

Spring 2012

William Colmer and the Politics of the New Deal Labor Legislation 1933-1940

Zachary Wyatt Moulds
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/masters_theses



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moulds, Zachary Wyatt, "William Colmer and the Politics of the New Deal Labor Legislation 1933-1940" (2012). *Master's Theses*. 488.

https://aquila.usm.edu/masters_theses/488

This Masters Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

The University of Southern Mississippi

WILLIAM COLMER AND THE POLITICS OF NEW DEAL
LABOR LEGISLATION 1933-1940
by Zachary Wyatt Moulds

by

Zachary Wyatt Moulds

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:



Dean of the Graduate School

May 2012

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WILLIAM COLMER AND THE POLITICS OF NEW DEAL

LABOR LEGISLATION 1933-1940

by Zachary Wyatt Moulds

May 2012

William (Bill) Colmer first entered Congress in 1933, the same year that President Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal began to reshape the role of government in the United States. While the New Deal's efforts to combat the Great Depression proved popular in the beginning, by 1935 many congressmen, especially southerners, began to distance themselves from the administration's attempts at social reform. Although many of his colleagues refused to endorse the increasingly liberal agenda of the New Deal, Congressman Colmer remained loyal throughout the decade. His loyalty to the administration was due in part to the south Mississippi district he represented. District Six was Mississippi's melting pot and contained the largest labor force and the most diverse industries in the state. Also, the presence of organized labor set District Six apart from other Mississippi congressional districts. While the conservatism of Colmer's later career has been well documented, his earliest years in Congress have not. This thesis will focus on the liberal Bill Colmer, and his record regarding labor legislation helps measure and explain his New Deal liberalism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank committee members Dr. Max Grivno and Dr. Deanne Nuwer for their recommendations and encouragement throughout this process. I would also like to thank Shelia Smith, Sue Fayard, Jennifer Brannock, Cindy Lawler, and Peggy Price for years of friendship and support while on campus. My parents, Wyatt and Faye Moulds, have been overly supportive and gracious as they patiently awaited this work, and I hope to one day repay their generosity. Lastly, I would like to thank my committee chairman Dr. Chester "Bo" Morgan whose scholarship made this thesis possible.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. LABOR AND BUSINESS IN THE EARLY NEW DEAL, 1933- 1935.....	15
III. THE NEW DEAL TAKES A LEFT: THE WAGNER ACT AND THE SECOND HUNDRED DAYS, 1935-1936.....	31
IV. THE RISE OF THE CONSERVATIVE COALITION AND LABOR'S FINAL VICTORY, 1937-1940.....	49
V. EPILOGUE.....	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	79

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On July 22, 1942, American Federation of Labor President, William Green, sent prominent Hattiesburg barber and newly elected Mississippi State Federation of Labor President W. L. (Willie) Hines a puzzling telegram. In the derisive letter, Green condemned the voting record of Congressman William M. Colmer, a Pascagoula Democrat, regarding wartime labor legislation. He urged Hines to support Judge Ben Stevens of Richton, Colmer's opponent for Mississippi's Sixth Congressional District seat, in the following month's primary. "I consider the record he has made as very bad. It was very unsatisfactory to labor," Green contended. Colmer learned of the letter later the same week, and its contents symbolized a bitter, and more remarkably, a curious pill to swallow. Since entering Congress in 1933, Colmer's support for President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, especially the labor legislation, had been equaled by few representatives from the South and none from Mississippi.¹

In his first years in Washington, Bill Colmer participated in a legislative onslaught unrivaled by any Congress in memory. In the spring of 1933, President Roosevelt's New Deal began, taking rein of a nation mired in a deep economic depression. By decade's end, the administration had changed almost every preconceived notion regarding the relationship of government and America's private sector. The New Deal created a template for future

¹ William Green to W.L. Hines, July 22, 1942, in William M. Colmer Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

administrations and forever cemented ties between the federal government and the American people. Colmer would be along for the entire, bumpy ride.²

After being sworn in, the president declared a national bank holiday and called a special session of Congress. Initially, the lone legislative priority was a sweeping emergency bank bill, which passed the lower House, sight unseen, with what William Leuchtenburg deemed “a unanimous shout,” after less than an hour of debate. The bill was introduced, approved by both houses, and signed by Roosevelt within eight hours. The Seventy-third Congress had commenced.³

Roosevelt’s original plan was to secure the banking legislation and then adjourn Congress, but members of the Brain Trust, the president’s closest advisors, encouraged him to extend the session. The momentum produced by the Emergency Banking Act seemed too precious to waste, and Roosevelt and his advisors, concluding correctly that the length and severity of the Depression had rendered Congress extraordinarily malleable, embarked on an ambitious legislative course.⁴

What followed, famously remembered as the Hundred Days, was politically unprecedented. In just over three months, the Seventy-third Congress passed a broad range of relief and recovery measures aimed at alleviating the Depression. The relief efforts met with immediate enthusiasm. For young, unmarried men, the Civilian Conservation Corps provided work developing the

² Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), 1-3.

³ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 43-44; Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), 8.

⁴ Schlesinger, Jr., 8-23.

country's natural resources. The Federal Emergency Relief Act provided both work and direct relief to the unemployed and destitute. Creating mostly unskilled positions, FERA quickly sent men and women back into the workforce. The Emergency Farm Mortgage Act and the Home Owners' Loan Act enabled many to refinance their farms and homes in order to save them. With roots dating back to the Woodrow Wilson administration, the Tennessee Valley Authority Act created a regional planning agency that provided, among other things, cheap electricity and comprehensive economic development for much of the South, including Mississippi. Although TVA did not provide direct relief, it proved to be a popular agency throughout the New Deal.⁵

The two primary recovery efforts of the Hundred Days focused on agriculture and industry. To combat plummeting crop prices, Congress passed the Agricultural Adjustment Act designed to increase the prices of staple crops by paying farmers to restrict production. For industry, there was the National Industrial Recovery Act, which sought to stabilize industry under codes of fair competition developed through government-business cooperation. The codes were drafted primarily by deputy administrators under Roosevelt and members of three National Recovery Administration advisory boards representing business, labor, and consumers. The NIRA also guaranteed the rights of organized labor and appropriated over three billion dollars to be spent on public works.⁶

⁵ Ibid., 20-27; Donald M. Dana, Jr. and Chester Morgan, *A Priceless Heritage: The Story of the Mississippi Power Company* (Gulfport, MS: The Mississippi Power Company, 1993), 58.

