

Biles, Roger. *The South and the New Deal*. New Perspectives on the South, ed. Charles P. Roland. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994.

**AUTHOR:** At Illinois State University, Roger Biles is the Chair of the history department and a professor of history. His teaching interests include urban and twentieth century United States history. Some of his earlier works which influenced the publication of *The South and the New Deal* include *City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago, Memphis: In the Great Depression*, and *A New Deal for the American People*. His most recent works have centered on the history of Illinois and on the politics of public housing in Chicago.

**TOPIC AND SCOPE:** This book discusses how the New Deal helped to erode southern distinctiveness and transformed the region into a part of mainstream America.

**THESIS:**

Before the New Deal, Biles explains that the South was a distinct region with a feudal and rurally dominant economy that was controlled by conservative elites. These elites in the government openly discriminated against blacks by maintaining Jim Crow segregation. They also believed in rugged individualism with survival of the fittest as the law of the land. Consequently, when the Great Depression struck, southern governments had no institutions in place to assist struggling and unemployed individuals.

Biles asserts that the New Deal began the transformation of the South from a backwards place to being a part of mainstream America. Realizing the enormity of the South's economic troubles, southern governments reluctantly accepted the establishment of social institutions, such as Social Security and the Works Progress Administration. The establishment of these agencies moved the South away from its traditional *laissez-faire* stance. Additionally, Biles maintains that the New Deal's agricultural policies helped to destroy the South's dominant agricultural system of sharecropping. Since farmers were required to grow less food in order to increase prices, they needed fewer workers. Consequently, farm workers moved to the cities in search of employment. In order to "accommodate the masses of displaced rural folk resettling in the cities," Biles explains, "the federal government built roads, housing, schools, and other public facilities."<sup>1</sup> These improvements encouraged northern companies to move south, which helped to further industrialize the region and to move the region away from its focus on agriculture.

Biles applauds the New Deal's impact in modernizing the South, but he also recognizes its failures. For instance, the New Deal was unable to break southerners' longstanding support of white supremacy. The New Deal also relied on local implementation for its programs, so blacks continued to experience disproportionate discrimination compared to whites. However, New Deal programs were still beneficial to blacks as "the number of blacks receiving paychecks from Washington tripled to about 150,000 [in the 1930s], owing in part to the abolition of the civil service regulation requiring job applicants to submit photographs."<sup>2</sup> Consequently blacks, like the rest of the nation, began to vote Democratic. Since the Democratic Party became a national party, rather than a predominantly southern party, another form of southern distinctiveness withered away.

**CRITIQUE:** This book was very well written. Despite its brevity, Biles' work makes a compelling case that New Deal policies helped to remove southern distinctiveness. His book is repetitious at times, but his smooth-flowing narrative helps to keep the story going. His talented writing describes New Deal policies and their impact on the South without getting bogged down in too many details. His succinct format will help to introduce history students to the New Deal and to its impact on the South. While his book uses primary sources, history scholars will really benefit from his impressive synthesis of secondary sources in order to explain the impact of the New Deal on the South. Additionally, scholars will enjoy the extensive bibliographical essay he provides. Unfortunately, though, due to his generalizations about the New Deal's impact on whites, blacks, farmers, and city-dwellers, there is very little distinction made between the New Deal's impact on southern men and women. Additionally, the distinction between white and black women is especially lost on the reader.

**SOURCES:** Biles uses newspapers, magazines, government records, and an impressive amount of secondary sources.

---

<sup>1</sup> Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, New Perspectives on the South, ed. Charles P. Roland (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 155-56.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 120.