THE CONTEST OVER
NATIONAL SECURITY

FDR, Conservatives, and the Struggle to Claim
the Most Powerful Phrase in American Politics

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At a backyard party one afternoon during my childhood in Washington, DC, I found myself standing next to a grown-up neighbor. Unsure of what else to say, I asked the question I had heard so many grown-ups in DC ask each other in similar circumstances: what do you do? He said he “worked in national security.” Even at the time, this struck me as intriguing. I understood what it meant to be a teacher or a doctor or a lawyer. What did it mean to work in national security?

The question lingered until I watched the smoke rise from the Pentagon on the morning of September 11, 2001. Amid the fear and foreboding that gripped my hometown that day, I decided to contribute whatever I could to preventing a recurrence of those feelings of insecurity. It seemed only logical to assume that banishing insecurity was the province of national security professionals like my childhood neighbor. I decided to join their ranks. In college, I dedicated myself to learning as much as possible about the various government departments and agencies that did national security work, both their current operations and their histories. The Department of Defense and the Intelligence Community seemed to be at the center of the action and seemed to have been so for a long time. I decided those were the places where I wanted to work.
Almost as soon as I started my job as a nonpolitical civil servant in the Office of the Secretary of Defense in the summer of 2006, it became obvious that working in national security meant power, resources, and deference: power and resources for those on the inside, and deference from those on the outside. A subsequent stint in the Intelligence Community underscored those conclusions, as well as their implication: it clearly mattered what counted as a national security issue. During my time in government under both Republican and Democratic presidents, working in national security entailed a focus on the country’s physical security and on foreign policy. Every now and then, someone—usually an outsider—would suggest that some domestic policy issue rose to the level of a national security concern. But national security professionals, including me, often dismissed such suggestions out of hand. There was a clear demarcation between national security work and everything else the government did. I assumed it had always been that way. Researching and writing this book made clear how wrong I was. This book tells the story of how the United States developed the type of national security state in which I worked—a national security state far more narrowly focused than the one with which the country began.

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Golden can be most proud of producing Eliza. She shaped this project from start to finish with her incisive questions and constant encouragement. I am grateful every day for her love and support. The arrival of our delightful daughters, Schuyler and Nora, provided timely spurs to completion. May they live in a time of real national security.
THE CONTEST OVER NATIONAL SECURITY
“National security” ranks among the most powerful phrases in American politics, commanding wide deference, garnering almost unlimited resources, and determining many of the government’s priorities. The phrase has a timeless quality that makes it easy to assume that it has always been defined as we understand it today. But it hasn’t. Nor has the national security state always focused primarily on foreign affairs and protecting the country against physical attack. The meaning we associate with national security and the tasks we associate with the national security state emerged only after nearly twenty years of intense political struggle. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, liberals and conservatives fought tooth and nail to define the government’s national security responsibilities in law, policy, and the public mind. Words were the decisive weapons in that fight.

On the evening of July 2, 1932, Franklin Roosevelt told the audience gathered at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that providing “security” ought to be one of the government’s primary objectives. He campaigned on that premise in the months that followed. Upon assuming the presidency in the spring of 1933, he told Americans gathered around radios to hear his second fireside chat that expanding the government’s domestic responsibilities to ensure economic security was
“imperative to our national security.” At the end of 1940, with war enveloping the world, Roosevelt told Americans in another fireside chat that expanding the government’s international responsibilities too had now become vital for “national security.” In his January 1944 State of the Union address, Roosevelt proposed a “second Bill of Rights under which a new basis of security and prosperity can be established for all regardless of station, race, or creed.” The objective, he said, should be “not only physical security which provides safety from attacks by aggressors” but “also economic security, social security, moral security.”

