

# THE NEW REPUBLIC

## Fear and Loathing of the Green New Deal

Kim Phillips-Fein

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One of the less-appreciated wonders of the Green New Deal—the proposal for large-scale federal investment in alternative energy sources introduced in February by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Edward Markey—is that it presses almost all the buttons of the right at once. It’s the brainchild of a woman (a young Latina at that). It conjures up the ambitious, habit-altering agendas of radical environmentalists—and if this wasn’t bad enough, it reaches all the way back to the original modern program of radical reform, the New Deal! Identity politics, the New Left, the Old Left: For eager right-wing merchants of ideological invective, the Green New Deal has it all.

Precisely because it seems to embody so many of the right’s worst fears, the response to the Green New Deal provides us with a catalogue of conservative arguments in all their schizophrenic glory. Post after tweet after editorial oscillates madly between a depiction of the Green New Deal as sheer folly, a laughable and frivolous exercise in ultraliberal vanity, barely worthy of analysis—and a portrayal of savvy, power-crazed environmentalists rubbing their hands with glee. The Green New Deal, we are told, is socialism incarnate and just plain impractical—a “radical front for nationalizing our economy,” as Ryan Bourne of the Cato Institute put it in *USA Today*. Charles Cooke in *National Review* trounces the notion as “an untrammelled Dear Santa letter without form, purpose, borders, or basis in reality” proposed by an “unmarried, childless bartender” who somehow has the temerity to fancy herself a congressional representative.

Also in *National Review*, James Lileks adopts a tone of elite dismissal that’s at once apocalyptic and condescending, warning that advocates of a Green New Deal seek “total government control over the nation’s economy” and “worship central planning” even as he scoffs at the proposal as “an instruction manual for unicorn assembly.” Richard Epstein of the Hoover Institution characterizes it as “juvenile,” “infantile,” “extreme,” and “pie-in-the-sky,” chiding its supporters for giving unions “the whip hand in all labor negotiations” and failing to recognize the “many tradeoffs and compromises that are needed to operate any complex system.”

Note again the alternation between the image of the Green New Deal as an instance of glorified college-grade tantrum-throwing and the specter of sinister, uncompromising seizure of power by an opportunist brand of labor militant, presumably eager to recruit childlike millennial souls like Ocasio-Cortez as designated ideological sock puppets. As longtime Democratic campaign consultant Mark Penn tells us at Fox News, it has less to do with the New Deal than “Mao’s Cultural Revolution.” The latest succinct chant at MAGA rallies sums it all up: “AOC sucks!”

The notion that the Green New Deal might actually represent some effort to grapple, realistically and responsibly, with an impending global disaster—that climate change poses at least as profound a threat to our society as the 24 percent unemployment rate did in 1932—well, the very

idea seems to the wise and tempered sages of the contemporary right as a specimen of total mass gullibility. As the hard-bitten editorialists at the *Washington Examiner* warn, “This isn’t about clean air. It’s about centralized power.”

Today, the most strident opposition to the Green New Deal is mostly confined to op-ed pages, internet postings, and Fox News segments. But should the proposals included within the framework of a Green New Deal—fragmentary and suggestive as they may be right now—take on a more concrete legislative form, the present flutter of right-wing resistance to the idea will build into a full-blown propaganda offensive.

And here the past serves as an instructive prologue; we’ve seen pretty much this same furor over imperiled liberty and hovering tyranny in the concerted bid from some business leaders to stigmatize and delegitimize the original New Deal. Right-wing foes of the 1930s program of social and economic reform hailed each newly arrived New Deal initiative as the harbinger of social revolution—when, that is, they weren’t wringing their hands over its “ravenous madness” (as one American Liberty League pamphlet put it) or warning against the tentacles of bureaucracy strangling a once-free land. What we view today as barely controversial registered then as a series of seismic shocks to the entire social order.