⁶ William Lincoln Giles, "Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970," in *A History of Mississippi*, Richard Aubrey McLemore, ed. (Hattiesburg, MS: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), II, 202; Bernard Bellush, *The Failure of the NRA* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 37-38.

In total, Roosevelt delivered and Congress passed fifteen major pieces of legislation. In some measure, everything enacted during the Hundred Days would remain vital throughout the New Deal. The legislation, along with Roosevelt's immense popularity, provided a major source of hope for Americans, and the cloud of fear cast over the nation by the Depression began to give way to rays of optimism. "Roosevelt is an explorer," said Winston Churchill, "who has embarked on a voyage as uncertain as that of Columbus, and upon a quest which might conceivably be as important as the discovery of the New World."⁷

After the Hundred Days euphoria had subsided, however, Roosevelt's policies, though still popular with many Americans, began to encounter opposition, especially among businessmen. Despite sweeping Democratic gains in the 1934 elections, the United States Chamber of Commerce formally condemned the New Deal early the following year. The "thunder on the right," as termed by James MacGregor Burns, attacked the New Deal and its intrusive business legislation. Meanwhile equally thunderous interests on the left called for more drastic measures. Prominent figures such as Louisiana Senator Huey Long and Michigan's Father Charles Coughlin, a famous radio personality, demanded that the New Deal enact more liberal social and economic reforms. The dissent among the New Dealers forced the president into action. The result of Roosevelt's renewed vitality was manifest in the Second Hundred Days.⁸

⁷ Schlesinger, Jr., 23.

⁸ James MacGregor Burns, *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956), 227; Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 69-70.

Aside from the political jabs coming from liberals and conservatives, the most significant catalyst leading to Congress' flurry of legislation was the Supreme Court's invalidation of the National Industrial Recovery Act. With his industrial recovery program nullified and continued business support for the New Deal unlikely, an angry Roosevelt embarked on a bold course. The actions of the Court prompted the president to keep Congress in session throughout the summer of 1935. Along with a new and more thorough labor bill in the Wagner Act, the Second Hundred Days Congress passed social security, banking, and public-utilities legislation. The results were bittersweet for Roosevelt; although Congress passed legislation which would be remembered as the administration's most triumphant, the Second Hundred Days left many of his conservative supporters questioning the course of the New Deal.⁹

From 1936 to 1938, the New Deal was often at an impasse. The administration's support on Capitol Hill had weakened, despite Roosevelt's monumental defeat of Alf Landon in the 1936 election. Controversial legislation and a botched court-packing proposal in 1937 left many former New Dealers alienated. Apprehension among conservatives had now coalesced into a semi-formal coalition often at odds with the president's agenda. By decade's end, the strength of the conservative coalition and affairs abroad forced the Roosevelt administration to modify its course domestically. The Fair Labor Standards Act of

⁹ Leuchtenburg, 150.

1938, although a landmark piece of labor legislation, would mark the effective end of the New Deal.¹⁰

By that time, Colmer had represented Mississippi's Sixth Congressional district for nearly a decade, at times running counter to many of his more conservative southern colleagues in the lower House. Throughout the twists and turns of Roosevelt's sweeping reform program, Colmer remained loyal, as thorough a New Dealer as Mississippi would produce. Between 1937 and 1940, Colmer supported the president on eight of eleven key roll call votes (nearly 73 percent), far more than Congressman John Rankin, whose support for the administration fell below 50 percent, the next highest percentage among the Mississippi delegation. Colmer remained the only Mississippi representative not labeled a conservative in James T. Patterson's *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, and his voting record on labor legislation was unrivaled among Mississippi's House delegation. Despite this, the AFL's William Green remained unimpressed.¹¹

The 1942 falling out with Green marked a turning point in Colmer's political career. By the coming of World War II, Colmer had begun a transition that would take him from New Deal liberal to arch conservative. While the conservatism of his later career is well documented, Colmer's work throughout the Great Depression is not. This thesis will focus on Bill Colmer, the liberal New Dealer.

¹⁰ James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 164-66.

¹¹ Philip A. Grant, Jr., "The Mississippi Congressional Delegation and the Formation of the Conservative Coalition, 1937- 1940," *Journal of Mississippi History* 50 (February 1988): 21-28; Patterson, 339-45.

Colmer was born in Moss Point, Mississippi, in 1890, the son of a sawmill worker. He was educated in Gulfport's public schools and worked in the local lumber mills as a young man. After attending Millsaps College in Jackson, he returned to south Mississippi in 1914 and taught for three years in Lumberton, where he met his wife, Ruth Milner. In 1917, he gained admittance to the Mississippi bar and began practicing law. His nascent legal career would be put on hold as he enlisted in World War I. Coming home to Pascagoula after the war, Colmer returned to his law practice.¹²

In 1928, Colmer began his political career. That year, the married father of three was elected Jackson County District Attorney, a position he held for four years. At forty-two he first won election to the House of Representatives in 1932. Although Bill Colmer in 1932 would prove to be a fundamentally different politician than Bill Colmer in 1972, the year he chose to retire and return home to Pascagoula, he arrived in Washington an enthusiastic supporter of Roosevelt. Colmer quickly proved himself as a valuable New Dealer. Alone among Mississippi's delegates in the lower House, he supported every piece of the Hundred Days legislation.¹³

By 1933, many Mississippians were destitute. In September 1933, FERA Field Representative Aubrey Williams reported to his boss Harry Hopkins, "The situation in Mississippi continues to be a rather desperate one." The severity of Mississippi's economic crisis was apparent to those outside of the federal

¹² Neil Michael Bruce Rowe, "William M. Colmer: His Role as a Leader in the House of Representatives" (honor's thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 1989), 6-7.