The language of security was not new. Alexander Hamilton and John Jay used it in *The Federalist* to justify creating a strong and balanced national government under the Constitution. But no American politician had used the language of security to advance their agenda in as deliberate and sustained a manner as Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt’s embrace of the language of security transformed American politics—but not in the ways he envisioned. Ironically, Roosevelt’s success expanding the government’s domestic and international responsibilities in the name of security galvanized the forces—namely, the conservative movement and foreign policy establishment—that by the late 1940s defeated his plans for a comprehensive national security state responsible for both economic and physical security. This book tells that story.

**Why We Know Only Part of the National Security State’s History**

Although much has been written about “security” and “national security” in the United States, we know surprisingly little about how the language of security became such a potent force in American politics and how its most powerful expression—the phrase “national security”—came to be defined in the way Americans have understood it since the late 1940s. The problem is one of perspective. Almost everything written about national security in the United States has approached the topic with a present-day understanding of the phrase’s meaning in mind. As a result, nearly everyone who has talked or written about national security in the past seven decades has assumed that national security refers to physical security and that national security policymaking is a foreign policy matter.
Operating from those assumptions, it is not surprising that most commentators on national security have used the phrase instrumentally to explain American foreign policies.\textsuperscript{12} For Americans who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, a concept of national security provided the answer to two of their most vexing questions: What explained the origins of the Cold War? And why did the United States get involved in Vietnam?\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, a later generation of Americans looked to a concept of national security to explain the country’s response to the events of September 2001.\textsuperscript{14} While this attentiveness to foreign policy–focused concepts of national security has produced some valuable insights, it has also made it difficult for commentators to see or explain the more expansive national security state designed by Franklin Roosevelt and his advisors in the 1930s, which sought to protect citizens against both economic insecurity and physical attack and which relied on a mix of domestic and foreign policy to do so. With the domestic policy part of the story underdeveloped, disconnected, or missing altogether, the national security state’s history remains only half written.\textsuperscript{15}

The history of the phrase “national security” itself remains similarly incomplete, despite repeated warnings from scholars about the need to nail this “slippery term” down and several promising attempts to do so.\textsuperscript{16} Writing in 1952, Arnold Wolfers cautioned that “national security” was “an ambiguous symbol” that “needed to be scrutinized with particular care.”\textsuperscript{17} In 1966, P. G. Bock and Morton Berkowitz observed that “the term has been used as a rhetorical phrase by politicians, as a specific military objective by generals, and as a promise of utopia by political evangelists. All this has served to create a blanket of smog that has made disciplined inquiry almost impossible.”\textsuperscript{18} Daniel Yergin lamented in 1977 that “the amount of literature that invokes ‘national security’ is vast; the amount that critically explores the concept is in short supply.”\textsuperscript{19} With a few exceptions, the problem only worsened in subsequent decades. In the 1990s, several scholars even proposed using a fixed concept of national security to investigate the entire sweep of United States history.\textsuperscript{20} Historians Emily Rosenberg and Anders Stephanson, among others, pointed out the problems with that ahistorical approach, and little came of the suggestion.\textsuperscript{21} Several more promising attempts to historicize national security appeared thereafter, but none of them fully escaped the
foreign relations silo. As a result, our understanding of this most pow-
ful of political phrases remains remarkably limited.

We have also paid a more concrete price for the way people have writ-
ten about national security. Largely unintentionally, three generations of
commentators have solidified a concept of national security focused on
physical security and foreign policy at the expense of alternatives. In so
doing, they have erased Franklin Roosevelt’s quite different concept of
national security from historical memory—and therefore also from our
sense of political possibilities. Economic security and domestic policy,
both central to Roosevelt’s concept of national security, have been pushed
further and further from the national security frame.