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In 1991, the economist A.O. Hirschman published a short book, *The Rhetoric of Reaction*, in which he argued that conservative arguments from the eighteenth to the twentieth century all followed the same basic logical structure and deployed the same rhetorical formulations. It’s hard not to recall Hirschman’s argument as we see conservative opinion already amassing to place the Green New Deal outside the bounds of respectable discourse. Back in the 1930s, the foes of the New Deal repeated their central arguments over and over again, no matter the specifics of the particular legislation then up for consideration. Critics warned that the New Deal would cause permanent damage to the foundations of the American economy. They feared that its measures were hasty and irrational. And once their complaints built to a crescendo, they argued that the flurry of legislation introduced by Roosevelt and the other New Deal Democrats intended to do little more than perform the necessary rescue mission to save capitalism from itself could only result in the creation of a totalitarian state. Squint your eyes a bit at the brewing pundits’ assault from the right on the Green New Deal, and you can see nearly all the same basic structural arguments in play. A.O. Hirschman is long gone, but the rhetoric of reaction sails serenely on, deployed against the nightmare of climate change with the same breezy, repetitive insistence its adherents once rolled out to argue against a coordinated response to the Great Depression.

You don’t have to delve far into the heady days of New Deal reform to run into the brick wall of business reaction arrayed against even the most modest FDR-sponsored measures to mitigate the disastrous fallout of the economic collapse of 1929. Just look, for instance, at the Securities Act of 1933—one of the laws passed during FDR’s first “hundred days.” Judged by both the standards of the times and the scale of the economic calamity of the 1930s, its aims were modest indeed. The act mandated that companies seeking to sell shares to the investing public provide them with basic financial information. And should executives fail to discharge this obligation, the statute ensured that they’d be held legally responsible. The stock market crash of 1929 had exposed financial fraud on a staggering scale; the Securities Act sought to make Wall Street safe

for investors once more. In the first flush of New Deal reform, the bill sailed easily through Congress.

But Wall Street conspicuously dissented. The investment economy's opposition focused on two main points: Wall Street savants predicted that the Securities Act would slow economic recovery and thus prolong the depression; and they painted a dire portrait of a bureaucratic state gone mad, seeking ever-greater control and power. At first, it seemed that Wall Street would accept the new law, if warily. Even though "the underlying principle of Federal control of business is as repugnant as ever," the *New York Times* wrote, "most industries and business executives are resignedly falling in with the purposes of the two-year experiment which Congress has been asked to authorize." But this grudging toleration for regulation quickly gave way to resentment. A 14,000-word article in *Fortune* magazine in August 1933 (by lawyer Arthur H. Dean of the New York firm of Sullivan & Cromwell) warned that the act "contains many provisions not apparent on the first reading which will have a profound effect on the entire economic system of the country." What's more, Dean continued, the measure was "drastically deflationary" and "may seriously retard economic recovery."

By September 1933, the *Wall Street Journal* insisted that the "consensus" among bankers and executives was that the "hastily written" Securities Act "prevents the financing and refinancing of legitimate private enterprise." The act could be amended in 1934, and at that point the country would face a moment of reckoning, forcing the depression-battered American public to "decide whether the private enterprise upon which our civilization has been built must make room for a bastard state capitalism." Meanwhile, the Investment Bankers Association of America attacked the law as "a hindrance to national recovery," and went on to explain that a "reservoir of money that can be translated into jobs for millions of people" was being blocked because of the Securities Act.

Richard Whitney, the president of the New York Stock Exchange, took it upon himself to campaign against a congressional measure that would have permitted the Federal Trade Commission to regulate the stock market. Whitney sent a letter to all members of the NYSE warning that the federal government sought powers so "extensive" that it might come to "dominate and actually control the management of each listed corporation." Wall Street employees planned mass protests against the bill. One Republican congressman charged that the government was no longer run by the White House, but by a "little red house down in Georgetown" where "communistic" bills were formulated by the protégés of law professor Felix Frankfurter. When Congress finally established the Securities and Exchange Commission in the summer of 1934, appointing stock broker Joseph Kennedy its first head, much of the anxiety subsided; with one of their own now overseeing the nascent financial-regulatory state, many financiers relinquished their former diehard opposition and adapted to the new order of business on Wall Street. (Whitney, meanwhile, was convicted of embezzlement in 1938.)

Other New Deal measures met with similar opposition. Not only Republicans but conservative Democrats resisted emergency relief bills. Senator Thomas Gore of Oklahoma warned against spending for relief in 1933 with a distinctly dad-like bit of homespun wisdom of his own: "Credit is to a nation what chastity is to a woman. Without it, nothing counts." When the Social Security Act was passed in 1935, the *New York Times*—while conceding that the legislation was of "great historic importance"—mused that the "measure is in some respects ill-considered." First, the paper of record explained, it wasn't yet clear that Social Security was constitutional: "If the

Federal Government may compel the States to adopt unemployment insurance under the guise of a tax, why may it not similarly compel them to adopt any other sort of legislation?" The editorialists at the *Times* also objected to the high tax burden entailed in the creation of Social Security: "The problem of managing such a reserve fund, and its possible social and economic effects, have (*sic*) not yet received anything like adequate study." Finally, the *Times* worried that the tax contributions of employers would ultimately be borne by workers and consumers. While praising the passage of the law, the editorial board urged "quiet, dispassionate study and mature amendment." At the same time, Congress debated whether the program should be truly universal or whether people who had private pension plans should be allowed to keep them.

