

## ***Looking Back for Inspiration***

***By Mel Lavine***

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If this is the worst economy since the Great Depression more than seventy-five years ago, why are there so few ideas for how to get us out of it, as Robert Reich, a former secretary of labor, asked in his column Sunday in the San Francisco Chronicle?

His explanation is that Romney and Obama are playing it safe. “Neither candidate wants to take any chances by offering any large, serious proposals,” says Reich. “Both are banking instead on negative campaigns that convince voters the other guy would be worse.”

Reich argues that the president could propose a public works program along the lines of Roosevelt’s WPA. It provided hundreds of thousands of jobs for the unemployed rebuilding the country’s infrastructure. Another example Reich cites would be a new Civilian Conservation Corps, perhaps the most popular of all the New Deal creations.

Over the 10 years it was in existence, the CCC had put “more than three million idle youngsters to work on forestry and flood control, building firebreaks and lookouts in the national forests, and bridges, campgrounds, trails, and museums in the national parks,” according to David M. Kennedy in his fine history of the Depression and the Second World War, “Freedom From Fear.”

Of course taxes had to be raised to help pay for all that. No surprise, the wealthy balked then as they balk now at efforts to level the playing field.

In 1936, Harold L. Ickes, Roosevelt’s secretary of the interior, writes in his diary of a conversation with Harry F. Guggenheim, a member of a family that made one of the world’s great fortunes in mining. As Ickes pressed him to support the charge that FDR was antagonistic to business, he said “it became clear that the...issue today is taxation. Roosevelt, according to these very rich people, is penalizing business and tearing it down because he has increased the income taxes in the higher brackets...the fear of increased taxes...has made (FDR) such a bitter enemy out of practically everyone” among the super rich.

A Republican and a Teddy Roosevelt progressive before joining FDR, Ickes claimed that by “giving the underdog a chance” and an “opportunity to earn enough to live on,” the New Deal “really saved capitalism.”

Frances Perkins, Roosevelt's secretary of labor, and the first woman to sit in a cabinet, said Roosevelt's method of work reminded her of a painter mixing colors on his palette, experimenting, until things began to feel right. Like an artist, FDR would try something, almost anything, and if it didn't work he would try again, but kept trying.

The late historian, Richard Hofstadter, summed it up when he said, "At the heart of the New Deal was not a philosophy but a temperament."

*Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: [mellavine@aol.com](mailto:mellavine@aol.com).*