Toward a Political History of the National Security State

Rather than looking at the past from the narrow perspective of the
present, this book sets aside our contemporary understanding of national
security and instead charts the evolution of the phrase’s meaning as his-
torical actors conceived it. Shifting perspective in this way immediately
makes clear that national security has not always been solely a foreign
policy matter and that the meaning of national security familiar to us
emerged from an intense political struggle. In other words, the national
security state’s history is political history. Accordingly, this book focuses
on the interrelated processes of public persuasion and state building
through which Americans fought to define the national security state’s
purview in law, policy, and the public mind. Centering political history
changes our understanding of the national security state by recovering its
origins in 1930s economic security policies and by revealing the domestic
political reasons for the subsequent exclusion of economic security from
what counted as a national security matter.

To understand how and why political actors succeeded in framing is-
sues as essential to national security, we need to get as close as possible to
what people in the past said and wrote. We must learn how and why they
chose their words, narratives, and frames, treating those things as what
historian David Green calls “historical data.” We must also consider
the contexts in which those words, narratives, and frames emerged and
the contests through which they evolved. In both cases, that means
eschewing published primary sources in favor of archival material—including the original audio recordings of Franklin Roosevelt’s speeches, since he often deviated from prepared texts. It also means parsing the sources behind the sources, such as the drafts and other artifacts of the speech preparation process. These overlooked materials provide valuable insight into why and how people in the past mobilized the language of security for political ends.

But focusing exclusively on how Americans moved issues into the national security frame would leave much unexplained, including the emergence of separate “national security” and “welfare” states rather than the comprehensive national security state Franklin Roosevelt envisioned. This book therefore also focuses on how Americans removed issues from the national security frame. This approach illuminates the role played by a new group of foreign policy–focused professionals and academics in claiming the mantle of national security exclusively for their work in the 1940s. Their success marked a dramatic shift in which policy areas counted as a national security matter, and a remarkable reduction in status for those working on domestic policy. In the 1930s, senior government officials working on economic security issues—people like Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins—were rightly seen as the country’s preeminent national security professionals. But by the time Congress passed the National Security Act in 1947, anyone who suggested that economic security–focused entities like the Social Security Administration ought to have been included in the national security state would have been ridiculed.

Focusing on how and why the accepted meaning of national security narrowed also brings into view the modern American conservative movement, which helped channel the national security state’s development in ways overlooked until now. Energized by opposition to Franklin Roosevelt’s comprehensive vision for national security, the businessmen leading the nascent conservative movement intensified the large public persuasion campaign they had launched in the 1920s as part of a broader effort to limit the growth of the government’s domestic responsibilities. The expanded persuasion campaign became the conservative movement’s driving force and provided the rhetorical glue that bound together an assortment of groups into a big tent movement in the 1930s and 1940s. Through this campaign, conservatives worked tirelessly to sell a
narrower vision of the government’s national security responsibilities that excluded domestic economic security.

It can be difficult to assess the impact of persuasion campaigns on public opinion, and doing so for the 1930s and 1940s presents special challenges. Opinion polling was in its infancy and rarely employed the kinds of sampling methods experts would demand today. As a result, there is a tendency to understate the impact of persuasion campaigns like the one conservatives orchestrated in this period. Focusing on the volume of messaging provides a way around this problem. Psychologists established long ago that the frequent repetition of messages shapes minds. To an extent greater than many of us might like to admit, persuasion campaigns use volume and repetition to provide the dominant narratives we use to make sense of the world and to talk about it. These dominant narratives shape not only what we believe the government should do but also what the government actually can do. The story in the pages that follow lends credence to historian Brian Balogh’s observation that “controlling the way in which the central government’s policies were framed, it turned out, could sometimes be more important than the actual impact of those programs.”

The conservative persuasion campaign ensured that conservatives supplied the dominant narratives about the government beginning in the 1940s. Conservatives inundated Americans with billions of messages disparaging domestic economic security programs, sowing doubt about the government’s competence, and presenting the private sector as best able to provide economic security. Through these messages, the conservative persuasion campaign helped cement a conception of the government’s national security responsibilities in the public mind and in law and policy that was far narrower than the one put forward by Franklin Roosevelt. Unable to compete with this deluge of conservative messaging, liberals lost the fight to define national security.