¹³ Roger D. Tate, "Easing the Burden: The Era of Depression and New Deal in Mississippi" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1978), 56.

government as well. In 1931, renowned journalist H.L. Mencken labeled Mississippi “the worst American state.” Mencken’s conclusions were based on statistics and analysis which focused on various facets of Mississippi’s social, economic, and political culture. Unfortunately, Mencken’s analysis was quite accurate.¹⁴

The factors contributing to Mencken’s inglorious title predated the stock market crash of 1929. The state’s woeful economic conditions were rooted in, among other things, a debilitating one-crop agricultural policy and a legacy of Populist—Progressive era hostility to industrialization. For decades prior to the Depression, Mississippi’s Populist and Progressive politicians passed regulatory legislation discouraging out-of-state investors, thus enabling cotton to retain its disproportionate role in the economy. Simultaneously, the legislation reinforced cycles of debt for poor farmers, stifled purchasing power, although consumerism was fast becoming the national pastime, and deterred economic growth. The results of these legislative actions, or arguable inactions, ultimately limited employment opportunities for Mississippi’s labor force.¹⁵

Though agriculture was important within District Six, King Cotton did not reign supreme among Colmer’s constituency. The sixteen counties Colmer

¹⁴ Aubrey Williams to Harry Hopkins, September 13, 1933, in Harry L. Hopkins Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park; Tate, 3-5.

¹⁵ Westley F. Busbee, Jr., *Mississippi: A History* (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2005), 212-24; John Ray Skates, *Mississippi: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, 1979), 120-35; Ted Ownby, *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830-1998* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 95.

served represented the most diverse congressional district in the state.¹⁶

Counties such as Covington and Jefferson Davis were rural and in 1933-34 received the most federal money in within the district according to the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's Cotton Division director Cully Cobb, a trend that would continue throughout the lifespan of the AAA. The interests of the coastal counties, however, were much less aligned to Mississippi's cotton culture. Compared to the rest of the district, the coast counties were more diverse, with an abundance of population, industrial opportunities, and a large labor force, not to mention the bountiful Gulf of Mexico as their southern border. Other District Six counties were mixed, containing both industrial and agrarian elements.¹⁷

By Mississippi standards, District Six was urban. To imply that the calamity within the agricultural markets evaded Colmer's district would be incorrect; the Piney Woods and Coastal Pine Meadow regions that make up District Six sustained farms and provided rural Mississippians an income. Throughout the New Deal, Colmer received countless letters from within the district regarding AAA checks and farming subsidies. However, District Six differed from Wall Doxey's District Two, which was littered with acres and acres of North Mississippi cotton. Nor was it akin to District Three, represented by Greenwood Congressman Will Whittington, located in the center of Mississippi's Alluvial Plains and teeming with plantations, unlike the smaller farms of District Six. Colmer's district contained lumbermen, railroad men, textile workers,

¹⁶ District Six was comprised of the following counties: Covington, Forrest, George, Greene, Hancock, Harrison, Jackson, Jefferson Davis, Jones, Lamar, Lawrence, Marion, Pearl River, Perry, Stone, and Wayne.

¹⁷ C.A. Cobb to Colmer, June 14, 1934, in Colmer Papers.

fishermen, seafood factory workers, ship builders, farmers, and white collar professionals, among others.

Due to the diversity of the district and its percentage of industry and population, New Deal labor legislation provides an effective vehicle for studying Colmer's early years in Washington. His acumen in supporting labor legislation during the Depression, while many of his colleagues in the lower House did not, endeared him to voters, labor leaders, and the Roosevelt administration. District Six was Mississippi's melting pot, forcing the congressman to juggle the needs of his diverse constituents, amidst the torrents of New Deal legislation flooding Washington, and Colmer's record regarding organized labor thus helps measure and explain his New Deal liberalism.

The New Deal provided a framework for developing organized labor, but unionists already had roots in Mississippi, mostly in the southern half of the state. Organized labor in South Mississippi pre-dated Franklin Roosevelt's administration by over fifty years. Organizations such as the Knights of Labor, various farmers' and railroad unions, and the American Federation of Labor, in its earliest phase, maintained unions in Mississippi during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The New Deal would strengthen and encourage the union sentiments in the state.¹⁸

Initial union activity in south Mississippi concentrated primarily in the railroad and lumber industries. The Knights of Labor, emerging in Mississippi's post-Civil War years, flourished in the lumber mills and represented the first

¹⁸ Donald Crumpton Mosley, "A History of Labor Unions in Mississippi" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alabama, 1965), 32-52.

official band of organized, nonagricultural labor the state had known. The Knights national organization, at its height, numbered approximately 700,000 members. By 1888, thirty three locals operated within Mississippi. According to Donald Mosley, the Knights' most significant achievements occurred within the Gulf Coast's lumber industry. In the years following the Civil War, the once small and paternalistic South Mississippi sawmills became inundated with northern demands for lumber. Within a decade, mills became much larger, paternalistic ties deteriorated, and, to the alarm of many Mississippians, northerners relocated to the South and claimed many of the mills' management positions.¹⁹

By 1889, the Jackson County Knights were some of the most prominent unionists in the state, but ineffective strikes, an influx of imported workers, and a lack of sympathy from local law enforcement severely curbed their influence. Although Mississippi produced more lumber than most states, ranking as high as third in production by 1908, the unions' attempts to organize workers achieved only modest success. Mills cooperated with each other to deter unionization. By the turn of the century, an employer favorite, the yellow-dog contract, emerged, forcing employees to waive their right to organize for the duration of their employment. The Knights of Labor, both nationally and in Mississippi, had been largely defeated.²⁰

Although the Knights could not maintain lasting success, their influence carried on. South Mississippi's laboring men became aware of the concept of

¹⁹ Ibid., 37-38; James E. Fickle, *The New South and the "New Competition": Trade Association Development in the Southern Pine Industry* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 3.

