDR's Brain Trust, Rexford Tugwell, persuaded the President to allocate some of the emergency relief funds to his new organization, the Resettlement Administration, and under Tugwell, and his deputy, Will Alexander, the government built three greenbelt towns -- in Ohio, in Wisconsin, and here in Maryland -- to test the ideas of the English planner, Ebenezer Howard; of the Gartensiedlungen on the Continent; and of American forerunners like Clarence Stein. Greenbelt, Maryland, was soon flourishing. One index to the positive response of the people of the community is that women became pregnant here at such a rate that Greenbelt became known as Stork Town.

In 1935, the same year that the WPA and NYA and Greenbelt were born, Congress also laid the foundation stone for the Welfare State: the Social Security Act, which, among its many innovations, created a national system of old age insurance, with consequences that were only dimly perceived. The first recipient was a Vermont woman who had been a school teacher and bookkeeper. She contributed only \$20 to the fund, but before she died she was to receive more than \$20,000 in benefits; to the consternation of the actuarial experts, she lived to be one hundred. From the day that she got her first check to the present, the Social Security system has paid nearly two trillion dollars to beneficiaries. It is now shelling out at the rate of \$15 billion a month.

In carrying on these activities, the New Deal frequently took over functions that had previously been assumed by individuals, families, and communities, and the public realm sometimes acquired an importance that in an earlier day had belonged to religion. When, at St. James's in Hyde Park, where FDR was a vestryman, a sign was erected, "The President's church," someone scribbled on it, "Used to be God's."

In the 1930s, the personality of Franklin Roosevelt was pervasive. The President intervened in a comic strip to get Joe Palooka out of the French Foreign Legion. In Maxwell Anderson's "Knickerbocker Holiday," a Roosevelt was a minor hero. In George M. Cohan's "I'd Rather Be Right," the President was gently ribbed. Cohan cried:

Bring me another fireside,
I'm going on the air.

Torch singers confided in the tune "How About You?":

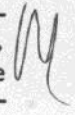
And Franklin Roosevelt's looks
Give me a thrill.

In "Sing Out the News," a chorus chanted the praises of "Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones." And years later, fans of the New York Giants football team would cheer the appearance on the field of two mammoth linemen: Roosevelt Brown and Roosevelt Grier.

Franklin Roosevelt believed he belonged in the White House. He remembered Uncle Teddy, he had seen Woodrow Wilson at close range, but the office seemed peculiarly his almost as a birth-right. As Richard Neustadt has observed: "Roosevelt, almost alone among our Presidents, had no conception of the office to live up to; he was it. His image of the office was himself-in-office." Not even the weightiest responsibilities seemed to disturb his serenity. One of his associates said, "He must have been psychoanalyzed by God."

Roosevelt scoffed at the idea that the nation was the passive victim of economic laws. He believed that the country could lift itself out of the depression by sheer will power. In one of his fireside chats, Roosevelt said:

"When Andrew Jackson, 'Old Hickory,' died, someone asked, 'Will he go to Heaven?' and the answer was, 'He will if he wants to.' If I am asked whether the American people will pull themselves out of this depression, I answer, 'They will if they want to.' ... I have no sympathy with the professional economists who insist that things must run their course and that human agencies can have no influence on economic ills.

In accustoming the nation to the idea of activist government, FDR had an invaluable counterpart in Eleanor Roosevelt, who by 1940 had travelled more than a quarter of a million miles, written a million words, and become the leading advocate within the administration for the underprivileged, especially blacks and unemployed youth. No one knew where she would turn up next. In one of the most famous cartoons of the decade, a begrimed coal miner in the bowels of the earth cries out in astonishment to a fellow miner, "For gosh sakes, here comes Mrs. Roosevelt." Admiral Byrd, it was said, always set two places for dinner at the South Pole "in case Mrs. Roosevelt should drop in." Greenbelt's Rexford Tugwell has written, "No one who ever saw Eleanor Roosevelt sit down facing her husband, and holding his eyes firmly, say to him 'Franklin, I think you should' ... or, 'Franklin, surely you will not ...' will ever forget the experience." She became, as one columnist said, "Cabinet Minister without portfolio - the most influential woman of our times." 