Overview of the Book

Eight chapters chart the American national security state’s overlooked origins and contested evolution. Events abroad cast a long shadow throughout. The book begins on the presidential campaign trail in early 1932. Using
Introduction

handwritten notes, speech fragments, and marked-up speech drafts, Chapter 1 shows how Franklin Roosevelt and his closest advisors found in the language of security the answers to their most pressing political problems, which were how to get Roosevelt elected president and how to deal with the Great Depression. In deploying the language of security, Roosevelt and his advisors intuited what social scientists later established. The language of security has intrinsic persuasive power and generates deference to leaders who use it because “security” has what psychologists call a “loss frame” built in: people fear insecurity. The language of security enabled Roosevelt to explain the Great Depression’s causes in ways Americans could understand instinctively and to propose remedies Americans would support reflexively. Beginning in 1932, Roosevelt made the promise of security the focal point of the new “liberalism” he championed. Until the 1930s, those who called themselves “liberals” generally had opposed expanding the government’s responsibilities. Roosevelt appropriated the term and reversed its meaning, invoking national security to justify expanding the government’s domestic responsibilities to deal with rampant economic insecurity.

Before the 1930s, the phrase “national security” had appeared sporadically throughout American history in a vague, usually undefined way. To Roosevelt, the global political upheavals associated with the Great Depression made obvious that national security depended on economic security. As Chapter 2 shows, Roosevelt sought to cement that connection in the public mind and in law and policy after entering office in March 1933. In his first term, Roosevelt used the language of security to reshape public perceptions of what the government should do domestically and to expand those responsibilities in law, laying what he called the “corner stone” of a national security state with the establishment of Social Security in 1935. In so doing, Roosevelt and his advisors believed they had taken an important first step toward solving the central problem of their time, which was how to address the economic insecurity associated with modern industrial capitalism without following the path taken by other countries and abandoning democracy.

Roosevelt’s demonstration that the government’s domestic responsibilities could be expanded seemingly without limit in the name of national security terrified advocates of limited government. As Chapter 3
shows, these Americans had already begun mobilizing in the 1920s against what they saw as unwarranted expansions of the government’s domestic responsibilities. These Americans, who saw themselves as the “real” liberals, fought bitterly against Roosevelt’s appropriation of that label and accepted the new “conservative” label for themselves only after a long struggle. The new conservatives agreed with Roosevelt that national security depended on preserving individual liberty, but they disagreed about how best to do that. Roosevelt thought assuring individual liberty under modern industrial capitalism required expanding the government’s responsibilities to guarantee economic security. Conservatives defined liberty in what philosopher Isaiah Berlin called its “negative” sense, meaning that individual liberty depended on limiting the government’s domestic responsibilities.

Chapter 3 shows how Roosevelt’s success using the language of security to expand the government’s domestic responsibilities lit a fire under the nascent conservative movement. To erode support for Roosevelt’s agenda, conservatives mobilized the full power of the public relations profession to deliver billions of messages disparaging domestic economic security programs and casting doubt on the government’s competence. The National Association of Manufacturers spearheaded this large public persuasion campaign in the 1930s and early 1940s, with the ostensibly nonpartisan but conservative-run Advertising Council taking the lead thereafter. The conservative persuasion campaign’s architects used volume and repetition to cultivate impressions and make them stick. The campaign relied not only on direct messaging, which those who disagreed with the message might ignore, but also on indirect persuasion through trusted intermediaries. The campaign’s architects wooed teachers, religious leaders, women, and other “opinion molders” who could deliver tailored anti-statist messages to trusting audiences over an extended period. Whether they realized it or not, by the late 1930s Americans of all ages received conservative messages from the moment they woke up until the moment they went to sleep. The high-stakes struggle between liberals and conservatives to define the government’s national security responsibilities had begun.