²⁰ Mosley, 42; John K. Bettersworth, *Mississippi: A History* (Austin, TX: The Steck Company Publishers, 1959), 350.

organizing, and the idea expanded significantly. Railroad unions became popular and constituted labor's first permanent gains within the state. Building trades' locals consisting of painters, bricklayers, and electrical workers emerged in the heavier populated towns. Fishermen and shrimpers joined unions and participated in strikes long before they received the support of a sympathetic federal government. Craft unionism, exemplified most prominently by the American Federation of Labor and its subsidiary the Mississippi Federation of Labor, was burgeoning by the onset of the New Deal. The MFL's Holt Ross forwent a successful law practice in Laurel to champion the rights of organized labor fulltime in the state, long before catchphrases like "Wagner Act" or "wages and hours bill" gained fame at the national level. Fittingly, all of this occurred in Bill Colmer's Sixth District.²¹

Mosley lists several factors that explain union growth in South Mississippi and the lack of organized labor in other parts of the state. He credits speedier commercial growth within the southern towns as being a catalyst to organized labor, while the heavily agrarian northern part of the state maintained relatively sluggish commercial growth. Also, the southern half of the state contained more railroad hubs and lumber mills. The lingering heritage of the Knights of Labor, a large pro-labor Catholic population along the Gulf Coast and in the river towns, and industry created by the Gulf of Mexico also contributed to higher success rates for organized labor in South Mississippi.²²

²¹ Mosley, 53-92; Deanne Nuwer, "The Biloxi Fishermen Are Killing the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg: The Seafood Strike of 1932," *Journal of Mississippi History* 66 (Winter 2004): 335-44.

²² Mosley, 67.

The presence of organized labor within Bill Colmer's Sixth District seems clear; however its existence did not guarantee success. Mosley provides a framework for what conditions need to exist to sustain organized labor within a specific region. A framework for labor harmony remains an entirely different matter. As mill workers, mill owners, fisherman, seafood factory workers, barbers, bankers, painters, and politicians would all attest during the New Deal, different people held very different views towards labor unions and their representatives. As it had for a half century prior, organized labor during the 1930s remained a polarizing issue.

For Colmer, questions regarding labor legislation continued throughout his forty years in Washington. He always proclaimed himself a friend to organized labor, and as a Gulf Coast resident, labor issues remained perpetually at hand. As a young man, Bill Colmer earned money in Jackson County lumber mills before going to college. Having been born in 1890, around the same time the Knights of Labor thrived in his hometown, Colmer had to have a keen sense of what the right to organize and bargain collectively meant to his constituents. Like other southern states, Mississippi has been perceived as generally unsupportive of organized labor, but Colmer's congressional career contradicts such an oversimplified characterization. His career also illustrates why, despite landmark legislation during the New Deal, unionism essentially failed in Mississippi. By the time Colmer left the House in 1972, the AFL and CIO had long since merged, and organized labor had become a powerful interest group throughout the nation. However, when Colmer entered Congress in March of 1933, the verdict was still

out regarding the fate of organized labor. Bill Colmer would have a hand in determining that fate.

CHAPTER II

LABOR AND BUSINESS IN THE EARLY NEW DEAL, 1933-1935

As the booming nineteen twenties shifted into the depressed nineteen thirties, Mississippi teetered on the edge of bankruptcy. In the four years of Herbert Hoover's presidency, Mississippi lost roughly 34,000 industrial jobs. Unemployment in Gulfport and Biloxi surpassed ten percent, and in District Six's upper counties, unemployment rose steadily because of stagnation in the lumber industry. The end of Herbert Hoover's presidency aroused hope for many Mississippians. Disdain for Hoover and his administration's perceived laissez-faire recovery efforts resonated among the voters, and the national election of 1932 confirmed that many Americans were ready for a new plan of attack to combat the Depression.¹

Hoover's administration, however, did attempt to aid impoverished Mississippians through federal channels. Although President Hoover proved painfully slow at supplying federal aid, by early 1933, the Federal Farm Board and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, both Hoover administration creations, had pumped over \$8,000,000 in loans into various Mississippi relief efforts. Although Hoover's attempts to aid the state proved too little, too late in garnering him political support, the federal funds created enough purchasing power for Mississippians to balance the state's budget in 1933, thanks largely to

¹ Roger D. Tate, "Easing the Burden: The Era of Depression and New Deal in Mississippi" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1978), 37-41.

the revenues generated from the recently implemented state sales tax. The emergence of large-scale federal aid was only beginning, however.²

President Roosevelt's arrival in Washington began with a bang, setting off an onslaught of legislation intended to alleviate the Depression. Summoning a special session of Congress immediately that would last until mid-June, Roosevelt received unprecedented support in both Houses. The legislators proved swift and generous in granting the new leader power. Excluding the Cullen-Harrison Act, commonly referred to as the Beer Bill, Mississippi's delegates in Congress backed Roosevelt at an average of 75 percent in the initial session. Senator Pat Harrison and Congressman Colmer supported every piece of legislation. The Hundred Days Congress addressed an array of national grievances; at the president's request, the Congress repealed prohibition, passed legislation regarding the banking crisis and agricultural surpluses, slashed federal salaries, created relief programs, attempted to induce industrial recovery, and, unbeknownst at the time, laid a blueprint for the evolution of organized labor.³

In the second half of the Hundred Days, industrial recovery became a top priority for Congress. Legislation aimed at combating the widespread unemployment emerged, the most prominent being the thirty-hour week bill championed by Alabama Senator Hugo Black. Black's bill prohibited goods produced in plants where employees worked in excess of a thirty-hour week from interstate commerce. By modifying the traditional work schedules in factories and plants, the bill would have enabled many unemployed to rejoin the labor

² *Ibid.*, 59-64.