In the age of Roosevelt, government became engaged in a spectrum of activities that differed not merely in degree but in kind from almost anything it had ever undertaken before. Just four years earlier, it would have seemed incredible that the government would have its own circus, would be supporting Jackson Pollock's painting and John Cheever's writing, paying farmers not to raise peanuts, regulating the brassiere industry, sending bookmobiles through the Tennessee Valley, filming documentaries, patronizing the ballet, and teaching the Sioux how to milk goats.

Whereas before the New Deal, most Americans did not conceive of the national government as an agency that acted directly on their lives, in the age of Roosevelt they looked toward government in countless ways. Millions of farmers cast ballots in crop referenda, and factory workers voted in National Labor Relations Board elections. Suburbanites lived in FHA-financed homes, and city dwellers in gargantuan federal housing projects. Schoolchildren ate hot lunches provided by the national government; the WPA taught more than a million illiterates to read and write; and, thanks to the REA, families in the remote countryside enjoyed the blessings of electricity for the first time in their lives. In the 1936 election, the American people were given their first chance to say what they thought about all of these changes, and the prospects for FDR, many believed, were not good - for you don't embark on new projects like greenbelts without making enemies. Herbert Hoover called Roosevelt a "chameleon on plaid," while H. L. Mencken declared, "If he became convinced tomorrow that coming out for cannibalism would get him the votes he so sorely needs, he would begin fattening a missionary in the White House backyard come Wednesday."

The President incurred the wrath, especially, of, in Hamilton's words, "the rich and well born." In the 1930s, an American who had been travelling extensively in the Caribbean confided, "During all the time I was gone, if anybody asked me if I wanted any news, my reply was always - 'there is only one bit of news I want to hear and that is the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt. If he is not dead, you don't need to tell me anything else.'" During the 1936 campaign, the newspapers of the country were overwhelmingly against the President, and week after week the most widely read poll, which had never failed to forecast an election accurately, predicted that Roosevelt would go down to defeat, and by a wide margin, and down with him were likely to go all of the novel experiments like Greenbelt.

On Election Night, the President settled back in his chair to await the results. When the first returns came in, he blew a big puff ring from his cigarette holder and said, "Wow!" Through the night, to the sounds of Tommy Corcoran's accordion, he listened to further returns that showed that the country had responded to the advice of the Mississippi editor who said of FDR: "Stick with him until hell freezes over, and then skate with him on the ice!" In the greatest victory in the Electoral College since James Monroe ran unopposed in 1820, Roosevelt carried every

state but Maine and Vermont. It used to be said, "As Maine goes, so goes the nation." Now it was said, "As Maine goes, so goes Vermont." FDR was jubilant. "I knew," he said, "I should have gone to Maine and Vermont."

With the election behind him, Roosevelt had but one wish - to see Greenbelt, Maryland, for the first time. He had been eager to look at Greenbelt, but had not been able to get away from the campaign. Not long after the election, though, Rex Tugwell took the President on a tour of the new community, much to the pleasure of its residents. Roosevelt was no less delighted. He chatted with the pioneers of Greenbelt, and when he came to the lake, he said that now he would not have to travel so far to go fishing. Roosevelt, Will Alexander reflected afterwards, "had the time of his life that afternoon. He just glowed under the response of the people."

At the town center, after the tour had ended, President Roosevelt summed up his thoughts:

I have seen the blueprints of this project and have been greatly interested, but the actual sight itself exceeds anything I dreamed of. This is a real achievement and I wish all the people could see it ... It is an experiment which ought to be copied by all the communities in the United States.

It was under such circumstances, then, that Greenbelt was born -- in the unsettling crisis of the Great Depression, as an aspect of the pathbreaking program of the New Deal, and under the dynamic leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt. And it is Roosevelt's comment spoken here in Greenbelt - "it is an experiment which ought to be copied" - that sets the agenda for much of the discussion that will follow in the hours to come today and tomorrow.