

AME2230F - American Protest

Snapshot #1: Coxey's Marchers, 1894:

- At the time of Grover Cleveland's inauguration in March 1893, farm foreclosures and railroad bankruptcies were a sign that something was wrong in the economy. Just a few weeks after Cleveland entered office two major railroad companies folded: Pennsylvania and Reading Railroad. Investors panicked and the stock market crashed. Europeans started to call back their investments. By July 1893 banks had hemorrhaged their reserves and suspended their clients' accounts. By Christmas, 500 banks and thousands of connected businesses collapsed. Unemployment skyrocketed to over 20% nationwide. Well, hitting in 1893 and lingering for until the turn of the century, America was hit by a stinging economic depression that was trans-formative to American politics, etc.

- For middle-aged ppl it actually reminded them of the poor economy in the 1870s when the newly re-united country demobilized. Union activism had increased greatly then and the public thought about the Haymarket bombing in 1886 and the showdown at Homestead in 1892. In 1893 when the depression hit there were massive strikes by coalminers across Pennsylvania and a boycott of the Pullman railroads which saw sporadic violence erupt bw the Army and angry crowds. Rich were filled with worry, even dread about the potential of a worker-uprising.

- In the summer of 1894 another protest jolted Americans. Radical reformer Jacob Coxey of Ohio proposed something unprecedented: the government should hire the unemployed, specifically a shovel-in-hand project where men fixed the roads. Through 1894 Coxey organized hundreds of men, Coxey's Army, to carry out a peaceful march on Washington. There they would present their case. Most Americans viewed Coxey as a dangerous extreme. The public was alarmed when other protests started to spontaneously erupt after a major one by Coxey. Now, sometimes the protestors found support from sympathetic communities and were given aid. Sometime entire cities drove them out at gun-point.

- When Coxey's Army reached Capitol Hill, they were shocked when Coxey was arrested and jailed for trespassing, and the protestors dispersed. Many Americans put the blame of economic troubles onto the radicals themselves, as if you blame a cough for a cold. Others of course blamed the federal government and the Democratic Admin in power there. Cleveland was a poor President bc while his entire party wanted to introduce silver into the money supply, he stubbornly stuck to gold and even made a secret gold buying deal with John Pierpont Morgan that enraged many. In the mid-term elections of Nov 1894 the Dems were crushed and GOP held the House for 16yrs, and there was a viable third party: the People's Party (farm-labor movement favoring more gov regulation of the economy).

Snapshot #2: The Bonus Army:

- President Herbert Hoover, late-1929, responded to the sudden and frightening downturn by drawing upon two American traditions. 1. He professed a belief that economic outcomes were the product of individual character; that success went to those who deserved it; that ppl's fates were in their own hands; and that the national economy reflected the ppl's work ethic and drive. 2. When it came to national economics he profoundly believed that the business community would regulate itself. So he asked Americans to tighten their belts (austerity) and work harder.

- So, following the stock market crash he cut federal taxes in an attempt to boost private spending and corporate investments. But, Hoover did appreciate that this escalating depression was already severe and so he did engage some state-led efforts. He suggested that States and municipalities invest in public projects so as to provide some jobs. In 1931 he secured an unprecedented increase in federal spending in \$700m. The most innovated solution his Admin came up with was lending to major companies (bailout) which went to banks, railroads, etc. but the commission (Reconstruction Finance Corporation [RFC]) was overly cautious and only lent out 20% of its \$1.5b in available funds.

- Hoover was an unlucky president. Any president would have a tough time by 1932 but Hoover was insistent upon smaller government, in a Keynesian discourse. But, unemployment was so severe is overwhelmed private charities and religious institutions (traditional form of dealing with the unemployed) who by 1932 told the federal government they could not handle the problem. He also kept insisting, to the public, that recovery was just around the corner, and so he was seen as insensitive, aloof. After the electric glow of the roaring 20s, the country had come a long way since the downturns of the 1870s and 1890s when no one except Jacob Coxey called for direct governmental intervention for the unemployed.

- Hoover became rapidly unpopular and was accused of being a do-nothing president, despite that what he had do was actually a great deal of state intervention... nothing of course by the standards that John Maynard Keynes suggested to the next president, FDR. Not unsurprisingly then, Americans started to protest.

Early-Depression Discontent:

- As the depression worsened local grassroots protests erupted. Bankrupt farmers often banded together in gun fights with security forces hired by banks and local police during farm foreclosures. In protest of low prices for their goods, thousands of farmers cut-off food to cities by dumping that very food into massive barricades on roads. In industry, lay-offs and wage cuts lead to violent clashes, some spontaneous, some union driven, always met by local police, hired hands, or even the National Guard and US Army.

- Coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky went on strike over a 10% wage cut, and the mine owners called in the National Guard who violently crushed that union. In 1932 there was an infamous strike bw workers and security guards at the Ford Motor Company's massive River Rouge factory just outside Detroit. 5 workers KIA, 50 WIA. A cameraman had his bulky camera shot out of his hand, and 15 police were WIA (clubbed or stoned). This happened over all the US.

- In the summer of 1932, the most publicized of all protests of the early-depression occurred. The so-called Bonus Army was a determined group of 15,000 unemployed Great War veterans. They banded together, as was internationally common for the young male survivors of the Great War, organized and hitchhiked to Washington. Their demand was simple: an early (immediate) release of pension awards that were due to be paid in 1945. They bitterly cried: "we were heroes in 1917, but we're bums now".

- The Bonus Army's leaders entered the offices of the Capitol Building to plead their case. Their lobbying went nowhere. In the mean time the other men set up tents near the Capitol Building. Hoover was immediately disturbed and called out General Douglas MacArthur, with regular US Army troops, to eject the horde. MacArthur's men evicted the men, burnt the camp down. Some journalists captured images of regulars aggressively handling, even injuring, Great War vets upset the public (newsreel footage in theaters, and movies were very popular form of cheap entertainment). Hoover's popularity plummeted.

- The election of 1932 was not about libertarianism versus state intervention, but the American ppl overwhelmingly rejected limited state for action. In another measure of how the country had modernized, where the public blasted Coxey as the radical, they now blamed the president and the general, and not the protestors, for the Bonus Army debacle. Protesting itself was no further imbedded into the American fabric.

Snapshot #3: Ella Jo Baker and decentralized leadership:

- In the closing years of the decade, African Americans – particularly students – started experimenting with nonviolent direct (mass) action. In August 1958, an NAACP youth group in Oklahoma City organized a sit-in at a local restaurant. Similar actions spread to Oklahoma and Kansas. Sit-ins occurred in the late 1950s at department store lunch counters in Miami, Florida, which included three arrests, and toward the end of 1959, there was a sit-in in Nashville. In Louisville, Kentucky, the NAACP organized sit-ins in 1959. That same year, sit-ins occurred in Charleston, West Virginia, and Lexington, Kentucky. Meantime, a boycott in Atlanta ended segregated busing in the city in 1959.

- Sit-ins were not new. During World War II, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) organized early sit-ins against segregated lunch counters and other facilities, but with the war going on, the movement failed to take off. The CORE activists, of course, were inspired by the great General Motors Sit-Down Strike in Flint, Michigan, in 1937. But to the disappointment of CORE activists in World War II, their struggle went nowhere.

- For all of his brilliance, courage, and vision, Martin Luther King, Jr. failed to capitalize on the growing youth militancy that was sporadically erupting in different parts of the United States. But there was someone else in SCLC who was paying attention. Ella Baker, the executive director of SCLC, took a strong interest in the spread of youthful direct action protests. She sensed that there was a new force for change in the freedom struggle – a force that was not coming from the clergy, but one that was coming from students.

- Baker also felt uneasy with the centralized, charismatic leadership that dominated SCLC. In particular, she felt that King – with the media spotlight constantly fixed on him – was taking away public attention from the numerous other grassroots struggles across the country. Ella Baker likely had King on her mind when she spoke the following harsh words about centralized leadership:

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.

- Baker soon grew frustrated with the SCLC. She put pressure on the organization's leaders – Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, Ralph Abernathy, others – to place a higher priority on trying to help women, youths, and poor people. Baker realized that the SCLC was not going to be her vehicle for changing the South. As she later explained:

I had known...that there would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister... The basic attitude of men and especially ministers, as to...the role of women in their church setups is that of taking orders, not providing leadership.

- As her successor, Reverend Wyatt Walker, commented, "She could not fit into the mold of a preacher organization. It just went against the grain of the kind of person she is."

- When Ella Baker broke away from the SCLC, she helped form a new organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC (SNICK). Baker hoped this new organization would be less cautious and more radical than the organization she was leaving. The founding meeting of SNCC grew out of the April youth conference at Shaw in Raleigh. The young activists set up a new, loosely structured organization, with delegates from every Southern state, and adopted a statement of purpose that affirmed its commitment to nonviolence.

- SNCC activists asserted that deep and lasting change can only come from empowering people at the grass roots level, and that this takes commitment to local people over time. Ella Baker strongly believed that if racial subjugation were to be overcome, especially in the rural South, black people would have to rely on themselves, not on outside leaders. Baker and other SNCC activists claimed, "We are all leaders."

- This anti-leadership ethos – actually a vision of an alternative kind of leadership, decentralized and participatory – and the emphasis on the process of grass roots social change, was best expressed by SNCC's slogan, "Let the people decide." SNCC represented not a coherent set of ideas as much as an intangible mood and spirit of a new era, a new way of life.