
NELSON LICHTENSTEIN

At the center of twentieth-century US politics stand the great reforms of the New Deal era and the fate of the social forces that sustained them. The two are closely linked but not identical, which is why historians and social scientists continue to debate how, why, and when the electoral coalition that proved so potent during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt lost its majoritarian character. Was the New Deal merely a set of specific economic reforms that appealed to an electorate desperate for security and relief during the Great Depression? Or was it a more profound transformation in government and society that cast a shadow well into the postwar era?

These were some of the issues Samuel Lubell tried to answer when he published The Future of American Politics in 1952. In those early postwar years, the electoral future of the New Deal impulse was very much in play. Although his polling and journalistic investigations are now more than half a century old, Lubell’s broadly conceived social analysis remains remarkably insightful, more prescient and powerful than many books written in more recent decades. The New Deal fused a demographic revolt with key economic and social reforms, argues Lubell. Thus the party of FDR remained for more than a generation the political “sun” around which all other parties, factions, and tendencies were forced to revolve. But this electoral coalition was hardly monolithic, and it was under attack from without, while inside the encampment hidden fissures and incipient revolts threatened to undermine its majoritarian power.

Samuel Lubell was a journalist, a member of that left-liberal, largely Jewish cohort that at mid-century included I. F. Stone, Theodore White, A. H. Raskin, Daniel Bell, and Benjamin Stolberg. He was born in Poland in 1911, came to New York as an infant, and graduated from City College and Columbia’s School of Journalism in the early 1930s. He worked for various newspapers, but made his unique mark as a polling and electoral analyst in a series of investigative essays for the Saturday Evening Post. Lubell’s first book, The Future of American Politics, had its origins in the essays he wrote for the Post on how and why Harry Truman won in 1948. Instead of writing about “principle politicians strutting across the stage in Washington,” he “deliberately swung the spotlight out into the country.” Lubell was therefore a shoe-leather pollster: he used the electoral returns to identify key wards and precincts, and then
he went out and interviewed scores, even hundreds, of voters to get at the history and texture of their lives.

He thought voting returns “like radioactive isotopes”: as key districts shifted their vote, he sought to trace how various class strata, ethnic groups, regions, and occupations recast their loyalties, allegiances, and mentalities. Thus Lubell saw voting behavior as linked not only to current events, or even to a particular ethnicity or class, but to an historical set of circumstances that formed, froze, and sometimes broke political allegiances. He therefore returned again and again to those key precincts where a shift in the vote reflected not just the momentary appeal of one candidate or policy, but the reconfiguration of an entire ethnogenerational set of loyalties.

Lubell calls the New Deal political realignment the “Roosevelt Revolution.” This is a phrase that certainly went out of fashion in the 1950s when Dwight Eisenhower was president, and it stayed out during the 1960s and 1970s when New Left historians and journalists devalued so much of what the New Deal wrought. But it has once again come into play and into parlance, for as Lubell makes clear, the power and popularity of the New Deal’s social democratic initiatives were amplified by a demographic coming of age that put his own immigrant generation at the center of American politics. By the early 1950s these working-class ethnics were moving on to an “urban frontier,” out of the tenements and into the new suburbs and the middle-class apartment blocks. Their lives had been transformed by the New Deal, the new unions, and the war-era prosperity over which Roosevelt presided. In 1952 Jews, Italians, and Poles still gave upwards of 90 percent of their vote to the Democrats.

But the counterrevolution was knocking at the door. Lubell understood that the greatest threat to the postwar New Deal came from the right, or from those internal fissures from which the opponents of a nationalizing, interventionist, laborite state could easily profit. His analysis therefore stands counterpoised to that of some of the giants of American historiography. Unlike many liberal intellectuals, he was not worried about the emergence of a leviathan state, or the insertion of an ideological strain into partisan politics. In The Future of American Politics Lubell sees the Rooseveltian New Deal in far more ideological terms than did Richard Hofstadter (1948, 1955), whose influential essays painted the New Dealers as a pragmatic, experimental, even a cavalier cohort, who broke with the moralism that had so constipated the American reform tradition. Nor does Lubell’s work share much in common with the outlook of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., who also celebrated the creative opportunism of FDR. In The Vital Center (1949) Schlesinger still saw a sinister threat to American social progress coming from those who took their politics a bit too seriously, namely, the communists and the dough-faced liberals they had seduced. In contrast, Lubell knew that the impact of the New Deal was profoundly ideological; there was no such thing as a pragmatic calculus or a pluralist equilibrium in American politics. Partisan politics had moral, ideological content, whatever the episodic program of those politicians who briefly strut across center stage. And this is why he spent so much time investigating the way voters rationalized a shift in their electoral loyalties even as they clung for generations to the core of their ethnogenerational identity.