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Meanwhile, the American Liberty League—an organization of businessmen led by the du Ponts who sought to resist the "totalitarian" centralization of power embodied by the New Deal—financed a legal challenge to Social Security, representing a New Jersey dairy owner who viewed the new law as a form of unconstitutional property seizure. The *Jackson Daily News* opined that "the average Mississippian can't imagine himself chipping in to pay pensions for able-bodied Negroes to sit around in idleness on front galleries while cotton and corn crops are crying for workers." During the 1936 presidential election, the Republican Party tried to persuade employers to pay their workers using special pay envelopes that explicitly referred to how much lower wages would be once the payroll tax was deducted. The idea behind this gimmick was to warn the nation's workers that there was "no guarantee" that they'd ever see the money return to them. (Once payroll deductions began in 1937, some employers distributed notes referring to Social Security taxes as theft.) Social Security, one executive from Morton Salt reflected later, was a "gigantic fraud."

The proposal for a federal minimum wage (which passed in 1938) aroused still greater alarm among business conservatives. By this time, the Roosevelt administration was far more embattled than it had been early in the 1930s. The sit-down strikes in Flint, Michigan, in December 1936 that finally compelled General Motors to recognize the United Auto Workers union—and the "sit-down fever," as the *Times* called it, that erupted in their aftermath, as workers in dozens of different industries experimented with the tactic—caused great distress among liberals who thought organized labor was going too far. They liked unions in principle but were wary of the way that tactics like the sit-down appeared to challenge the free reign of property rights. (Even FDR's vice president, John Nance Garner, described sit-down actions as "intolerable" outbreaks of "mass lawlessness.") Meanwhile, FDR's "court-packing" plan of 1937 aroused fears that the country was sliding toward dictatorship, like Germany and Italy. A group of Southern Democrats had allied with Northern Republicans to sign a "Conservative Manifesto" that sought to maintain "States rights," cut the federal budget, lower capital gains taxes, and generally "preserve and rely upon the American system of private enterprise and initiative."

When congressional Democrats took up efforts to institute a federal minimum wage, an early version of the law went down to defeat. "KILL ROOSEVELT'S WAGE BILL," crowed the *Chicago Tribune*. "HOUSE REJECTS DICTATOR RULE OF NATION'S LABOR." As Congress prepared a new version of the bill, the *New York Times* expressed great skepticism. The paper of record called for Congress to convene a bipartisan commission to explore the question, one that would include "economists of recognized impartiality and high professional standing." Minimum wage laws were "likely to be successful in proportion as its aims are modest,"

the *Times* counseled; should the proposed law attempt “to effect too sudden and too great a change in actual conditions, the harm it does must exceed the good.” The Fair Labor Standards Act would “represent one more major invasion by the Federal Government of a field of regulation that should have been left to the States.” The paper also took the position that the federal minimum wage should simply not apply to the South at all: “To force Southern employers prematurely to pay the same wages as Northern employers would retard the growth of industry in the South, diminish Southern industrial employment, and injure Southern labor as a body.” In the end, the Fair Labor Standards Act passed in 1938—by some counts, the last truly significant piece of New Deal legislation.

All of these editorial-page arguments against the New Deal’s signature reforms emerged amid significant political upheavals. The messy, controversial, and confrontational politics that the Depression unleashed was fiercely contested all throughout the 1930s. The rhetoric of reaction trained itself not only on the formal legislation of the New Deal but also the social movements of poor, unemployed, and working-class people that helped to bring it about—especially the labor movement.

The conspiratorial and anti-Semitic right flourished in the country during the 1930s, much as it does now. The New Deal was known as the “Jew Deal,” and Roosevelt as Franklin D. Rosenfeld. Inspired by the anti-Bolshevik forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and by Henry Ford’s popularization thereof (*The International Jew*), a common pastime for homegrown fascists such as mystic William Dudley Pelley—founder of the Silver Legion, an aspirational Nazi organization—was listing the Jewish ancestry of all the New Dealers. FDR himself, Pelley mused, simply must be descended from “Dutch Jews,” which was the main reason for his “insane hatred” of Hitler. In 1937, Pelley proposed charming anti-Semitic Christmas cards:

Dear Shylock, in this season  
When we’re all bereft of reason,  
As upon my rent you gloat,  
I would like to cut your throat.

