



## **This Labor Day 2014 Let's Think Back To Move Progressively Forward**

By Harvey J. Kaye  
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*On Labor Day weekend 2007 the Guardian "Comment is Free" editor commissioned me to write a piece on labor and progressive possibilities. I published the piece posted below, which the editor titled "TO BE FRANKLIN: Seventy years on he is still under attack from the right, but Democrats should recall, this national holiday, what made Roosevelt truly great." So this Labor Day, as we once again look ahead – both to this November's congressional and state elections and beyond that to November 2016 and a new presidential Administration – let's not despair but rather think back in favor of moving progressively forward.*

As we look ahead this Labor Day to the elections of 2008, those of us who call ourselves progressives should hope not only that the Democrats recapture the White House and additional congressional seats, but that those Democrats advance the memory and legacy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Why Franklin Roosevelt? While it's true that most Americans continue to consider FDR the greatest president of the 20th century, three decades of conservative ascendance have taken their toll on our political and historical imaginations. And just as their ideological ancestors did in the 1930s, today's right-wingers continue to accuse Roosevelt and his New Dealers of not simply failing to end the Great Depression, but prolonging it; of hijacking and trampling on the constitution; and of suppressing individual liberty and free enterprise in favor of bureaucratic collectivism.

This very summer [2007] – presumably seeking some reason to feel good in the face of the disastrous Bush tenure and dreading the possibility of a Democratic presidency that may bring with it a host of liberal initiatives – conservatives have been hyping Amity Shlaes' *The Forgotten Man*, the latest literary assault on Roosevelt's presidency.

In fact, the effusiveness of the right-wing praise leads one to imagine they fantasize about being in the vanguard of a joint Wall Street and Cato Institute “free market” expeditionary force marching through Washington to the FDR Memorial and toppling the statue of Roosevelt in his wheelchair while chanting Shlaes' fallacious claim that he and his famous Brain Trusters modeled the New Deal after Mussolini's fascism and Stalin's communism.

Of course, liberals and progressives have not allowed Ms Shlaes to go unchallenged. Writing in *Slate*, historian Eric Rauchway has clearly identified her distortions. While acknowledging that the New Deal did not end the Depression, Rauchway reminds us that it most definitely did stimulate economic recovery and afford relief and jobs to vast numbers of the needy. And crucially, it did so without surrendering to either barbarism or totalitarianism.

Even more affirmatively, in *The Defining Moment: FDR's Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope*, political columnist Jonathan Alter offers a rousing narrative of how Roosevelt rescued liberal democracy from the specter of dictatorship.

And in *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR's Unfinished Revolution and Why We Need It More than Ever*, legal scholar Cass Sunstein presents Roosevelt as a visionary social democrat by redeeming his 1944 State of the Union Address, which advanced an agenda for postwar America that included establishing rights to employment, education, housing, and healthcare.

Progressives should applaud Alter and Sunstein. And yet, we should not fail to see how even these liberal writers, too, end up contributing to our amnesia, for they often ignore how the American people themselves encouraged and instigated their president to pursue the New Deal's grand experiments of recovery, reconstruction and reform. They fail to address how working people – labor unionists in particular – actually pushed FDR toward social democracy.

Compelling each other to try to live up to America's finest ideals, the President and his fellow citizens advanced those ideals further than either had originally conceived. They

made serious mistakes and regrettable compromises, and they suffered terrible defeats. But they subjected capital to public account and regulation, empowered the federal government to address the needs of working people, established a social security system, organized unions, expanded the political nation and fabricated a new governing coalition.

They built a vast array of public works, enhanced the environment, refashioned popular culture and imbued themselves with fresh democratic convictions and hopes – all of which would serve them well as they fought a world war in the name of the Four Freedoms: “Freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.”

Campaigning in 2006, Nancy Pelosi said she had three words to offer in response to Republican assertions that the Democrats had run out of ideas: “Franklin Delano Roosevelt.” But we need to make it clear that there’s more to it than that.

Given the prospects for Democratic victories in 2008, we need to remember what truly made FDR great. Redeeming the radical-democratic politics of the 1930s should remind us not only of what we might accomplish, but also of what we must do to turn rhetoric into policy and program.

As the political scientist Wilson Carey McWilliams warned back in 1984 – incited by Ronald Reagan’s persistent abuse of the past and Orwell’s haunting novel bearing that year as its title in mind – a “people’s memory sets the measure of its political freedom”.