

# The History of the Twentieth Century

## Episode 297

### “A Rendezvous with Destiny”

#### Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

*For twelve years this Nation was afflicted with hear-nothing, see-nothing, do-nothing government. The Nation looked to government but the government looked away...Nine mad years of mirage and three long years of despair! Powerful influences strive today to restore that kind of government with its doctrine that that government is best which is most indifferent...*

*We had to struggle with the old enemies of peace—business and financial monopoly, speculation, reckless banking, class antagonism, sectionalism, war profiteering. They had begun to consider the Government of the United States as a mere appendage to their own affairs. We know now that government by organized money is just as dangerous as government by organized mob.*

*Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me—and I welcome their hatred.*

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in his closing campaign address in Madison Square Garden, October 31, 1936.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 297. A Rendezvous with Destiny.

With the year 1936 came another Presidential election in the United States. Franklin Roosevelt meant to run for re-election, and had every reason to be optimistic about his prospects. The contrast between the four years of his term and the previous four years under Herbert Hoover could hardly have been starker. Industrial production had nearly doubled. So had stock prices. Corporate profits were up; so were farmers' incomes. Six million new jobs had been created. There were still 8 million unemployed Americans, but most of them had worked for the WPA or the CCC for at least part of the year. Millions of farmers and homeowners who had been facing

foreclosure in 1933 were now secure, as were Americans who held bank accounts: their money was now insured.

Public opinion polling was just getting started at this time and was not always accurate, but the polling data suggested that a significant majority of Americans believed the Great Depression was over and credited President Roosevelt with bringing about its end.

The Republican Party was reeling. The past three election cycles had reduced it to small minorities in both chambers of Congress and just 7 out of 48 state governorships. Virtually the only Republican political figure who had the stomach for taking on Roosevelt despite the Democrat's wide popularity was Herbert Hoover. One of the myths of American politics is that there exists a solemn tradition of ex-Presidents not criticizing their successors. Well, apparently no one ever explained that to Herbert Hoover, who in 1934 published a book denouncing the New Deal titled *The Challenge to Liberty*, and called for a balanced budget, return to the gold standard, and an end to all New Deal programs. Hoover sometimes denounced the Roosevelt Administration as socialist, and at other times as fascist. Whatever. Just so you understand, it's bad, okay?

Hoover offered to campaign for Republicans in 1936, apparently unaware that his name was still synonymous with failure and hardship in the minds of most American voters. Most Republicans running for office, however, were fully aware of this, and whenever Herbert Hoover came to town, they made sure they were someplace else.

The Republican Party was sufficiently marginalized that it was only one of the organizations that presented a threat to Roosevelt's re-election, and not necessarily the biggest one. I named some of Roosevelt's other political rivals back in episode 290. Louisiana Senator Huey Long by 1935 ruled his home state as a virtual dictator. Colonel Edward House—remember him? He's now 77 years old, but still advising Democratic Presidents. Colonel House expressed to Roosevelt the fear that Long might run as a third-party candidate and do to Roosevelt what Theodore Roosevelt did to William Howard Taft in 1912; that is, split the vote and allow a Republican to squeak in. In House's view, Long wouldn't mind that one bit, as it would make him front-runner for 1940.

But Long was assassinated in Baton Rouge in September 1935 by the son-in-law of a political rival, ending the challenge he posed to Roosevelt.

Long's assassination is one of the great "what ifs" of American history. It unquestionably benefited the Roosevelt campaign, which regarded Long as the greatest threat to Roosevelt's re-election.

Long had been the biggest threat, but there were other forces gathering in opposition to Roosevelt. I told you about them in episode 290; let's get caught up on them now. The corporate-funded Liberty League held a grand dinner in Washington in January 1936, attended by America's corporate and financial titans, including the Mellons, the Vanderbilts, and the du

Ponts. The keynote speaker was Al Smith, the 1928 Democratic candidate for President and once Franklin Roosevelt's mentor. Smith spoke for an hour, denouncing Roosevelt and the New Deal six ways from Sunday. "Let me give one solemn warning," Smith told the white-tie-and-tails crowd. "There can only be one capital, Washington or Moscow. There can be only one atmosphere of government, the clean, pure, fresh air of free America, or the foul breath of communistic Russia."

Don't hold back, Al; tell us what you really think.

