

Social Security Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:

Which historical account of Social Security is more accurate?

Materials:

- Social Security Movie: <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/socialsecurity/>
- Copies of Social Security Historian Interpretations Worksheet
- Copies of Social Security Documents A-C
- Copies of Social Security Guiding Questions

Plan of Instruction:

NECESSARY BACKGROUND:

- *Depression worsened between 1928 and 1932.*
- *Dust Bowl caused severe damage to the Great Plains; many farmers were left destitute.*
- *FDR elected president in 1932 and promised to help people.*
- *First 100 days, passed a lot of legislation: ended Prohibition, New Deal.*
- *Difference between relief, recovery, and reform.*
- *Many people who were active in the Progressive Movement encouraged Roosevelt to use his power and government money to help people.*
- *New Deal policies opposed by business community who believe in laissez-faire.*

1. Do Now: Free-write:

If people are out of work (either retired or disabled or otherwise unable to find work), should they receive money from the government (which comes from tax money)?

Elicit student responses. Push students to articulate both sides of the argument.

2. Play movie on Social Security from [historicalthinkingmatters.org](http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/socialsecurity/): <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/socialsecurity/>

Ask students to answer (either through class discussion or write questions on the board):

- What is Social Security?
 - *A policy that offers pension to those who retire, so that they'll leave the workforce and open up jobs for younger people.*
- Where does money for social security come from?
 - *It's taken out of every taxpayer's paycheck and put into a big fund. When you retire, you get a certain amount every month. It doesn't matter how long you've worked, everyone gets the same amount.*
- Where did Huey Long think the money should come from?

- *He thought social security should get its money by taxing the very richest people.*
 - Where did Townshend think the money should come from?
 - *A sales tax.*
3. Today, we're going to look at how different historians have thought about Social Security. Then, we're going to look at some evidence and decide which historian has a stronger argument.

Pass out Historian Interpretations Worksheet.

Read together and have students summarize individually.

Pair-share student summaries before discussing as a whole class.

Note: there might be a number of concepts here that might need explaining:

- Laissez-faire
 - Why Huey Long would be considered "radical"
 - What is meant by "revolutionary"
4. Hand out Social Security Documents A-C and Guiding Questions.

Do **sourcing** of Document A: FDR together.

Let students work through the rest of Document A and Documents B and C either individually or in pairs.

5. Whole class discussion:

- Both the NAACP representative and the woman in Document C were unhappy with Social Security. How did their concerns differ?
- How would FDR have responded to the complaints in Document B and C?
- Let's go back to the historians. Do these three documents support Degler or Bernstein? Explain.
- Which historian do you agree with? Why?

Citations:

Roosevelt, Franklin D. "Presidential Statement signing the Social Security Act." August 14, 1935. *Social Security Online*, <http://www.ssa.gov/history/fdrstmts.html#signing> and <http://www.ssa.gov/history/mpeg/videosound.html>

Statement of Charles H. Houston. *Economic Security Act: Hearings Before the Committee on Ways and Means House of Representatives, Seventy-Fourth Congress First Session, on H.R. 4120 A Bill to Alleviate the hazards of Old Age, Unemployments, Illness, and Dependency, to Establish a Social Insurance Board in the Department of Labor, To Raise Revenue, and for*

Other Purposes, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 796. *Social Security Online*, <http://www.ssa.gov/history/35house.html>

McElvaine, Robert S. *Down & Out in the Great Depression: Letters from the "Forgotten Man,"* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 148-149.
<http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/socialsecurity/0/inquiry/main/resources/37/>

Document A: FDR (Modified)

President Franklin D. Roosevelt gave this speech on August 14, 1935 when he signed the Social Security Act.

Today a long-held hope is largely fulfilled. The civilization of the past 100 years, with its startling industrial changes, has made life insecure. Young people have come to wonder what would happen to them in old age. The man with a job has wondered how long the job would last.

