The New Deal and the Birth of an America Made for the Road

Nathan Seper

In 1933, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office, the United States was still suffering from the worst economic depression in its history. Millions of Americans had been thrown out of work, the stock market had cratered, and banks continue to fail at an unprecedented rate. Despite the beliefs of Herbert Hoover, the economic problems were too severe to let the business cycle run its course. To solve this crisis, Franklin Delano Roosevelt implemented a series of programs known as the New Deal to reform and stimulate the American economy. Because of all the road building that occurred as a part of this stimulus, and because of the effects those roads had on American life, the New Deal would mark the beginning of America as a "nation on wheels."

While historians still debate the effectiveness of the New Deal in lifting the nation out of its economic crisis, what isn't debatable is the legacy of these efforts. One of the hallmarks of the New Deal and other efforts by local governments were vast public works projects to put people back to work. Some of these construction projects, like the Golden Gate Bridge and the Hoover Dam, are now public landmarks because of their sheer size and benefits. But there a much greater legacy of the public works projects of the 1930s, the expansion of the nation's highways and the growing dependence on the automobiles that traveled those roads. While the interstate system would not be built until the

1950s, much of the groundwork for the modern roadways was laid during the Great Depression by programs such as the Civil Works Administration (CWA) and the Public Works Administration (PWA). According to Courtney Beth Dwyer, in "the short time that the CWA was in existence, approximately 255,000 miles of highways roads and streets were repaired or built…The largest percentage of WPA funds was spent on construction and improvement of highways and roads. Between July 1935 and December of 1940 the WPA built of repaired 565,000 miles of road."[1] In order to understand to full effects of this road building, however, particularly in terms of its importance at a local level, we can examine New Deal efforts in New York and Connecticut. Roads became a mean of revitalizing economically depressed areas, but they also transformed society. Our nation's dependence on automobiles, at the expense of the demolition of entire communities, and the building blocks of decentralization and suburbanization, were laid in the recovery efforts of the New Deal.

Few people were more active in the New Deal public works era than Robert Moses. Moses' transformation of New York's urban landscape made him virtually synonymous with urban and civic planning. Working from the 1920s to the 1960s, Moses believed that America should be mobile, and his work in New York City and the surrounding areas made that a possibility:

> His guiding hand made New York, known as a city of mass transit, also the nation's first city for the automobile age. Under Mr. Moses, the metropolitan area came to have more highway miles than Los Angeles does; Moses projects anticipated such later automobile-oriented efforts as the Los Angeles freeway system.[2]

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[1] Courtney Beth Dwyer, The New Deal in Norwalk, Ct: A Case Study of a Small City in America During The Great Depression (Master's Thesis, Southern Connecticut State University, 2003).
[2] Paul Goldberger, "Robert Moses, Master Builder, Is Dead at 92", *New York Times* (July 30, 1981): A1.

New York City was a symbol of the boom of the 1920s, with its jazz and soaring skyscrapers. However, it was also a sign of how this era did not ensure prosperity for all Americans, that the Big Apple was already slightly rotten before Wall Street crashed in 1929, and before the run on the bank of the United States a year later.

While cars roared through the city and its surroundings, the infrastructure they rolled through was decrepit and inadequate. From 1918 to 1932, the number of cars in the city grew from 125,101 to 790,173. While many people complain about traffic jams in the area today, the 1920s and early 1930s were even less forgiving. Commuters from Long Island had to either travel on outdated ferries or a series of bridges that had been built in 1909.[3] The city of Brooklyn itself had no thoroughfare, and the city of Queens was overwhelmed with traffic of its own. The costs of this neglect came not just in congestion, but in human lives. In one report on the state of the Brooklyn Bridge, the roadways "were too narrow for cars and so slippery that according to a police report alone, 'a dozen accidents were not uncommon on a rainy day'."[4]

While authorities had been aware of problems, attempts to repair and upgrade infrastructure were hobbled before they got off the ground. In 1909, land in the Bronx had been taken to build a bridge in honor of Henry Hudson, as well as a statue honoring the figure who helped discover New York City. But by 1932, neither the bridge nor the statue had been constructed beyond a small column. Anyone looking at that column would not regard it as a symbol of Hudson's greatness, but the ineptitude of his descendants.[5] In 1921, work had begun on a bridge to link Staten Island to Brooklyn, but by 1932, after seven

[3] Robert Caro, *The Power Broker: Robert Moses and the Fall of New York (*New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 330.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*

million dollars had been spent, nothing was completed except for four giant holes drilled into the shoreline.[6]