Chapter 4 chronicles the vicious battle at the end of the 1930s over Roosevelt’s proposals to expand the national security state by establishing
a Federal Security Agency and a National Resources Planning Board. Both liberals and conservatives pointed to events in Europe to bolster their arguments for and against these proposals. Roosevelt argued that the rise of dictatorships abroad reflected the failure of those countries’ governments to satisfy their citizens’ desire for economic security. He presented national planning as essential for ensuring the economic security on which he believed national security—and the survival of individual liberty and American republican democracy—depended. By contrast, conservatives believed that national planning represented a grave threat to individual freedom and argued that expanding the government’s economic security initiatives would weaken the United States just as conservatives said had happened to France, which fell to the Nazis in June 1940. Roosevelt won this battle, but the fight over the proper extent of the government’s national security responsibilities continued.

Ironically, Roosevelt’s subsequent actions helped conservatives exclude economic security programs from the national security state’s purview. Chapter 5 shows how Roosevelt invoked national security to persuade Americans and their representatives in Congress to adopt a more internationally engaged foreign policy in the 1940s. Roosevelt’s success putting foreign policy into the national security frame helped conservatives push domestic policy out of it. At the same time, the massive increase in government spending that accompanied American entry into World War II in 1941 reduced unemployment and increased economic output. But as Chapter 6 shows, conservatives used their large public persuasion campaign to deny credit to the government for this economic boom. Together, the return of prosperity and the public perception that the government had little to do with it made it harder for liberals to frame economic security programs as necessary for national security.

Contrary to the long-standing consensus that Roosevelt abandoned his domestic agenda with the coming of World War II, however, Chapter 6 also shows that Roosevelt worked in his third term toward a comprehensive national security state with domestic and foreign policy as coequal domains of national security policymaking. During his long tenure in the White House, Roosevelt had seen that the primary threat to national security could be economic insecurity in one period and physical insecurity in another. He believed the government needed to be responsible for
addressing all sources of insecurity—not just the one that had primacy at a particular moment—and therefore that national security policymaking must include both domestic and foreign policy. The fullest articulation of Roosevelt’s vision for the government’s national security responsibilities came in his 1944 State of the Union address, in which Roosevelt proposed a “second Bill of Rights” that would ensure economic security.46

Chapter 7 explains why Roosevelt’s vision did not come to fruition. Roosevelt’s success reorienting foreign policy in the name of national security gave birth to a powerful foreign policy establishment that claimed the mantle of national security exclusively for its work. Members of this newly empowered foreign policy establishment—many of whom sympathized with conservatives on domestic policy—articulated a concept of national security that focused on physical security from foreign threats. These foreign policy professionals worked to enshrine this concept in law with the National Security Act of 1947 and helped create an academic field of “security studies” that excluded domestic “welfare” policies from its ambit. Roosevelt’s successor Harry Truman unintentionally accelerated the removal of domestic policy from the national security frame by distinguishing in speeches and budget requests between the government’s “national security” and “welfare” responsibilities. Truman came to regret his contribution to this bifurcation as a foreign policy–focused national security state grew rapidly while the domestic policy–focused welfare state embodied in his proposal for a “Fair Deal” stalled. Ironically, rather than institutionalizing the Rooseveltian vision for national security at home, the United States exported it, helping underwrite and build comprehensive national security states abroad in the same years Americans abandoned that project at home.

Chapter 8 shows how conservatives in the late 1940s and early 1950s delivered the final blows to Roosevelt’s vision for national security by using “public service advertising” to further disparage economic security programs and to associate them with socialism. Using amusing examples of domestic policy incompetence unearthed by former President Herbert Hoover’s Commission on the Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, the conservative-led Advertising Council sowed doubt in Americans’ minds about the government’s competence. As the Cold War took shape, conservatives also portrayed liberal domestic policy
proposals as socialistic and therefore as threatening to national security. The guise of “public service advertising” provided the conservative persuasion campaign with a veneer of nonpartisanship and abundant free advertising space. This potent combination helped conservatives cement a derisive rhetoric in mainstream political discourse that shaped the way Americans perceived and talked about the government for decades thereafter. The result was a strand of selective anti-statism that paired disdain for domestic economic security programs with support for a robust military and foreign policy establishment. This selective anti-statism solidified separate and imbalanced “national security” and “welfare” states.