Such activists as Rev. Gerald Winrod of Wichita, Kansas—the founder of an organization named Defenders of the Christian Faith and Republican senatorial candidate in 1938—perceived the Roosevelt administration’s recognition of the Soviet Union as proof positive that the “hidden hand” of a Jewish cabal (the same one that had plotted the Bolshevik Revolution) was really pulling the strings. Father Charles Coughlin’s radio broadcasts with their sinister depictions of the “international bankers” who controlled Roosevelt reached millions of listeners. As historian Matthew Avery Sutton has argued, a substantial number of evangelical Christians strongly suspected that FDR was literally the Antichrist. (Online, such fantasies continue to circulate today: For one example, an organization calling itself the Christian Party has one lengthy post on the 1930s that describes the “Jew Deal” as “a tyrannical, plutocratic, Communist program for a Jewish collectivist state,” concluding: “The name that will live on in infamy: Franklin Delano Roosevelt / THE RED DEVIL !!!”)

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The furor over the new round of labor conflicts gave businessmen a chance to try to jump-start their longed-for dream of a popular insurgency on the right. One key plank of this initiative was

the anti-union strategy known as the Mohawk Valley Formula. This union-busting campaign came into being at the behest of the Remington Rand Corporation in response to a strike at the company in 1936, it laid out new avenues for employers to mobilize working-class communities against unions. Throughout the decade, scholar Joseph Fronczak has suggested, strikebreakers and other opponents of the changes of the era at times adopted fascist rhetoric and iconography. In the end, the “arguments” against the New Deal and the labor unions that its legislation nurtured came to include weapons stockpiled by manufacturers, the hiring of private security forces to spy on and intimidate workers seeking to organize unions, and the use of city police forces to attack employees on picket lines.

Mainstream critiques of the New Deal were carved out against this far wider—and wilder—array of right-wing viciousness. The Green New Deal, should it move forward, borne by a popular mobilization that could make possible realizing its demands, would likely need to contend with this kind of hostility as well.

With this history fixed firmly in view, let’s return to today’s attacks on the Green New Deal. The proposal is too ambitious and too contradictory. It will centralize power, hopelessly hamstringing the economy and be wildly expensive (“the Green New Deal cost all the money,” claims one report by the American Action Forum). Perhaps the most dramatic version of this putative hard-headed economic realism comes via Senator Ted Cruz’s oft-repeated assertion that the Green New Deal would cost \$93 trillion (a number invented mostly by including fantastic costs for a jobs guarantee and Medicare for All, while failing entirely to consider the devastating economic impact of climate change—which, not coincidentally, renders public investment in alternatives an economically sound course of action.)

In a way, the striking penchant conservatives share for minting their pre-existing ideological commitments into disciplinary exercises in economic realism makes sense: They view the economic features of the Green New Deal (along, of course, with the dire environmental forecasts that have propelled them into public debate) as a sideshow for the real project, a grab for domination. As Rep. Sean Duffy of Wisconsin put it on the Fox News website, “Green New Deal supporters don’t care about the climate—they want control over your life.” The hammer and sickle might as well be flying over Capitol Hill, writes Justin Haskins in the Washington Examiner—the “dangerous and extreme proposals” are “the sort of thing you’d see in the Soviet Union, not the United States.” In National Review, Charles Cooke groans that it deserves “no serious evaluation beyond grim, derisive laughter.”

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Much of the hostility toward the Green New Deal is difficult to separate from the right’s obsessive denigration of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez—referred to affectionately by Glenn Beck and others as “Alexandria Occasional Cortex.” Commenters over at Free Republic describe her as a self-absorbed “bimbo” and a “very slow learner.” There’s an attitude of disbelief that this young woman could possibly be in Congress at all, let alone proposing something as ambitious as a Green New Deal. The apotheosis of this demonization campaign is the notion—put forward in an online video that has been promoted by Fox News host Sean Hannity among others—that Ocasio-Cortez is a puppet entirely controlled by the Justice Democrats, a caucus they portray as a Leninist vanguard of power-mad state planning. Ocasio-Cortez is, in this dark surmise, “not really the Congresswoman from New York’s 14th Congressional District. She is—essentially—an actress, she’s merely playing the part of a New York Congresswoman.” AOC is at once a

virago drunk on her own self-aggrandizement and an incompetent ditz; the people who support her are dupes, idiots, or both.