This social security measure gives some protection to 30 million of our citizens who will receive direct benefits through unemployment compensation, through old-age pensions, and through increased services for the protection of children and the prevention of ill health.

We can never insure 100 percent of the population against 100 percent of the ups and downs of life, but we have tried to pass a law which will give some protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age.

This law, too, represents a cornerstone in a structure intended to lessen the force of possible future depressions. It will act as a protection to future Administrations against the necessity of going deeply into debt to help the needy. It is, in short, a law that will take care of human needs and at the same time provide the United States a sound economic structure.

Vocabulary

Pension: a regular payment made to someone in retirement from a fund that they or their employer has contributed to throughout their working life

Cornerstone: a stone that lies at the foundation of a building

Source: August 14, 1935, excerpt from President Franklin D. Roosevelt's speech, Washington, D.C.

Document B: NAACP (Modified)

President Roosevelt sent his Social Security bill, named the “Economic Security Act,” to Congress in January 1935. Congress held committee hearings on the bill. Here, a representative of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a group dedicated to advancing the rights of African Americans, testified before Congress about how the bill excluded certain groups of people.

Mr. Houston: The point that I am making is that in order for a person to qualify for Social Security, taxes must be paid on behalf of this person before he turns 60.

Now, for the benefit of Negroes, I want to ask, who would be left out by that rule?

First, and very serious, Negro sharecroppers and cash tenants would be left out. We all know that the Negro sharecropper and the Negro cash farm tenant are at the bottom of the economic scale. He is not employed. There is no relation of master and servant by which he gets wages on which a tax could be collected. Therefore this population is left out from the old-age annuity, and that represents approximately 490,000 Negroes.

Next, domestic servants are excluded from the act because the system of employing domestic servants is so loose.

In addition to that, this old-age annuity does not provide for unemployed persons. I do not need to argue to the committee that Negroes have suffered from unemployment more than any other class of the community.

Vocabulary

Annuity: fixed amount of money paid to someone each year

Source: Excerpt from the testimony of Charles H. Houston, representing the NAACP, to the House Ways and Means Committee on the Economic Security bill, February 1, 1935. Washington, D.C.

Document C: Stealing (Modified)

Americans sent thousands of letters to the White House during FDR's presidency and many were addressed to Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady. On average, more than 5,000 letters arrived daily. This letter refers to the "forgotten man," the title of a radio address that FDR gave on April 17, 1932. The "forgotten man" became a phrase adopted by many Americans.

no address
Jan 18, 1937

Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,

I was simply astounded to think that anyone could be nitwit enough to wish to be included in the so-called social security act if they could possibly avoid it. Call it by any name you wish, but it is, in my opinion (and that of many people I know), nothing but downright stealing.

Personally, I had my savings invested so that I would have enough money for old age. Now thanks to the President, I cannot be sure of anything, being a stockholder. After business has survived his merciless attacks (if it does), insurance will probably be no good either.

Believe me, the only thing we want from the president is for him to balance the budget and reduce taxes.

I am not an "economic royalist," just an ordinary white-collar worker at \$1600 per year. Please show this to the president and ask him to remember the wishes of the forgotten man, that is, the one who dared to vote against him. We expect to be tramped on but we do wish the stepping would be a little less hard.

Security at the price of freedom is never desired by intelligent people.

M.A. [female]

Source: Excerpt from a letter sent to Eleanor Roosevelt by an anonymous woman, January 18, 1937.

Document C: Stealing

1. **Sourcing** What does the author tell us about herself? What kind of person do you think she is based on the information in this letter?
2. **Close Reading** What was M.A. counting on to support her in old age? And why has she lost faith that this will support her?
3. **Contextualizing** How does this author generally feel about the New Deal? How does her phrase “security at the price of freedom” capture those feelings?

Using information from the movie and all three documents, write one paragraph in response to the following question: *Which historical account of Social Security is more accurate, Degler's or Bernstein's?*