The chosen defender of the President and the Administration was Senator Joe Robinson of Arkansas, currently the Senate Majority Leader, but more importantly, the Democratic Party's candidate for Vice President in 1928, and Al Smith's former running mate. Robinson gave a radio address in which he mocked the event as "the swellest party ever given by the du Ponts." He lamented that Smith, once known as the "happy warrior" had become the "unhappy warrior," and that the candidate who had once used "The Sidewalks of New York" as his campaign song had turned his back on the ordinary people of that city. "Now his gaze rests fondly upon the gilded towers and palaces of Park Avenue."

The Liberty League never recovered from this assault on its dignity. By summer, the organization had become so toxic that the Republican campaign was publicly asking it to please keep its distance, much to the public amusement of leading Democrats.

The Republican National Convention was held in Cleveland in June. Herbert Hoover was given the opportunity to make a speech. He had nothing good to say about the New Deal, but celebrated the fact that the Supreme Court had ruled nearly a dozen New Deal laws unconstitutional. He told his Party, "The American people should thank Almighty God and the Constitution and the Supreme Court," that Roosevelt hadn't gotten any farther than he had.

The two leading candidates for the Republican nomination were now-70-year-old Idaho Senator William Borah, supported by what was left of the Progressive wing of the Party, and the more centrist 48-year-old Alf Landon, the Governor of Kansas. Landon was the compromise candidate between the Progressives on one side and the hard-core anti-New Dealers on the other side, including Herbert Hoover, who was waiting in the wings, just in case the Party wanted him. It didn't. For Vice President, the Party nominated Chicago newspaper magnate Frank Knox, who had served in the Spanish-American War as one of Theodore Roosevelt's Rough Riders and again in the Great War, in which he had risen to the rank of colonel.

Landon was centrist-to-liberal on the political spectrum. Both Landon and Knox had bolted the Republican Party in 1912 to support Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive challenge, which tells you something about them. Both of them still saw that President Roosevelt as the model for what a President should be. Landon's big claim to fame is that he held on as Governor of Kansas despite the New Deal tidal waves and was in 1936 one of only nine Republican governors. With regard to his campaign strategy, Landon concluded, no doubt correctly, that the hard core

Hooverites in the Party would support him no matter what, so his position on the New Deal should be conciliatory. He would not dispute that Federal programs had an important role to play in ending the Depression; instead he would argue that Roosevelt's programs were ill-considered and badly managed and that a Landon Administration could do the job better.

Meanwhile, Huey Long was dead, but his political machine in Louisiana was very much alive. A fundamentalist minister from Shreveport named Gerald Smith attempted to assume leadership of Long's "Share Our Wealth" movement, but most of the Long political machine, facing the prospect of Federal investigation into their doings in Louisiana, especially if Landon was elected, opted to become New Dealers and support Roosevelt, a political shift that was dubbed "The Second Louisiana Purchase."

Shortly after the Republican convention adjourned, the Reverend Smith announced that his followers would join forces with Detroit radio priest Father Coughlin and Long Beach physician Dr. Francis Townsend to form a new political party, dubbed the Union Party, which would support William Lemke, a Republican who represented North Dakota in the House of Representatives, in a third-party bid. Lemke declared, "I look upon Roosevelt as a bewildered Kerensky of a provisional government. He doesn't know where he came from or where he is going. As for Landon, he represents the dying shadow of a past civilization."

I should note too that in 1936, there were open and visible fascist and Communist political movements in the United States. On the fascist side, there were brown shirts who favored German-style Nazism, black shirts who approved of Italian-style Fascism, as well as more homegrown movements. There were white shirts and blue shirts and even silver shirts, a whole panoply of fascism. On the Communist side, well, after the collapse of the German Communist Party, the world's biggest and most successful Communist Party outside the USSR in 1933, after Hitler took power, Comintern recognized the catastrophic miscalculation it had made in rejecting cooperation between Communists and other leftists and did a quick 180. As you know from our episodes on Spain, by 1936, Communists were being encouraged to build political alliances. In France and Spain, this would produce political success, with leftist Popular Front coalition governments replacing right-leaning governments.

In the United States, the Communist Party of the USA was attracting members like never before. Ostensibly an independent political movement, it was in fact receiving financial support from Comintern. In the US, the Popular Front meant supporting Roosevelt from the left, opposing fascism, and calling for closer relations with the Soviet Union. These positions were attractive to many left-leaning Americans and in the 1930s, the American Party's membership grew at an unprecedented rate. Party leader Earl Browder, who would also run for President in 1936, later said of American Communism in this particular moment, "We became almost respectable. Never quite respectable. Almost."