In some ways, these critiques themselves echo the dismissive contempt many conservatives famously held for FDR; the president was often characterized as an intellectual lightweight (“a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would like very much to be president,” journalist Walter Lippmann, a founding editor of *The New Republic*, wrote in 1932). Occasionally, they depicted FDR as a cripple who had no business running for national office (these criticisms were more whispered while he was on the campaign trail than publicly lobbed at the exceedingly popular president). Both in the 1930s and today, such personal attacks become a way of diminishing the program while also implicitly undermining a demagogue foolish enough to have chosen such a fraudulent leader.

The more sophisticated critiques of the Green New Deal follow a rhetorical structure that Hirschman surely would have recognized from earlier campaigns against universal suffrage and the welfare state. Whatever the proponents of the Green New Deal may intend, such critics lament, their plans will actually lead to the exact opposite outcome. Writers at the American Enterprise Institute have argued that the Green New Deal will “unintentionally inhibit” investment in clean technology by encouraging companies to sign up for government contracts rather than invest in research and development to develop low-carbon machines. They have insisted that what looks like environmental legislation is in fact the opposite: “To achieve ‘Green New Socialism’ we would have to trash all existing environmental laws,” writes Mark Perry on the American Enterprise Institute’s Carpe Diem blog. Building renewable energy sources would mean abandoning habitat protections and other longstanding environmental laws—jeopardizing the natural landscape in return for preserving the social one, argues Myron Ebell over at the website of the Competitive Enterprise Institute. Much the same set of unintended-cum-ironic consequences are sure to attend the Green New Deal’s specific provisions for economic reform. In the telling of its critics, the Green New Deal’s stated attempts to address economic inequality would only lead to the further entrenchment of crony capitalism and the impoverishment of the working-class people it purports to help.

The libertarian Cato Institute, principally funded by the Koch family of energy moguls, has likewise aggressively promulgated a series of unintended-consequences dismissals of the Green New Deal. If enacted, Cato scholar Chris Edwards warns, the initiative would “crush liberal values” and imperil the very high-minded principles of democracy and diversity it purports to embody. The national government that the Green New Deal would strengthen could not help but run roughshod over local communities. “In the language of Rep. Ocasio-Cortez’s proposal: *Whereas* the Green New Deal is supposed to help society in many ways, *be it resolved* that the plan would be a Grand New Disaster for liberal values such as community and democracy,” writes Edwards. Of course, the more general objections about the political dangers of the Green New Deal are present, too: “Make no mistake, this green-painted Trojan horse is filled with the biggest single government expansion the United States has seen since the 1930s.”

From liberals who are more accustomed to approaching climate change in far narrower terms, the reaction has been tepid at best. For the most part, such self-styled fraternal critics of the plan fret that the Green New Deal makes promises it can’t keep and down-pedals difficult material tradeoffs embedded within its core provisions. They also contend that the program, like most ambitious egalitarian proposals on the left, would institute a host of unfunded mandates with no

clear way to pay for them. Jonathan Chait, writing in *New York* magazine, denounced it as “at best grossly undercooked, and at worst fatally misconceived.” Chief among such misconceptions, he argued, was the way it was overpromising results, proposing a completely unrealistic agenda that would ultimately make actual action on climate change implausible; by entwining economic justice and climate policy, the sponsors of the bill were setting it up to fail—not that they had much of a strategy for marshaling congressional support for it in the first place. Catherine Rampell critiques the Green New Deal as “lazy sloganeering” in the *Washington Post*. Michael Bloomberg—former New York City mayor and multi-billionaire—lambasted the Green New Deal as “disingenuous” and “pie-in-the-sky,” even as he promised to release a plan for his own version.

Yet even these one-time opponents of the Green New Deal are starting to jump on the climate train, just as Wall Street eventually rallied around the SEC once it was clear they had no choice and would be able to control it anyway. Old guard Democratic funders such as hedge fund executive and *New York Times* opinion contributor Steven Rattner concede that we “need a Green New Deal,” while sundry moderate Republicans are starting to call for their party to adopt some kind of climate policy—even as they continue to jab at the Green New Deal as no more than “far-left messaging,” in the words of New York Republican Rep. John Katko.

In a way, the public relations barrage is not at all surprising. After all, for many years, the entire public debate about climate change has been hamstrung by the wealth and political power of the fossil fuel industry. The top 25 oil and gas companies alone produced \$73 billion in profits in 2017. Industries tied to fossil fuels spent nearly \$2 billion in lobbying between 2000 and 2016, according to a report from the Public Accountability Initiative. As Kate Aronoff put it at *The Intercept*, the result has been that significant parts of the Republican political establishment recycle fuzzy science and insist that climate change is no more than a hoax, a socialist plot or some other variety of wild-eyed conspiratorial maneuver; meanwhile, those liberal politicians who admit the reality of the problem have entirely failed to generate any political energy for actually addressing it. As the Sunrise Movement has pointed out, many of these political leaders, too, routinely collect financial contributions from the fossil fuel industry.

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No one objects to debate and analysis (though this is not quite the same as derisive laughter), and there’s clearly much that remains uncertain about the Green New Deal. But it’s hard to escape the sense that it has elicited such a strong response precisely because it represents the first effort to shake off the complacency and timidity that have for far too long marked the mainstream response to climate change. It’s the first attempt to mount a response to the emergency that treats it as an emergency. Here, too, looking back to the New Deal may be helpful. The 1930s businessmen and newspaper editors who assailed the first New Deal were in many cases alarmists, and in some instances, flat-out paranoid. The 1933 Securities Act was not, after all, the first step on the road to serfdom.

But in one key sense, they were on to something. In marshaling broad-based opposition to the first New Deal, they helped popularize the ideas of the business executives who joined the Liberty League or financed the Republicans in 1936 or resisted labor unions in the 1930s and again after World War II. And it’s true that, taken together, the measures of the New Deal did



actually entail a significant transfer of political power and social resources away from the elite—a partial and limited one, but a substantive one nonetheless.

The same will be true of any meaningful proposal to cope with climate change. This is not a problem that can be confronted in a technocratic way that avoids all redistribution of resources; in its essence, it suggests that certain social goods are more important than an individual's right to consume whatever he or she wants to with no regard for the consequences, or a company's right to profit above all else. As such, it's going to meet with tremendous resistance, and it will take an enormous show of political will to overcome it.

In fact, one could argue that another broad similarity that the Green New Deal shares with the original one is that despite the overblown rhetoric of the right, its vision (for better or worse) is ultimately not one that really challenges capitalism or consumer values—it simply changes the power source that is supposed to drive them. In a way, one version of a Green New Deal might represent a kind of environmental Keynesianism: You can have cars, and cheap consumer goods, and all the rest of it, only powered by wind and sun and electricity instead of carbon. In fact, through the employment created by massive public investment—both directly and through the multiplier effect—there will be more consumption, and more of the American Dream, available for all. Only now it won't be destroying the planet any more. The political appeal of this comforting pitch is obvious. But one wonders if the ideal might elide the ways in which realizing the promises of the Green New Deal might involve a real challenge to the economic values of our society—how conflictual it could ultimately be.

For his part, were Franklin Roosevelt alive today, one imagines that he would hardly have been surprised by the mockery visited on the Green New Deal. He'd likely break out into that famous grin of his when he'd hear the barrage of demands from the right that this threatening new body of state-administered economic reforms be enumerated with far greater detail and specificity. A few weeks after FDR accepted the Democratic nomination for the presidency, Republican Senator Lester J. Dickinson of Iowa delivered the keynote speech at the national convention of the GOP. There, he excoriated Roosevelt for the “generalities” invoked in his acceptance speech and in the Democratic Party platform, demanding that the presidential candidate explain simply and clearly what he meant by a New Deal. “Nebulous promises will not suffice,” he scolded. “What the nation wants and demands are blue prints and specifications.” If he, his party and his candidacy were to have any credibility with the nation, FDR should present his New Deal program “clearly, concisely, and in a fashion that can leave no misunderstanding.”

As it turned out, Dickinson was dead wrong. He remained a steadfast critic of the New Deal, and went on to lose his own Senate seat to Democratic Governor Clyde L. Herring in 1936, some months after he had declared the presidential contest that year nothing less than “a solemn referendum” on the “very form of government under which our children and our children's children are to live.” The country was moving in ways Dickinson simply had not predicted or imagined. And though it's still far too early to say with any certainty, the same may well be the case today.