The epilogue explores some of the consequences and ironies associated with the narrowing of the national security agenda after the 1940s. The removal of economic security and domestic policy from the national security state’s purview diminished their importance in the eyes of the public and created a cycle in which the government found it more difficult to address domestic problems. These difficulties—coupled with conservatives’ success sowing doubt about the government’s competence—eroded public confidence in the government, which further reduced public support for economic security programs. The government’s apparent domestic policy incapacity reinforced a long-standing tendency to use the military and foreign policy to address problems that might have been more efficiently managed through domestic policy. These outcomes make it tempting to conclude that the country would have been better off with Franklin Roosevelt’s comprehensive national security state. But the book ends by discussing the potential problems with making an expansive concept of national security the government’s chief objective and raises the question of whether such a concept might work better in conjunction with other goals.

Before coming to that, we need to understand how the language of security became such a powerful force in American politics and how its most powerful expression—national security—came to be defined as most Americans understand it today. The story begins in early 1932 as Franklin Roosevelt sought the Democratic nomination for president.
“These are unprecedented and unusual times,” Franklin Roosevelt told the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on July 2, 1932. It was almost an understatement. In the United States and around the world, widespread suffering inflicted by the Great Depression raised serious doubts about the futures of capitalism and democracy. The Depression had stripped away layer after layer of psychological and material security over the preceding two years until millions of Americans struggled to meet even their most basic needs. Nearly a quarter of the American workforce lacked work. National income fell by more than half. Even the more fortunate feared they too would be dragged under. Recalling a drive through Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Roosevelt later said, “I could see mile after mile of this greatest mill and factory area in the world, a dead panorama of silent black structures and smokeless stacks. I saw idleness and hunger instead of the whirl of machinery.” Americans had never felt so insecure.

In these hard times, Roosevelt asked the audience in Chicago, “What do the people of America want more than anything else?” Roosevelt said they wanted “work, with all the moral and spiritual values that go with work.” But Roosevelt acknowledged that work was only a means to an end. What Americans really wanted, Roosevelt said, was “a reasonable
measure of security.” As president, Roosevelt promised the government would provide “a new deal for the American people.” He made clear that security would be its basis.

Roosevelt chose his words carefully and talked in terms of “security” deliberately. After many intense discussions in the spring of 1932, he and his advisors grasped that security was a policy objective with inherent rhetorical power, and they made security the centerpiece of Roosevelt’s presidential campaign. Talking in terms of security solved several problems for Roosevelt. He needed a way of explaining the Depression’s causes and remedies that would convince Americans that he understood their problems and could solve them. The language of security met that need. Roosevelt said economic insecurity had caused the Depression and that a government guarantee of economic security would solve it. Roosevelt also needed a flexible and durable justification for expanding the government’s responsibilities in the ways he and his advisors believed necessary to solve the economic crisis and prevent a recurrence, all without abandoning democracy. Here again the language of security provided the answer. Framing domestic policy as necessary for security helped elevate it above politics and created space for institutional transformation. Finally, of course, Roosevelt needed to win an election. Talking in terms of security was good politics because it promised people what they wanted most in 1932.