Lubell is remarkably prescient in identifying those tensions that would weaken or fracture the Roosevelt coalition. These are fourfold: the conservative transformation of the labor movement; the persistence of a resentful, isolationist strain within
sections of the Democratic polity; inflation, which the upwardly mobile often linked to what they saw as overweening New Deal statecraft; and most explosively, the racial tensions that were generating a white southern revolt and a growing fission among the urban frontiersmen and women who had earlier been stalwart troops in the Roosevelt line of march.

I first read Lubell’s chapter on labor, “The Dynamo Slows Down,” almost thirty years ago: then, now, and in 1952 it hit the target. Lubell sees labor as increasingly conservative, both in terms of its internal bureaucratization, and as a bloc that seeks to preserve the industrial status quo generated by the New Deal. But the very existence of the new industrial unions nevertheless gave to US politics a polarizing character which often divided the working class itself. This explains part of the reason that Robert Taft won such a stunning reelection victory in Ohio, where in 1950 Lubell found that many working-class voters repudiated the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) as the embodiment of a dangerous, unresponsive “big labor.” Fears of inflation were an equally divisive threat to labor–liberal hegemony, “the breaking point of the Roosevelt coalition,” wrote Lubell. In the 1940s and 1950s inflationary worries, especially within the nonunion middle class, trumped every other issue in the opinion polls: communism, corruption, race, the Cold War. But few historians know what to do with this ever-present question. Most have come to think of it as something like the weather: always there, sometimes unpleasant, but a near-laughable subject when considered in terms of party politics. However, Lubell understood that the inflationary pressures that arose after World War II had a real political bite, and they worked insidiously against the integrity of the New Deal coalition. Inflation undercut working-class purchasing power and peeled away those layers of the Roosevelt majority most concerned with union power and welfare/warfare state spending.

Regional political currents were also threatening to fracture the Roosevelt coalition. For Lubell, isolationism and internationalism had little to do with the actual content of foreign policy. They reflected instead longstanding attitudes and postures vis-à-vis those who ruled, and who did not, inside the nation’s boundaries. In particular, twentieth-century isolationism stood for the longstanding resentment held by many in the old Northern European immigrant groups, by the Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians, who had resisted or resented US participation in World Wars I and II. In its heyday, midwestern political progressivism had linked together the economic radicalism of many of these immigrant farmers and townspeople with the anti-war sentiment of the La Follette progressives. In 1918 Congressman Charles Lindbergh, the flyer’s father, had been Minnesota’s leading opponent of the war. But after 1938 these currents diverged, with the economic radicals turning into Farmer-Labor Democrats, while the isolationists moved to the Republican right where they became part of the voting bloc that cheered on Joseph McCarthy, Douglas MacArthur, and Robert Taft. In truth, Lubell’s analysis devalues the McCarthyite political project. He fails to see how and why Cold War elites deployed anti-communism against the legacy of the New Deal and its left-liberal supporters. But Lubell nevertheless explains a good deal about the mass base enjoyed by the embittered anti-communists of that era, and without recourse to the crude anti-populist, anti-democratic discourse put forward by Richard Hofstadter (1963), Seymour Martin Lipset (1960), and Daniel Bell (1955) just a few years later.
And finally there are the racial tensions at work undermining the New Deal coalition. These came in two parts, one southern, the other on the urban frontier. After the Dixiecrat rebellion of 1948, it was clear that the white South was ready to bolt the Democrats. In a brilliant chapter detailing the infamous defeat of New Dealer Frank Graham in the 1950 North Carolina primary, Lubell identifies a racial counterrevolution that was energized, not ameliorated, by the urbanization and industrialization that was sweeping the South. Lubell was writing before the Brown decision and before the rise of massive resistance, but he nevertheless broke from the Whiggish liberalism that was so characteristic of the Roosevelt reformers, who thought southern economic progress would automatically lead to a moderation of racial attitudes and policies. Instead, Lubell demonstrates that the specter of black enfranchisement, either through the unions or through federal pressure, had begun to generate the kind of white solidarity of a sort not seen since the demise of Populism. In Charlotte, North Carolina, then a model of New South progressivism, Lubell found that Graham made his worst showing in Myers Park, heretofore the city’s most progressive, upper-crust district. A GOP-southern realignment of party politics was in the making.