It's important to understand that in 1936, both American Communists and American fascists saw their political movements as modern expressions of traditional American ideals. The Communists embraced the slogan, "Communism is twentieth-century Americanism," and illustrated their pamphlets with images of Abraham Lincoln and the Minutemen, while the fascists embraced George Washington as "the first Fascist," whose political vision for America's future had been suppressed, or so they said, until now.

[music: *Those Crazy Cats*]

The Democratic National Convention met in Philadelphia at the end of June. That Roosevelt and Garner were going to be renominated was never in doubt, and if Roosevelt was worried about Landon or Lemke or the Communists or the fascists, he never let it show. He held to his perennial optimism. With the nomination a foregone conclusion, Roosevelt and his campaign concentrated on a bit of unfinished business from 1932: changing the Convention rules to allow nomination by simple majority, rather than by the two-thirds rule that had governed the Party since the early days of this podcast. James Farley, Roosevelt's campaign manager, handed the task of pushing through the rule change to Missouri Senator Bennett Champ Clark, the son of the man who had lost the 1912 Democratic nomination to Woodrow Wilson because of the two-thirds rule.

The two-thirds rule was popular among Southern Democrats because it gave the South an effective veto over the Presidential nomination. Clark got the change approved, in exchange for a new system of apportioning delegates to the Convention. The new system would factor in how frequently a state went Democratic in Presidential elections in calculating the size of that state's delegation. Since the Southern states were the most consistently Democratic states in the Union, they would be the ones to benefit from the rule change.

One of the keynote speakers at the Convention was Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky, known for his speaking skills. In his speech, Barkley challenged Herbert Hoover and his praise for the Supreme Court. He told the convention that the Constitution should be read "as a life-giving charter, rather than as an object of curiosity on the shelf of a museum." When he asked the convention whether the Supreme Court was above criticism, the Democrats in attendance thundered their dissent.

Roosevelt gave his acceptance speech before an open-air crowd of over 100,000 people assembled at the University of Pennsylvania's Franklin Field, plus an audience of millions more seated by their radios. The storied Philadelphia Orchestra, led by celebrity English conductor Leopold Stokowski, famed for his wild hair and his steadfast refusal ever to wield a baton, warmed up the crowd with music featuring celebrated French-American operatic soprano Lily Pons.

A limousine delivered the President to the stadium, and he began his slow and strenuous walk to the podium while the Orchestra played "Hail to the Chief" and spotlights highlighted him as he

made his way. Alas, Roosevelt lost his balance. One of his leg braces popped open and down he went, the pages of his speech scattering everywhere, although a Secret Service agent was able to catch the President by the shoulder before he hit the floor. Roosevelt later remembered it as “the most frightful five minutes of my life.” But he pulled himself together, fixed the leg brace, and collected his papers, and when he reached the podium at last, the crowd cheered.

He reminded the audience of the early days of his Administration, when the nation was wracked with fear. Fear had been subdued, he told the crowd, but America still faced the threat of economic inequality, an inequality which rendered political equality meaningless. He closed with these words” “There is a mysterious cycle in human events. To some generations, much is given. Of other generations, much is asked. This generation has a rendezvous with destiny.”

In the general election campaign, Alf Landon took the high road, while the Union Party took the low road. Father Coughlin’s radio speeches were especially vituperative. He called Roosevelt a liar, a Communist, “anti-God,” “the dumbest man ever to occupy the White House,” and hinted that bullets might be called for if ballots failed to oust him.

Coughlin’s radio speeches were so over-the-top that they attracted the attention of the Vatican. The Vatican newspaper *L’Osservatore Romano* criticized Coughlin’s tone and the papal secretary of state, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, came to the United States for two months of what was officially called a “vacation” to keep a closer eye on Coughlin.

You’ve heard me say several times before on this podcast that in this era, public opinion polling was in its infancy. Well, here is the time and place when it came of age. Journalist George Gallup made his first attempt at polling a Presidential election in 1936 and concluded that Roosevelt would win in a landslide. *Fortune* magazine hired marketing researcher Elmo Roper, who took his own poll and came to the same conclusion.