During the 1932 campaign, Roosevelt used the language of security to frame proposals for expanding the government’s responsibilities as part of a new “liberalism” that would lead the country out of the Great Depression. Roosevelt believed the Depression had imperiled both the “liberty of the individual” and the “liberty of the community.” Under the new liberalism, the government would remove the danger to the individual by guaranteeing economic security and would neutralize the danger to the community through government planning. Roosevelt thought both policies necessary to resolve the crisis and prevent a recurrence. Freedom from the government defined the old liberalism. The new liberalism held that freedom depended on government action. Roosevelt took the new liberal case directly to the American people, crisscrossing the country by railroad to speak to them in their communities and using radio to chat with them in their homes. The language of security helped Roosevelt win
the presidency and gain public backing to expand the government’s responsibilities under the new liberalism. But Roosevelt’s success also rallied proponents of the old liberalism and opened a new phase in the long-running fight over the government’s role in American life.

Franklin Roosevelt’s Views on Government

Observers at the time and historians since have differed on Franklin Roosevelt’s core political and economic philosophy—even on whether he had one at all.11 By the time the 1932 presidential campaign began, however, several important aspects of Roosevelt’s views had taken shape.12 At the most basic level, Roosevelt thought the republic’s founders intended the government’s responsibilities to evolve to meet contemporary needs.13 While serving as New York governor from 1929 to 1932, Roosevelt said, “We cannot call ourselves either wise or patriotic if we seek to escape the responsibility of remolding government to make it more serviceable to all the people and more responsive to modern needs.”14 Roosevelt made clear that economic security ranked foremost among those needs. He argued that only by addressing the individual economic insecurity that appeared to be a by-product of modern industrial capitalism could Americans regain “economic liberty.”15

Roosevelt saw two aspects to economic liberty, which he called the “liberty of the individual” and the “liberty of the community.” He explained both aspects to an audience in Troy, New York, in March 1912 while serving as a New York state senator. The speech contained the earliest and fullest articulation of Roosevelt’s political and economic philosophy.16 In Roosevelt’s view, the increasing interdependence associated with modern life had made the liberty of the individual dependent on the liberty of the community. Liberty of the community, for Roosevelt, depended on sustaining high levels of cooperation—including through government action to ensure individual choices did not harm the community.17 Roosevelt’s thinking about interdependence reflected New York’s position at the leading edge of modernity and the importance of both agriculture and industry to the state’s economy. Fewer and fewer people in the state raised their own food, and fewer and fewer people controlled their own labor. People were no longer masters of their own economic destinies.
While serving as governor of New York, Roosevelt came to believe that restoring economic liberty required expanding the government’s responsibilities in two ways. First, Roosevelt thought the government needed to do more to help citizens make ends meet, thereby restoring their individual liberty. As he told the New York State Legislature in 1931, “modern society, acting through its Government, owes the definite obligation to prevent the starvation or the dire want of any of its fellow men and women who try to maintain themselves but cannot. To these unfortunate citizens aid must be extended by the Government—not as a matter of charity, but as a matter of social duty.” Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins, a longtime social reformer who served as New York’s industrial commissioner during Roosevelt’s governorship, influenced Roosevelt’s thinking on this point, with Perkins pushing Roosevelt to support government-provided insurance against unemployment and old age.

Moving from the individual to the community as a whole, Roosevelt believed ensuring the liberty of the community required a greater level of government stewardship of natural resources and the economy. He had seen the ill effects of the country’s haphazard and wasteful growth first-hand while traveling the country during the 1920 campaign as the Democratic vice presidential candidate. He believed such profligacy had become problematic with the closing of the American frontier, which prevented Americans who had fallen on hard times from moving away from ruined land and starting again with abundant resources elsewhere. Since the ratification of the Constitution, the government had played a vital behind-the-scenes role in the country’s growth, including through building or underwriting the construction of transportation and communications infrastructure. Roosevelt believed the government now needed to play an even greater role in guiding the country’s development, including through some measure of national planning. As he argued in January 1932, “the complete solving of those economic problems which are national in scope is an impossibility without leadership and a plan and action by our national government.”

As a presidential candidate, the question for Roosevelt was how to persuade the public to support expanded government responsibility and accompanying institutional growth. The ongoing crisis of the Great Depression made the task easier. The Depression made Americans more
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