

IS IT TIME FOR A

GREEN

NEW

IDEA?

Upon taking office in January 2009, President Barack Obama began tackling a host of economic problems recently plaguing the nation, including the loss of nearly two million jobs in 2008. To correct this situation, Obama's economic team has formulated a recovery plan to create jobs, over the next four years, for these unemployed Americans. A key component of this plan will involve putting the jobless to work making the nation's public buildings more energy efficient. Such work, Obama explained during his first 100 days in office, would not only provide jobs to the unemployed but also lower the federal government's energy bills while simultaneously slowing global warming. "We've faced difficult times before," Obama concluded, "and at each moment we have risen to meet the challenge."



JUST AS THE DEPRESSION ERA CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS HELPED TO CREATE A GREENER AMERICA BY PLANTING TREES AND SOIL-CONSERVING CROPS, A CCC FOR THE 21ST CENTURY COULD HELP TO CREATE A NEW, SUSTAINABLE-ENERGY INFRASTRUCTURE.

TO COMBAT ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL CRISES, ROOSEVELT CALLED FOR THE CREATION OF THE CIVILIAN CONSERVATION CORPS, ONE OF THE NEW DEAL'S FIRST AND MOST POPULAR ALPHABET AGENCIES.



President Franklin Roosevelt photographed in 1933 at a Civilian Conservation Corps Camp in Virginia.

One of those difficult times occurred seventy-five years ago, during Franklin Roosevelt's first one hundred days in office. In one of his earliest addresses to Congress, FDR also lamented rising unemployment, which had reached an astounding twenty-five percent in 1933. Yet Roosevelt, like Obama, was also aware of an ecological crisis that was then gripping the nation. Noting severe flooding occurring along the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, due in large part to deforestation along their banks, FDR warned Congress that the country faced an environmental emergency as well. To combat simultaneously both crises – one economic, the other environmental – Roosevelt called for the creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps, one of the New Deal's first and most popular alphabet agencies. Barack Obama should do the same by asking Congress to create a new and improved CCC.

During its nine-year existence the Corps helped battle both economic and environmental emergencies. On the economic front,

from 1933 to 1942, the CCC provided jobs for more than three million young men between the ages of 18 and 25. These young men received one dollar a day for their labor, most of which the federal government sent home to these enrollees' families, to help them weather the Great Depression. Additionally, each of the 5,000 or so Corps camps scattered across the country spent approximately \$60,000 annually in nearby communities through the purchase of goods and services. The more than three million young men who joined the Corps also benefited economically in the long run – the great majority took night classes, in their camps, that taught skills necessary for finding employment after leaving the Corps. The same could be said of the tens of thousands of young men from the state of New Jersey who joined the CCC during the Great Depression.

The CCC was successful environmentally as well. Young men in the New Deal program planted more than two billion trees in private,

state, and national forests across the country. In the mid-1930s, when Dust Bowl winds blew across the Great Plains, Corps enrollees rushed to the rescue and helped farmers contour plow their fields and plant soil-conserving crops on forty million acres of farmland. The CCC also developed more than 800 new state parks and built amenities in nearly every national park in the country, all in an effort to provide Americans with cheap, healthful, outdoor recreation. All told, Corps work projects from 1933 until 1942, when Congress halted funding for the program, transformed more than 118 million acres throughout the United States, an area larger than California. In New Jersey, the Corps focused much of its work on establishing and improving many of the state's parks and forests, including Bass River, Belleplaine, Jenny Jump, and Stokes state forests, as well as Cheesequake, Hacklebarney, High Point, and Ringwood state parks, among others.

While Barack Obama seems wary of publicly linking his new employment program directly to the New Deal, other countries are less shy of the Great Depression's usable past. Brazil has recently begun looking back to Franklin Roosevelt's CCC to help solve that country's economic and environmental problems. Plagued by high unemployment rates approaching ten percent, local, state, and federal governments in cooperation with non-governmental organizations and corporations have begun putting jobless Brazilians to work planting trees. The goal of Brazil's CCC-like program, which the Nature Conservancy helped initiate, is to plant one billion trees over the next ten years across the country's Atlantic Forest. Rather than funding the program solely by increasing taxes and federal spending, Brazil will rely on novel market mechanisms, including the sale of sequestration vouchers on the international carbon market, obtained through the program's reforestation efforts, as well as the collection of water-use fees in the reforested regions. Similar tree-planting programs reminiscent of FDR's CCC are also now operating

in China along the Yangtze River and through Wangari Maathai's Greenbelt Movement in Kenya. Even war-torn Afghanistan has created its own "Afghan Conservation Corps."

The United States and the State of New Jersey need to follow suit. Like Roosevelt, President Obama should ask Congress to create a Civilian Conservation Corps, but with a twist. Along with planting trees, this new and improved Corps should put young Americans, both men and women, to work planting windmills across the former Dust Bowl, solar energy panels throughout the Sunbelt, and energy-efficient biofuels on farms in every corner of the country, all in an effort to reduce both unemployment and the production of greenhouse gasses that lead to global warming. Much of this work could also be done in the Garden State. While Roosevelt funded the New Deal's CCC with federal dollars, public spending for Obama's new program could be greatly reduced through market mechanisms like those embraced by Brazil; by collecting carbon vouchers and water-use fees from the new program's reforestation efforts, and by selling clean, green energy generated from new windmills, solar panels, and bio-fuels. The young men and women enrolling in this market-driven Corps would also benefit. Not only would they gain valuable training, skills, and experience in the expanding green economy, but they could also be encouraged to put their enrollment stipend towards a college education.

President Obama has the opportunity to take a page out of the New Deal playbook. Back in 1933, during his first 100 days as president, FDR created the Civilian Conservation Corps to help the United States combat both the economic and environmental crises of the Great Depression, and since that time the New Deal program has become a model for other nations around the world. President Obama should act similarly during his first term in office by creating a 21st century CCC. By doing so, the United States could use its historic past to put Americans to work while simultaneously helping to better safeguard the planet's future. ■



A CCC poster from the 1930s

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