These failures of the city to expand infrastructure were not merely the result of weather, but also stemmed from the corruption of its leaders. Tammany Hall, one of the powerful political machines in American history, lorded over the city, demanding graft and patronage for its members. Its status as a center of civic corruption had been cemented by the late nineteenth century crimes of William "Boss" Tweed, who plundered millions from the construction of a courthouse. Decades later, however, his brand of governance still dominated New York City politics, and construction budgets were plundered by Tammany Hall officials looking to make a quick buck. In the area of park repairs, another area in dire need, money that was supposed to be spent on making a park look beautiful had been given to Tammany loyalists, "spending exactly $225,000 of the total park budget of $8,576,319 on such luxuries in 1932- and in that year 90 percent of the park department vehicles were still horse-drawn."[7]

Moses was the exact opposite of a Tammany Hall stooge. Members of Tammany were slick operators who often sought favors for their own gain. Moses was an anti-political, goal-oriented technocrat. In his one attempt at political office, when he sought the governorship of New York, he lost against his opponent by 800,000 votes. He had argued many times for civil service reform, which unsurprisingly put him at odds with the Tammany Hall leaders.[8]

Despite Moses' arrogance and later dictatorial tendencies, his arguments were ultimately not without merit. Robert Moses' own projects had been stifled by this spoils system. He understood the need to expand boulevards in the outer boroughs, but these efforts had largely stalled out by 1929. The Triborough

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[6] *Ibid*, 373.
[7] *Ibid.*, 332.
[8] Goldberger, "Robert Moses," A1.

Bridge, another crucial project, was being managed by someone who was described as a "Tammany Hack who had entered city service in 1886 as an axman," with no idea how cars were supposed to drive off the bridge safely.[9] By 1932, $5.4 million had been lost due to graft, and with the collapse of the stock market and the banking system, the project had no money or credit to build it. [10]

While Moses lacked the charisma necessary for public office, he would be aided in his efforts by someone who did, and who also had a desire to reform the city outright. In 1933, New Yorkers sent Tammany Hall away from the mayor's office and elected Fiorello La Guardia, a bombastic former Congressional representative committed to political reform and ending patronage[11]. The report of his death would describe him as "A fighter by nature [who] … was always ready to take on all comers, big or little, from Hitler to the man in the street."[12]

With the help of a popular goal-oriented mayor, Moses accomplished great things during the Great Depression:

> By the mid-30's, his output in the city alone had reached an extraordinary level. The Tri-borough Bridge, by far his biggest project up to that point, was completed in 1936, a crucial link in the Moses network of highways and regional parks… He built the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge and the West Side Highway and the 79th Street Boat Basin.[13]

Moses, more than anyone else, stressed cars as a major part of the construction of a city. While his road programs were needed to repair a woefully inadequate transportation system, subsequent observers noted that as Moses gained more control, he made cars more important than people, bulldozing

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[9] Caro, *The Power Broker*, 340.
[10] *Ibid.*
[11] "Fiorello H. La Guardia," *Encyclopedia Britannica Inc.,* 2015.
[12] "La Guardia Is Dead; City Pays Homage To 3-Time Mayor", *New York Times* (September 21,1947), A1.
[13] Goldberger, "Robert Moses," A1.

entire neighborhoods to construct roads. This had always been his tendency; as early as 1914, people often balked at his plans because they involved the eviction of large numbers of residents. Historian Robert Caro notes, "What the city officials could comprehend about Moses' plan they didn't like. The relocations involved for his highways would be a scale almost unknown in the city… the Triborough Bridge in the Bronx would alone require the condemnation of buildings that contained almost four thousand apartments."[14]

LaGuardia, despite his own beliefs in an accountable and honest government, put Moses into a position that left the enthusiastic builder accountable to no one, and Moses clearly drifted from what the Mayor wanted, aided by WPA money. While La Guardia wanted to expand and benefit the city with new schools, hospitals, and firehouses, he was forced to cut back on these projects for Moses' work on roads, bridges, and public parks. Almost all the New Deal projects came not from elected representatives of the people but from a bureaucrat who frequently ignored other public needs in favor of his own vision. Pretty soon, every major project in the city would come under the scrutiny of Moses.[15]

If the expression "absolute power corrupts absolutely" holds any truth, it found proof in Robert Moses. In 1959, in the midst of his various public renewal projects, he ignored the public outcry over the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which involved the demolition of entire neighborhoods, and he "refused to switch to an alternative route that would have taken away only a few dozen buildings."[16] He bluntly ignored criticism, responding in the *New York Times* o someone who claimed he was destroying parks to create more roads that the complaint "is wholly without foundation. It simply repeats a random canard

[14] Caro, *The Power Broker,* 386.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] Goldberger, "Robert Moses," A1.

by uninformed critics."[17] It seemed that Moses had been transformed from responsible city planner to a pharaoh building a monument to himself.

This cavalier attitude toward demolition led to many figures condemning him, but the most influential of his critics was journalist Jane Jacobs, who demanded "more diversity, density and dynamism — in effect, to crowd people and activities together in a joyous urban jumble."[18] Jacobs argued that Moses' priorities with civic planning treated people in cities as obstacles that needed to be removed to make way for cars, and Jacobs found this logic to be self-defeating and futile in its purpose of reducing congestion:

> It is true that diversity causes congestion? Traffic congestion is caused by vehicles, not by people themselves. Wherever people are thinly settles, rather than densely concentrated, or wherever diverse uses occur infrequently, any specific attraction does cause congestion. Such places as clinics, shopping centers or movies bring with them a concentration of traffic- and what is more, bring traffic heavily along routes to and from them… Lack of wide ranges of concentrated diversity can put people into automobiles for almost all their needs. The spaces required for roads and for parking spread everything out still farther, and lead to still greater uses of vehicles.[19]

Jacobs also pointed out the process of expanding freeways was also eating up a lot of other space in other ways, with parking lots, used car lots, and junkyards taking up land or demolishing any other remaining properties. Jacobs

[17] Robert Moses, "Our City's Parks; Reduction of Acreage for Parkways and Expressways Denied", *New York Times Company*, May 20, 1961.
[18] Douglas Martin, "Jane Jacobs, Social Critic Who Redefined and Championed Cities, Is Dead at 89," *New York Times* (April 26, 2006), A1.
[19] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961), 229.

felt that highways should never have a place in an area as densely populated as New York City.[20]

Moses finally lost his power when he attempted to build expressways through Lower Manhattan by demolishing an area that today makes up the SoHo District. In 1962, the city refused his plans, ending his once-dominant power over city planning, and in 1965, Mayor Robert Wagoner created the Landmark Preservation Commission to protect any further vintage neighborhoods from demolition.[21] While Manhattan relies on public transportation far more than automobiles, the outer boroughs and many other cities in the United States such as Los Angeles remain dependent on cars to move people from place to place. This is in part a legacy of Robert Moses that began in earnest during the New Deal.

The state of Connecticut offers a different story of New Deal development. Like other industrial states, the nutmeg state was in desperate economic trouble in the 1930s. The city of Norwalk, like the Big Apple, was full of signs that the famous economic boom of the 1920s was oversold. While manufacturing continued to be vigorous during this period, by the end of the decade the city's once major industry, oyster farming, had become one of many "sick" industries. Courtney Beth Dwyer notes that:

> Handicapped for years by the depletion of natural beds, the pollution of the waters, and differences between state and town authorities, the state ban was enacted to stop shell-fishing. Between 1927 and 1929, the local oyster grounds fell by two-thirds. The city had a casual attitude toward sewage and garbage disposal which was devastating an already faltering industry.[22]

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[20] *Ibid.*, 400.
[21] James Clarity, "Robert Wagoner, 80, Pivotal New York Mayor Dies," *New York Times Company*, February 13, 1993; Vince Graham, "Jane Jacobs vs Robert Moses: Urban Fight of the Century", YouTube LLC, 13 February 13, 2013, Accessed Fall 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AUeuQT6t7kg.
[22] Dwyer, *The New Deal in Norwalk.*

By 1933, the city struggled to provide paying jobs to its citizens. By the late 1930s, however, the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration, key New Deal programs, began to focus on road construction in the area. Out of this planning came the Merritt Parkway, which had an immediate impact on the city and Southwestern Connecticut. Dwyer writes:

> The Merritt Parkway was one of the New Deal's most ambitious undertakings. The parkway stretches fifty miles, and connects the Hutchinson Parkway in Greenwich to the Housatonic River in Stratford. Studies were done to show how the layout of the road would increase safe travel in a time when car accidents were very common. The Merritt Parkway connected Fairfield County to other parts of Connecticut and made travel between the areas safer and faster. [23]

The road building, especially the construction of Merritt Parkway, greatly stimulated the economy of the city of Norwalk. By 1937, the city of Norwalk had returned the original industrial capacity, partly because of industry that had left the city of New York.[24] But the recovery of Norwalk was also due to other results of the construction of the Parkway, suburbanization and decentralization. As Dwyer suggests, this provided for "an industrial move out of New York City into neighboring communities. All of these factors led to a low unemployment rate, as well as a large benefit from the New Deal support."[25]

The New Deal did more for America than create jobs and create public works projects. It was the period when the concept of America as a nation of cars was born. In New York, the car became crucial as entire neighborhoods were demolished from the 1930s through the 1960s. In Norwalk, the New Deal allowed for economic development as a result of the Merritt Parkway and laid

[23] *Ibid.*
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] *Ibid.*

the groundwork for automobile's role in suburbanization and the decentralization of major industries. Despite oil shocks and a recent revitalization of mass transit, America still remains a nation on wheels thanks to the efforts of the New Deal.