Lubell is somewhat more optimistic about racial politics along the northern, urban frontier. The New Deal itself gave rise to the modern civil rights impulse, when the newly empowered unions attempted to organize the South; and when black unionists and civil rights leaders realized that they too could make effective demands upon an intrusive, ambitious welfare/warfare state. Lubell thinks the passage of state-level fair employment practice laws, union success in recruiting African Americans, and the integration of many urban schools held out the prospect of black political assimilation. But Lubell sheds his rose-colored glasses when the lay of the social terrain forces him to recognize that huge numbers of working-class Democrats resisted black entry into their political and economic world. The fate of the Roosevelt coalition will therefore hinge upon the outcome “of this battle for racial and religious tolerance among its own elements.” And the prospects for victory were hardly assured. In a passage that foreshadows the latter-day scholarship of Jonathan Reider (1985), John McGreevy (1996), and Thomas Sugrue (1996), Lubell finds that “the frustrations of the urban frontier fall most heavily on the older residential areas, along the line where expanding Negro settlement pushes in on those unable to rise higher on the social ladder. Along this racial ‘middle border,’ where the rainfall of social status is so uncertain, the emotions stirred up by the civil rights issue assume their most violent form.”

This postwar stalemate thus explains why President Truman won in 1948 and why he proved so ineffectual a president, certainly in terms of the Rooseveltian yardstick by which Lubell measures Democratic politicians and their policies. Truman got himself reelected, not because of his celebrated whistlestop campaign, but because the third and fourth party defections of 1948, the Dixiecrat and Henry Wallace Democratic splitters, actually helped reforge the old Roosevelt coalition. The absence of these splinter elements made many wayward elements once again comfortable with Truman and the Democrats. These included the overwhelming bulk of the labor movement, the isolationists who had once followed Father Charles Coughlin out of the party, conservative midwestern farmers who were nevertheless dependent on federal crop subsidies, and all but the most radical African Americans and Jews. But
Truman’s electoral success assured that the president would continue as a domestic policy failure, for as Lubell makes clear, his very presence at the top of the Democratic ticket was the product of, and dependent upon, the political stalemate that had frozen US politics in the years after 1938. Given the hagiographic treatment that has so infected our more recent studies of the Missouri politician (McCullogh, 1992; Ferrell, 1994; Hamby, 1995), it is positively refreshing to read Lubell’s succinct analysis. Truman was a border-state politician who made a career of straddling the issues. He was “reluctantly indecisive,” writes Lubell, “happiest when able to make a dramatic show of activity, secure in the knowledge that nothing much was going to happen.” Thus “the secret of Truman’s political vitality was that he shrewdly planted himself on the furiously dead center of stalemate to which irreconcilables must repair if they are to make a bargain . . . deadlock was the essence of the man. Stalemate was his Midas touch.”

Samuel Lubell continued as an active journalist for a quarter-century after the appearance of *The Future of American Politics*. He wrote six more books, including *The Revolt of the Moderates* (1956) and *White and Black: Test of a Nation* (1965), but none enjoyed the influence of his initial book-length probe into the heart of mid-century social politics. Lubell died in 1987, by which time *The Future of American Politics* was out of print. For all students of the New Deal legacy it bears rereading.

REFERENCES