³ *Ibid.*, 56; James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 3-6.

force. Senator Black insisted that his bill would create roughly six million much needed jobs, yet Roosevelt remained hesitant. Roosevelt worried that the bill, aside from being unconstitutional, would prove unfeasible in rural and agrarian regions.⁴

In Mississippi's Sixth Congressional District, opinions varied regarding the proposed Black Bill. While Laurel's Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen and Gulfport's Brotherhood of Railway and Steamshipclerks urged Congressman Colmer to support the thirty-hour bill, local industrial leaders such as J. I. Thompson, manager of Hattiesburg's J.J. Newman Lumber Company, declared the legislation unworkable within their industries. While acknowledging that the thirty-hour week might grant relief, albeit temporary, to industries in major cities, Thompson maintained that in the much less mechanized South, the legislation would handicap local industry. Other prominent South Mississippi business leaders, such as Frank Tatum of Tatum Lumber Company and J.H. Thickens of the Masonite Corporation, agreed. Colmer conceded that although the thirty-hour bill had merit, the final version would need considerable amending in order to benefit local industry.⁵

Roosevelt also wanted industrial recovery legislation but not the kind Hugo Black was selling. Substantial congressional support for the thirty-hour legislation eventually forced the president's hand. Roosevelt assigned various New Dealers the job of drafting proposals to circumvent the Black Bill.

⁴ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 150-51.

⁵ R.A. McLeod to Colmer, April 26, 1933; J.I. Thompson to Colmer, April 12, 1933; Colmer to V.A. Scanlon, April 29, 1933, all in William M. Colmer Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

Throughout April, allies such as Rexford Tugwell and Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, as well as Senators Robert La Follette and Robert Wagner, zealously began composing alternative legislation. The fruits of their labor appeared in Roosevelt's address to Congress in mid-May, in which he introduced his plan for a National Industrial Recovery Act.⁶

The National Industrial Recovery Act included three major elements. The first created the National Recovery Administration led by General Hugh Johnson, which encouraged a partnership between government and business through a series of fair competition codes. The codes were drafted by three advisory boards representing business, labor, and consumers, as well as deputy administrators under Roosevelt. For limiting wage decreases and excessive layoffs and adhering to the codes of fair competition, business would be rewarded with exemptions from anti-trust prosecution and with increased federal spending intended to prime the proverbial pump. Businesses agreeing to implement the codes were encouraged to display the NRA's Blue Eagle emblem, a minor reward for their compliance. The second significant component of the NIRA was Title I Section 7(a) which provided industrial employees the right to organize and bargain collectively, viewed as a landmark goal for laborers at the time. Section 7(a) also outlawed the infamous yellow-dog contract, a long time grievance among Mississippi's workers. The final significant piece of the bill created the popular Public Works Administration, a federal agency meant to carry

⁶ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), 74; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 56.

out extensive construction projects. The PWA would eventually complete many lasting projects and spend millions of dollars throughout Colmer's district.⁷

For Mississippians, The NRA's Blue Eagle campaign began mid-summer. Chambers of Commerce throughout the state agreed to follow the codes handed down from Washington. As soon as the first NRA codes were enacted nationally in August, Mississippi post offices issued businesses the popular Blue Eagle signs. To encourage accountability, newspapers promised to publish Blue Eagle honor rolls, and NRA committees solicited pledges from citizens to support only Blue Eagle shops. As numerous parades, marching bands, and baton twirlers confirmed, Mississippians enthusiastically embraced the NRA.⁸

The NRA intended to improve poor working conditions in Mississippi, but by the end of 1933, optimism for the Blue Eagle campaign turned into uncertainty. Union activity on the Coast escalated during the Depression years, and Colmer became the recipient of anxious letters from workers expressing frustration with the NRA. While NRA public relations parades rolled throughout the state advocating change, women and children battled adverse conditions in the seafood canning and packing plants. In August 1933, women in the Biloxi packing houses struck for higher wages only to be denied. That same month, shrimpers along the Coast, some of whom had gone on strike the previous year,

⁷ Bernard Bellush, *The Failure of the NRA* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 37-38; Kennedy, 151; Tate, 67; J. Wayne Flynt, "The New Deal and Southern Labor," in *The New Deal and the South*, James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato, eds. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 65.

⁸ Tate, 67-68.

struck again. By October, shrimpers returned to the water, but agitation within the industry remained far from over.⁹

The NRA produced mixed results for the district's lumbermen as well. Lumber yards and sawmills housed workers for months at a time when conditions were favorable. However, their wages remained consistently lower than prescribed by the NRA codes. Also, frequent accidents and primitive sanitation left many employees unable to work, leaving the men with no compensation. With the NRA's lumber codes remaining ineffective and many smaller yards folding, only the Masonite Corporation's advances in the use of wood chips saved that industry in District Six. By 1934 it was clear that, despite its efforts, the NRA lacked sufficient accountability at the local level to carry out its mission in South Mississippi.¹⁰

If thoroughly enforced, Section 7(a) would have realigned power between Mississippi's employers and employees. Collective bargaining rights would immediately increase organized labor's economic strength. These potential gains were unpopular among Mississippi's less enthusiastic New Dealers. Vocal newspaper editor Fred Sullens of the *Jackson Daily News* had been suspicious of Section 7(a) from the beginning. Along with other pro-business elements within the state, he viewed labor unions as greedy and opportunistic. During the national textile workers strike in 1934, a livid Sullens urged the Roosevelt

⁹ Ibid., 70; Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration, *Mississippi: The WPA Guide to the Magnolia State* (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1938), 175; Deanne Nuwer, "The Biloxi Fishermen Are Killing the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg: The Seafood Strike of 1932," *Journal of Mississippi History* 66 (Winter 2004): 352.

¹⁰ Tate, 71-73; John Hebron Moore, "William H. Mason, Southern Industrialist," *Journal of Southern History* 27 (May 1961): 172-78.

administration to end the strike by any means necessary and advocated the elimination of Section 7(a).¹¹

Colmer held a more favorable opinion of the NIRA. In a speech on the House floor, Colmer voiced his admiration for the NIRA, specifically its benefits to labor. "There has never been a Congress," he boasted, "which has enacted into law one-tenth as much legislation that is beneficial to the laboring man as this Congress. . . . If all previous laws beneficial to labor were wiped off the statute books and only those passed by the Seventy-third Congress were to remain, labor would still be in the most exalted position that it has ever occupied under the American flag." Still in his inaugural congressional session, Colmer remained steadfast in his support for the president's legislative agenda and urged his constituents to do the same. "No longer can the industrial capitalists," he insisted, "grind the helpless laborer under the steel heel of industry."¹²

If Fred Sullens represented a reactionary faction at one end of the New Deal spectrum and Colmer represented a blindly loyal faction at the other, where did additional opinions fall within the spectrum in 1933 and 1934? While few voiced the same disapproval as Sullens, others in the Sixth District lacked the confidence of Colmer. The New Deal, though still in its infancy, had produced limited results. As the alphabet agencies birthed by the Hundred Days legislation produced mixed reactions, the earlier enthusiasm began to cool, at least partially. As summer turned to fall and fall to winter, Mississippians realized that the reform

¹¹ Richard C. Cortner, *The Wagner Act Cases* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1964), 47; John Ray Skates, Jr., "Fred Sullens and the Growth of Organized Labor," *The Southern Quarterly* 10 (July 1972): 345.

¹² Colmer to House, June 16, 1934, Colmer Papers.

and recovery efforts of the Hundred Days had not ended the Depression. Roosevelt remained extremely popular personally with the state's many Democrats, but certain pro-business elements began to realize that the New Deal agenda, whatever it entailed, might push them further than they were willing to go.

All the while, labor supporters remained anxious as well. To these laborers, the administration appeared at least nominally concerned with the rights of not only workers but of unions. Although Roosevelt held a largely ambivalent attitude toward the advancement of organized labor in 1933, the administration had recognized labor's interests. Though unions owed their gains more to a friendly Congress and shrewd pro-labor lobbyists than to the president, Roosevelt's early indifference was secondary to south Mississippi's laborers. President Roosevelt, the NRA, and Section 7(a), regardless of actual accomplishments, symbolized much more, and pro-labor elements in District Six wanted to know just how hard the New Deal was willing to fight on their behalf.¹³

By early 1934 South Mississippi's business elites were becoming more outspoken about the NIRA's recovery efforts. To these interests, the New Deal's pro-labor position looked more and more unappealing. When word began to spread in the press that Senator Robert Wagner was sponsoring a new bill advocating further concessions to labor, including worker's compensation insurance, local businessmen protested. Richard Dunn of the American Oil Company in Hattiesburg proclaimed the legislation vicious in nature and nothing

¹³ J. Wayne Flynt, "The New Deal and Southern Labor," in *The New Deal and the South*, James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato, eds. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 65.

but a victory for manipulative labor lords. J. H. Thickens of the Masonite Corporation in Laurel worried that the legislation might rob employers of their operational rights while leaving plant employees unaccountable to management. A third business executive, E.G. Flowers of Enochs Lumber and Manufacturing Company in Jackson, lamented to Colmer that any legislation sponsored by Senator Wagner, "who is so pronouncedly pro-labor," would yield only adverse effects. Colmer assured these men that Congress would likely adjourn before the current Wagner legislation came to a vote.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, voices on the opposite end of the labor spectrum also spoke up. Organized labor throughout the district looked to take advantage of the federal government's benevolence toward their cause. In March 1934, The Gulfport Brotherhood of Railway and Steamshipclerks was still advocating a shortened work week which would provide employment for its over 800,000 nationally displaced members. Other unions, such as the Painters, Paper Hangers, and Decorators Local of Gulfport and Hattiesburg's United Brotherhood of Carpenters & Joiners of America, showed interest in the unemployment insurance elements of Wagner's proposed legislation. Gulfport's Central Labor Union, AFL—with over 1,500 members of voting age within the district, they reminded Colmer—expressed similar interests in unemployment insurance as a combatant to the suffering their members endured during the Depression.¹⁵

¹⁴ Richard Dunn to Colmer, March 19, 1934; E.G. Flowers to Colmer, March 19, 1934; J.H. Thickens to Colmer, June 7, 1934; Colmer to J.H. Thickens, June 9, 1934, all in Colmer Papers.

¹⁵ Clarence W. Jones to Colmer, March 22, 1934; H. McGorkpe to Colmer, April 16, 1934; E.B. Lyman to Colmer, April 24, 1934; D. L. Reid to Colmer, April 30, 1934, all in Colmer Papers.

In early 1935, laborers in District Six remained adamant in their support for the NRA, while the pro-business faction continued to object. The NIRA included a sunset provision under which it would expire if not reauthorized within two years. Roosevelt asked Congress for reauthorization in February 1935 but received a hostile response. Similar hostility abounded in District Six. The President of Cotton Mills Products Company complained to Colmer that the NRA codes and high production costs enabled foreign producers like Japan and Brazil to expand, while hindering the local textile industry's output. Horace Hinds of Gulfport's United Cash Wholesale Company declared the NRA to be a mess, littered with unenforceable, expense-boosting codes. More alarmed, B.A. Weems of Hattiesburg insisted that Colmer "fight the NRA to a finish!" Weems maintained that his pipe company, along with other small businesses in the area, suffered unreasonably under the NRA codes which, he claimed, benefitted big business at the expense of the little man and consumers. "The NRA," Weems charged, "is playing the devil with the whole country. . . . This thing should be stopped and stopped at once."¹⁶

With the NRA's future in limbo, labor unions reached out to Colmer in the spring of 1935, intent on seeing the act reauthorized. One United Textile Workers of America local informed Colmer that its 305 members voted unanimously in favor of seeing the NRA's continuation. Interestingly enough, some representatives of local business agreed with the unions' stance. Taking an entirely different position than Weems, small business owner Kirk Burnham of

¹⁶ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959), 165; D. Sanders to Colmer, April 9, 1935; Horace Hinds to Colmer, April 11, 1935; B.A. Weems to Colmer, May 14, 1935, all in Colmer Papers.

Moss Point wrote Colmer, "It is my well grounded opinion that the NRA ought to be continued as it is beneficial [sic] to small business men and likewise to the consuming public." Colmer agreed.¹⁷

On Saturday, May 18, 1935, Colmer wrote a constituent in Greene County a congratulatory telegram stating that the Senate voted to extend the NRA. Nine days later, however, reauthorization of the NRA proved moot. On May 27, 1935, recognized as Black Monday by the New Dealers, the Supreme Court, in a 9-0 decision, declared the National Industrial Recovery Act unconstitutional. In a famous case involving the Schechter Poultry Company of Brooklyn, New York, the Court concurred that the Schechter brothers had been illegally convicted on several counts of violating the NRA poultry code. Schechter Poultry had dealt solely in intrastate commerce, thus yielding no regulatory authority to the federal government. The Supreme Court's decision voided the NRA. The New Deal's original industrial recovery program was finished.¹⁸

The Supreme Court's ruling stunned Roosevelt. The verdict levied a direct assault against the New Deal unlike any yet seen during the president's tenure. With the United States still facing economic uncertainty, Roosevelt feared that he could not act to alleviate the Depression without having to answer to the Court's rigid interpretation of the Constitution. The New Dealers realized that the Court's ruling not only nullified the NRA, but it also threatened to dismantle virtually every federal organization created in the previous two years. The flood of legislation dating back to the Hundred Days Congress, David

¹⁷ R.W. Kuyrkendall and C.S. Myers to Colmer, April 8, 1935; Kirk Burnham to Pat Harrison and Colmer, March 26, 1935; Colmer to Burnham, March 28, 1935, all in Colmer Papers.

¹⁸ Colmer to B.E. Green, May 18, 1935, in Colmer Papers; Leuchtenburg, 145.

Kennedy notes in his massive Depression Era and World War II synthesis *Freedom From Fear*, made a clash between the Roosevelt administration and the judiciary inevitable.¹⁹

The Supreme Court's ruling likewise stunned Colmer. During his second term in Congress, Colmer began writing a weekly column, syndicated throughout all of District Six's newspapers. Entitled *Congressional Sidelights*, the popular and informative column featured a variety of subtopics relating to the congressman's activities in the House. Published solely while Congress was in session, the column ran continuously in the district for years. The weekly discourse enabled Colmer to keep an open channel of communication with the voters back home.

Following the Court's ruling, Colmer took to the local papers. In a June 1935 vignette entitled "NRA Held Unconstitutional," the congressman expressed shock, devastation, and a general sense of confusion, sentiments mirrored by many of his peers in the House. Colmer noted the precarious position in which the entire New Deal found itself following the NRA ruling. He and his colleagues were anxious to know what piece of New Deal legislation would be the next to go. In his humble eulogy to the NRA, Colmer lamented that "principle [sic] among its gains are the elimination of child labor, the improvement of labor conditions, and the bringing of some order out of the chaos in which the country found itself when the new Administration took office."²⁰

¹⁹ Kennedy, 328.

²⁰ "NRA Held Unconstitutional," in *Congressional Sidelights*, in Colmer Papers.

In hindsight, the failure of the NRA and Section 7(a) seems predictable. The legislation, assembled swiftly during the height of Roosevelt's popularity in 1933, proved too ambiguous, too bureaucratic, and too voluntaristic. Bernard Bellush notes in *The Failure of the NRA* that Congress and the administration "ignored the lessons of history . . . and through Title I of the National Industrial Recovery Administration, delegated unlimited decision-making power to an unborn bureaucracy, with minimal clarity as to standards, guidelines, or principles." While the NRA codes temporarily created a veil of order in certain industries, particularly textiles, coal, and retail markets, in other sectors like steel and the auto industry they proved asinine and unenforceable. This blend of direct governmental partnership, paternalism, and constraint was a novel concept within the business sphere and largely unwelcomed. On the other hand, many businessmen made the codes work in their favor by fixing prices and production levels, albeit detrimental to consumers. The NRA left most onlookers puzzled, curious to know who was winning and who was losing because of the fair competition codes. In its two year lifespan, the NRA tried to inject too much power and innovation where there had been little previously, creating an atmosphere of confusion.²¹

Section 7(a) of the NIRA also proved to be deficient. Ultimately, the amendment only encouraged management to practice collective bargaining with its employees. Coercing big business with exemptions from antitrust prosecution was an ineffective method of aligning the interests of industry and labor. When

²¹ Bellush, 176; Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 44-47.

disgruntled employers chose to ignore Section 7(a), little could be done to deter them. Laborers, expecting genuine industrial reform while receiving little, grew disenchanted by the summer of 1935. Had the New Deal only given scant interest to their plight? The answer would come shortly.²²

Despite its failure, the NIRA changed the course of labor's history. In less than twenty-four months, the NRA and Section 7(a) energized a somewhat dormant labor pool and reminded workers of the strength they shared collectively when pursuing fair working conditions and wages. The NRA allowed fishermen and shrimpers along the Gulf to gain traction in their unionizing efforts, something they had previously been unable to maintain. Although many textile workers and lumbermen in District Six gained only marginally from the labor legislation, the emergence of an accountable federal government reinforced their support for the Roosevelt administration. The benefits of the NRA were limited, but the agency prevented the country's economic crisis from getting worse. Furthermore, the seeds planted by the NRA and Section 7(a) in their two years would completely redefine management-labor relations throughout the nation. For the rest of the decade, anti-labor factions near and abroad would be forced to reconcile themselves with the moderately intrusive, often recycled, calculated gambles known more popularly by the moniker of New Deal legislation.²³

Colmer never budged in his support for NRA or the Roosevelt administration in the first years of the New Deal. In a 1933 speech in Mobile, Alabama, Colmer declared the NRA "the most revolutionary and comprehensive

²² Badger, 127.