Against that was the magazine *Literary Digest*, which had polled every Presidential election since 1916 and had correctly identified the winner every time. In 1936, they ran their poll again, and it showed Alf Landon winning by a comfortable margin. What’s more, the *Literary Digest* poll relied on a sample of more than 2.4 million respondents, which was about fifty times the size of the samples Gallup or Roper used.

And then there was the state of Maine. Maine held its elections for state offices in September back then, although it voted for President in November like everyone else. Maine’s September elections were widely seen at the time as an important bellwether for the Presidential race. For example, most recently, in 1932, Maine had elected a Democratic governor and Democrats had made gains in the state legislature, apparently presaging Roosevelt’s victory that November, hence the political maxim, “As Maine goes, so goes the nation.” This year, 1936, Maine elected a Republican governor and put strong Republican majorities into its legislative chambers, suggesting that *Literary Digest* might be on to something. Republicans pointed all this out and hoped for the best.

Roosevelt closed his campaign with an address at Madison Square Garden in New York City, the Saturday night before the election. I quoted from it at the top of the episode. When Roosevelt said he welcomed the hatred of the monied interests, the crowd responded with applause and thundering cheers. "I should like to have it said of my first Administration that in it the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match," Roosevelt added. "I should like to have it said of my second Administration that in it these forces met their master."

The day before the election, campaign manager James Farley met with the President to assess the coming vote. Farley told the President that Maine and Vermont were lost to the Republicans. The states of New Hampshire, Connecticut, Michigan, and Alf Landon's home state of Kansas were iffy, but Farley predicted Roosevelt would carry them, along with all of the remaining 42. Roosevelt didn't believe him. On election night, when the returns started coming in, Roosevelt sent his staff back out to double check, because he still didn't believe what he was being told.

Farley had been exactly right. Roosevelt swept 46 of the nation's 48 states, losing only the two Farley had predicted. Farley jokingly proposed a new political maxim: "As Maine goes, so goes Vermont." Roosevelt took 523 electoral votes, the largest share ever by a Presidential candidate in a contested election. Maine plus Vermont gave Alf Landon just eight electoral votes, tying the dismal total racked up by William Howard Taft, the third-place candidate in 1912.

In popular vote terms, Roosevelt won 60.8% of the vote, four million more votes than in 1932 and a record percentage. Lemke and the Union Party came in a distant third with less than a million votes, and the Union Party would soon dissolve. Socialist Party candidate Norman Thomas came in fourth, with a quarter of the votes he had drawn in the 1932 race.

In South Carolina, Roosevelt had drawn 98.6% of the vote, a record that stands to this day for a state-level Presidential vote. In Mississippi, 97.1%. In Huey Long's home state of Louisiana, 88.9%, and in Georgia, Franklin Roosevelt's second home, 87.1%. James Farley pointed out that in Warm Springs, Georgia, fourteen people had voted for Landon, and suggested that next time he was down there, Roosevelt should look them up and "raise hell with them."

This election saw the emergence of the New Deal Democratic coalition that would dominate US politics for the middle third of the century. The Democrats lost for good the support of business and professional people, represented in the Party by the likes of John Davis and Newton Baker. But they more than made up for it with gains from other demographics. Roosevelt won the votes of 80% of labor union members, and labor votes swung Midwestern industrial states from Illinois to Pennsylvania, which had gone Democratic for the first time since the Civil War.

Roosevelt also had solid support among farmers and in the nation's big cities, including places like Philadelphia and Columbus, which had gone for Hoover four years ago. Virtually every city in America now voted Democratic. Roosevelt carried 81% of the Catholic vote and 86% of the Jewish vote.

Most significantly, this was the first time since the Civil War that the African-American vote went to the Democrat. This was not because Franklin Roosevelt was any great champion of civil rights for Americans of color. He was not. But the stark economic reality was this: no other demographic group in America had suffered more from the Great Depression, or had needed more badly the relief programs the New Deal had delivered to them.

The Democratic landslide was not limited to the Presidential race. Maine notwithstanding, the Republicans lost a net two state governors, reducing their total to seven out of 48. They lost a net 15 seats in the US House of Representatives, reducing their total to 88, and a net five seats in the US Senate, leaving just 17 Republicans in that body, and also leaving a number of newspaper columnists to speculate that the US Republican Party might be on the threshold of extinction.

