Mini-Unit Title: Voices of the Great Depression

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<th>Author:</th>
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<th>Grade level:</th>
<th>Elementary</th>
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<td>School:</td>
<td>Auburn Middle School, Fauquier County</td>
<td>Time Estimated:</td>
<td>6 to 7 days (45 minute periods)</td>
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Overview:
Students will have completed the initial section of the Great Depression unit in which they have learned about the stock market crash of 1929 including stock speculation by investors, the Federal Reserve System’s failure to prevent the collapse of the banking system, and the fact that high tariffs diminished international trade. Students will have taken an anticipation guide to assess background knowledge about the effects of the Great Depression. Some students will have read historical fiction about this time period, including A Long Way From Chicago, by Richard Peck, a humorous story collection about life in rural Illinois in the 1930s, or Out of the Dust, by Karen Hesse, a Dust Bowl drama told through the skillful use of narrative poetry. Upon completion of this unit, students will know that large numbers of banks and businesses failed, significant numbers of industrial workers lost their jobs, farm income fell, and there was widespread hunger and homelessness during the 1930s. Students will be able to identify that the federal government created programs to attempt to address the needs of Americans affected by these economic problems. Students who complete the unit will be able to give detailed descriptions of the human consequences of social problems like joblessness and homelessness and identify how liberal government policies and programs like the New Deal were created to support these Americans while maintaining economic individualism.

Historical Background:
The 1920s were characterized by optimism on the part of investors who borrowed money to speculate in the stock market, and in so doing, created stock values that could not be maintained in the latter part of the decade. Consumers were also borrowing in order to buy durable goods, so businesses invested to increase their capacity. Although the country had experienced numerous depressions in the past (1907 and 1893 were two previous years which began economic downturns), economists, the business community, and investors believed that the Federal Reserve System would prevent further contractions of economic output. This new system moved to raise interest rates in 1928 and 1929 in order to slow spending which resulted in a recession.

What followed was a deflationary trend in which businesses laid off workers in an attempt to return to profitability, and consumers stopped buying durable goods in order to balance their budgets. As prices fell an average of 10% per year, investors delayed stock purchases anticipating that they could get more value if they invested in the future. There were banking panics and a collapse of the world monetary system during the presidential term of Herbert Hoover who attempted to calm investor anxiety, but failed to respond to individual citizens’ requests for government aid. Relying on a traditional governmental approach to economic cycles, Hoover asked Congress to provide loans to failing banks and businesses, but did not offer income supports or job programs to the unemployed.
because he believed these social problems were the responsibility of private charities or local governments.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected in 1932 on the promise that he would take action to end the depression. In the first hundred days of his administration, Congress passed more legislation than at any time in our nation’s history as desperate lawmakers followed his plan to create a liberal vision of government that was to last for thirty or forty more years. Roosevelt did not know exactly what would end America’s economic woes, but he pledged the power of the federal government to try whatever seemed reasonable to end the suffering of the American people, not just its struggling business communities. In so doing, he created a vision of government as a protector of the people from the economic hardships of life. Populations such as the aged, blind, disabled and labor were recognized as having valid claims to government assistance on their behalf for the first time. Programs created by the Social Security Act and the Wagner Act made it possible for citizens to have retirement incomes, income supports, and rights to collectively bargain with employers for the first time in our history. America had created the modern welfare state that would last through the 1960s as embodied in Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society reforms.

The New Deal, as Roosevelt’s programs came to be called, did more than provide a safety net for Americans. It attempted to address structural problems in the banking system and the stock market by establishing federal deposit insurance and a commission to investigate and prosecute fraud in the stock market. Bank failures declined to a remarkable degree after 1933, and investors had some assurance that stock manipulation, while never curbed in the markets, was now regulated by the federal government to improves investor confidence and assure a steady flow of investment capital in American business, particularly from foreign sources.

In addition to these New Deal programs addressing the needs of business, workers, and individuals with special needs, the federal government created programs to promote the acceptance of its new role in the lives of American citizens. Programs like the Works Progress Administration hired artists and writers to chronicle the effects of the Great Depression on the lives of individuals. In addition to providing work to reduce unemployment, these socially activist programs promoted the idea that government had a role in ameliorating, if not ending the suffering of those afflicted by their position as victims in a capitalist society. In so doing, it manifested the aims of Progressives who had worked throughout the early twentieth century to reform American life in a direction of social and economic fairness and equality for all Americans. This liberal mission of the government was probably best embodied in Eleanor Roosevelt who often was the conscience of the president on matters regarding minorities and individual human rights.

Critics of the New Deal point to the fact that Congressional labor reforms tended to favor those who already had jobs rather than in putting the unemployed back to work in the private sector. Strikes in the auto and steel industries gained union workers higher wages and workday concessions from management. The got seniority recognition in layoffs, and grievance procedures were implemented that reduced the power of foremen to intimidate union organizers. But in less organized industries, the Roosevelt
Administration did nothing to assist garment, agricultural, and service workers. The Democratic Party benefited from the gains of the union movement without expending much political capital, and was helped by the fact that American workers rejected the radical socialist and communist organizers in favor of the mainstream union movement. With respect to New Deal programs, like Social Security, critics point to the bias given to providing benefits to men, which only recognized women as frail, dependent participants in need of help in the absence of men.

**Major understanding:**
Students will understand that in the 1930s, the liberal vision of government was established in which American citizens can expect or petition our representatives to take a role in ensuring fairness and equality in our social and economic lives. This awareness provides an important basis for understanding the constitutional guarantees embodied in the Fourteenth Amendment, which ties together their study of Reconstruction, in United State History I, and the study of Civics, which ensues for Virginia students of the social sciences. It also provides an understanding of the conservative movement in American politics that has largely supplanted liberalism in contemporary American society. Students will understand that Franklin Roosevelt was able to discredit the laissez-faire, limited government policies of the Republicans and create a social democratic state based on the scientifically oriented advice of intellectuals that persisted under Democratic administrations until the demise of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society reforms.

**Objectives:**
Students will:
1. Be able to identify several examples of the impacts that an economic depression has on the lives of individuals.
2. Be able to identify several examples of ways in which liberal governments attempt to address social and economic problems of citizens.
3. Understand that government leaders promote their policies and programs through the use of government media and the independent media.
4. Use internet resources to locate examples of the impact of economic deprivation during the Great Depression and of New Deal programs implemented to ameliorate unemployment, hunger, homelessness, and financial hardship.
5. Practice close reading to find pertinent information in interview and speech transcripts, and other written documents.
6. Listen to audio recordings of interviews and speeches to find pertinent information.
7. Examine photographs to identify key concepts about the Great Depression and the New Deal.

**Standards of Learning:**

**Skills:**
US II.1 The student will demonstrate skills for historical and geographical analysis, including the ability to
a) analyze and interpret primary and secondary source documents to increase understanding of events and life in United States history from 1877 to the present;
b) make connections between past and present;
d) interpret ideas and events from different historical perspectives;
e) evaluate and debate issues orally and in writing.

**Content:**

U.S.II.5: The student will demonstrate knowledge of the social and economic changes of the early twentieth century by

d) identifying the impact of the Great Depression on Americans and the major features of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal.