

DOCUMENT 2: AMERICANS WHO OPPOSED RELIEF DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

One-quarter of Americans were unemployed during the Depression. Many people wrote to the President asking for help. However, not everyone was affected by the Depression. Some rich Americans did not think the government

should try to solve economic problems. You are about to read some of the letters they wrote to the President urging him not to get involved. The first source was written to Herbert Hoover in 1931. The

other letters were written to Senator Robert Wagner of New York and to Eleanor Roosevelt, the wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The final source is an oral history with William Benton.

Contractor and Builder Real Estate Insurance Mortgages
W.H.H.

Annapolis, Maryland

September 10, 1931

President Herbert Hoover
Washington, D.C.
My dear Mr. Hoover,

It is my purpose to write you a short letter and to cheer you along with your trying undertakings....

....In these days of unrest and general dissatisfaction it is absolutely impossible for a man in your position to get a clear and impartial view of the general conditions of things in America today. But, of this fact I am very positive, that there is not five per cent of the poverty, distress, and general unemployment that many of your enemies would have us believe. It is true, that there is much unrest, but this unrest is largely caused,—by the excessive prosperity and general debauchery through which the country has traveled since the period of war. The result being that in three cases out of four, the unemployed is looking for a very light job at a very heavy pay, and with the privilege of being provided with an automobile if he is required to walk more than four or five blocks a day.

National Relief Director Walter S. Gifford and his committee are entirely unnecessary at this time, as it has a tendency to cause communities to neglect any temporary relief to any of their people, with the thought of passing the burden on to the National Committee. I am also of opinion that the suggested five billion dollar loan, that the Hearst papers have been agitating, is an impractical, foolish, and unnecessary burden and obligation that they would place upon the shoulders of future prosperity to pay off....

Yours Sincerely,
W.H.H. [male]

Source: McElvaine, pp.38-39

Hornell, New York

March 7, 1934

My Dear Senator [Wagner]:

It seems very apparent to me that the Administration in Washington is accelerating its pace towards socialism and communism. Nearly every public statement from Washington is against stimulation of business which would Everyone is sympathetic to the cause of creating more jobs and better wages for labor; but, a program continually promoting labor troubles, higher wages, shorter hours, and less profits for business, would seem to me to be leading us fast to a condition where the Government must more and more expand its relief activities, and will lead in the end to disaster to all classes.

I believe that every citizen is entitled to know the policy of the Government, and I am so confused that I wish you would write me and advise me whether it is the policy of this Administration, of which you are a very important part, to further discourage business enterprise, and eventually set up a program which eliminates private industry and effort, and replaces it with Government control of industry and labor,—call it what you will: socialism, fascism, or communism, or by any other name...

With kindest personal regards,

Yours truly,
W.L.C. [male]

Source: McElvaine, pp.150-152

Not all Americans who opposed relief were wealthy.
This woman lived on a Midwestern farm.

Dec. 14—1937.
Columbus, Ind.
Mrs. F.D. Roosevelt,
Washington, D.C.

Mrs. Roosevelt: I suppose from your point of view the work relief, old age pensions, slum clearance and all the rest seems like a perfect remedy for all the ills of this country, but I would like for you to see the results, as the other half see them.

We have always had a shiftless, never-do-well class of people whose one and only aim in life is to live without work. I have been rubbing elbows with this class for nearly sixty years and have tried to help some of the most promising and have seen others try to help them, but it can't be done. We cannot help those who will not try to help themselves and if they do try a square deal is all they need, and by the way that is all this country needs or ever has needed: a square deal for all and then, let each one paddle their own canoe, or sink...

...You people who have plenty of this worlds goods and whose money comes easy [the Roosevelts were wealthy], have no idea of the heart-breaking toil and self-denial which is the lot of the working people who are trying to make an honest living, and then to have to shoulder all these unjust burdens seems like the last straw....

...Is it any wonder the taxpayers are discouraged by all this penalizing of thrift and industry to reward shiftlessness, or that the whole country is on the brink of chaos?

M.A.H. [female]
Columbus, Ind.

Source: McElvaine, pp.145-147

This excerpt is an oral history. At the beginning of the Depression, William Benton worked at a large advertising agency. He later became a Senator from Connecticut. He was also the publisher of *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

“...We didn’t know the Depression was going on. Except that our clients’ products were plummeting, and they were willing to talk to us about new ideas. They wouldn’t have let us in the door if times were good. So the Depression benefited me. My income doubled every year. When I left Benton & Bowles, it must have been close to half a million dollars. That’s the kind of money great motion picture stars weren’t earning. That was 1935. The Depression just passed me right over. I’m not a good man to talk to about the Depression...”

...*The Encyclopedia Britannica* lives off installment buying, this is our whole business. We don’t think about credit as a problem, particularly when we think about a Depression. With more men out of work, we’d have an easier time finding good salesmen. The more men out of work, the more applicants we have. By multiplying our salesmen, we’d have an offset to the fact that there are fewer people to whom to sell. Progress through catastrophe.”

Source: Terkel, pp.60-65