This dramatic, unprecedented, overwhelming victory for Roosevelt and his party may well leave you wondering: What the heck happened with the *Literary Digest* poll? Why did the poll that worked so well through five previous Presidential elections over twenty years fail so spectacularly in 1936?

The answer lies in *Literary Digest's* methodology. The magazine created a list of ten million American voters, which included residents of every county in the United States. The list was compiled from subscribers to the magazine, plus membership lists purchased from clubs and other organizations, and further supplemented with names drawn at random from telephone directories. There are two problems here. The first is, in 1936, with the nation just climbing its way out from the Great Depression, a list drawn from club members, people with telephones in their home, and subscribers to *Literary Digest* is likely to be skewed heavily toward more highly educated, upper income voters. For example, in 1936, barely a third of American households had a telephone. The people excluded from the survey were far more likely to be lower income, and far more likely to be Roosevelt voters. This is known in the field as selection bias.

Second, once the magazine had their list of ten million voters, it sent out a paper questionnaire to every one of them, by mail, which the recipients were asked to fill out and mail back. Only 2.4 million of the ten million voters selected returned their questionnaires. Now, 2.4 million is a very big number, but it's only 24% of the sample. Those 24% who returned their surveys will inevitably be a different kind of person from the 76% who threw them in the trash. Obviously, they are people with a more favorable attitude toward opinion polls, but they may also differ in other ways. One of the more remarkable facts about Franklin Roosevelt and his political career is that for as phenomenally popular as he was—and he will never be more popular than he was in 1936—his political opposition would positively hate him. It was as if they hoped intensity of feeling would make up for their small numbers. It's not difficult to believe that those who returned their *Literary Digest* questionnaires were disproportionately people who disliked Roosevelt intensely and were pleased to have a means of expressing their disapproval before November, while people who supported Roosevelt felt less of an urge to put it in writing.



This is known in the field as non-response bias, and it is the reason why pollsters don't rely on mailed questionnaires. Face-to-face interviews are regarded as the most accurate polling method, with telephone polling an acceptable alternative. Even these polling methods have to deal with non-response bias, since you can't actually force a person to cooperate with your poll, but the response rate is much higher with these methods, and when a citizen does refuse to answer questions, a reputable pollster will not simply discard that result, but will instead seek out another, demographically similar, person to replace them in the sample.

The magazine *Literary Digest* folded two years later, and it is widely believed that the widespread negative publicity its famously failed poll generated was an important factor in its demise. Gallup and Roper, on the other hand, called the election correctly despite much smaller sample sizes, and both of them would go on to found well-known and well-regarded public opinion research organizations.

The moral of the story is that the size of your survey sample is less important than the care with which you select it, and that increasing the size of the sample doesn't compensate for a poorly chosen one.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Dana for her kind donation, and thank you to John for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Dana and John help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, [historyofthetwentiethcentury.com](http://historyofthetwentiethcentury.com) and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at English-language literature during the interwar period. It was a very fertile time for letters, and there were a lot of interesting writers at work. I'll try to survey as many of them as I can, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I mentioned to you before that when Herbert Hoover left office in 1933, he became America's only living ex-President. He would retain that status as America's only living ex-President for twenty years, until 1953, and he would survive another eleven years after that, until he passed away in 1964, at the age of 90.

Hoover's 31 years of Presidential retirement eclipsed those of the previous record holder, John Adams, who lived 25 years after leaving office until he died, also at the age of 90. Herbert Hoover would retain the record for the longest Presidential retirement until Jimmy Carter, who, as of when I release this episode, is 98 years old, 41 years retired from the Presidency, and still counting.

Hoover's name was tarnished by association with the Great Depression for the rest of his life, although in his final years, he liked to say that he had gotten his revenge on his critics by outliving them. Certainly, Hoover never stopped criticizing Franklin Roosevelt. He opposed US involvement in the Second World War, joined the America First movement, criticized US aid to the British, and later to the Soviet Union.

And Hoover would never stop criticizing Roosevelt's New Deal domestic programs. Living as long as he did, Hoover has to be counted an important influence on the next generation of Republican Party leaders, including people like Richard Nixon, Barry Goldwater, and Ronald Reagan, and by extension, the Republican Party's unrelenting hostility to Roosevelt's New Deal programs and reforms, hostility which in our time is as fierce as ever, nearly a century after.

[music: Closing Theme]