²³ E. Paul Durrenberger, *Gulf Coast Soundings: People and Policy in the Mississippi Shrimp Industry* (Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1996), 31; Leuchtenburg, 69.

piece of legislation ever enacted by any Legislature . . . the most beneficial piece of legislation ever enacted for the welfare of the common masses." Later in 1934, Colmer assured Gulfport's Central Labor Union, AFL, president of his interest in seeing the proposed Wagner legislation passed. "It is my present intention to support any measure that leads to a more amicable relationship between capital and labor," he insisted. Immediately following the NRA's demise in June 1935, he noted one last time, "Even the bitterest critics of the NRA admit that gains have been made."²⁴

After two years, the verdict had arrived. "By the way, Bill Colmer has made good up here in Congress—he is a live chap," wrote a Mississippi native visiting Washington to a friend back home in Leaksville. "He has ability, personality, and in fact everything that goes to make up a real good fellow." The rookie congressman had proven to be a success. The legislative agenda that Colmer had energetically supported for the two previous years, he believed, served Mississippi well. Many Mississippians felt the same way.²⁵

Unlike Mississippi's other members of the lower House, Colmer continually had to balance the demands of the state's most demographically diverse voters. With so many of his constituents aligned with the cause of labor, Colmer remained eager to support them. There were scores of working class voters throughout the district who were anxious to cast a ballot for a representative looking after their interests, and Bill Colmer failed to disappoint. For better or for worse, the New Deal labor policies altered the psyche of

²⁴ Colmer to Committee of the Automobile Maintenance Industry, 1933; Colmer to H. McGorkpe, April, 20, 1934; "NRA Held Unconstitutional," in *Congressional Sidelights*; all in Colmer Papers.

²⁵ Dick Wooten to John Backstrum, March 28, 1934, in Colmer Papers.

Mississippi's working class. For a brief, yet encouraging, period the NRA and Section 7(a) aroused hope for many workers in depressed Mississippi. Recovery seemed near at hand.

Still, in early 1935, it was easy to be a liberal New Dealer. In his first session in the House, Colmer's only controversial vote was pro-administration and concerned alcohol. The majority of Colmer's southern peers still remained securely hitched to the Roosevelt bandwagon. The transition leading to a conservative coalition that historian James Patterson examined in the 1960s had only minuscule roots in early 1935. By summer's end, however, the anti-New Deal shift in Congress would slowly gain momentum. The major unifying factors, opposition to a burgeoning federal bureaucracy and disdain for the New Deal's domestic programs, remained just beyond the horizon. Hence, many of 1933's active New Dealers would soon become displeased with the administration's escalating course. By late 1935, several of Mississippi's once enthusiastic supporters, such as newspaperman Fred Sullens and Congressman John Rankin, began voicing anti-New Deal sentiments more frequently, something that would have been branded as blasphemous in 1933. Bill Colmer, however, remained confident.²⁶

²⁶ Tom S. Hines, Jr., "Mississippi and the Repeal of Prohibition: A Study of the Controversy Over the Twenty-First Amendment," *Journal of Mississippi History* 24 (January 1962): 23; Patterson, vii.

CHAPTER III

THE NEW DEAL TAKES A LEFT: THE WAGNER ACT AND THE
SECOND HUNDRED DAYS, 1935-1936

Even before the Supreme Court struck down the National Industrial Recovery Act, labor was expressing dissatisfaction with Section 7(a). In a May 20, 1935, letter to Congressman Colmer, American Federation of Labor President William Green summarized what he viewed as 7(a)'s limitations:

Labor learned from experience during the last two years that Section 7-A of the National Recovery Act, which provides for the right of working people to join a union of their own choosing, to do so free from intimidation, coercion or discharge, and to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, was neither real nor operative. The declared purpose of Congress to guarantee to Labor the right to organize and bargain collectively, free from intimidation or coercion, was defeated through the unrelenting opposition of employers and employes' [sic] organizations. Because of this fact Labor earnestly seeks to secure the enactment of a law which will make Section 7-A real.¹

Barely a week before the Black Monday ruling, Green was already convinced that further legislation was needed to protect the rights of organized workers. He particularly liked a bill sponsored in the Senate by Robert Wagner of New York. Wagner had first introduced a labor bill in 1934, but Roosevelt, nervous about midterm elections, effectively delayed any vote on it before Congress adjourned later that summer. Throughout the winter, Wagner and his assistants continued to hone the bill. Even without support from the Roosevelt administration, the new legislation slowly began to gain traction as the 1935

¹ William Green to Colmer, May 20, 1935, in William M. Colmer Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

congressional session unfolded. Wagner's persistence would soon be rewarded.²

Like Green, laborers within District Six petitioned Colmer to support Wagner's proposal. Despite the administration's apparent indifference, the bill had become increasingly popular among labor's spokesmen. Before the Supreme Court had even denounced the NRA, Gulfport's Bricklayers, Masons, & Plasterers International Union and the Central Labor Union, both AFL affiliates, informed Colmer of their support for the Wagner legislation. United Textile Workers of America locals throughout the district did the same. In mid-May 1935, after the Senate agreed to reauthorize the NRA, the AFL and its Mississippi affiliates advocated passage of the Wagner bill as a supplement to the New Deal's original recovery program. In his letter to Colmer, Green insisted that the legislation "is of major importance to the working people and their friends throughout the entire country. For this reason I am earnestly appealing to you to vote for the enactment of this measure into law."³

Despite his steadfast support for the NRA, Colmer recognized its defects. He realized that the fair competition codes and voluntaristic aspects of the NRA left much to be desired by both management and labor. Colmer initially welcomed the Wagner bill as a helpful revision which addressed the shortcomings of the NRA. Just days before the Supreme Court's bombshell, Colmer emphatically endorsed the Wagner legislation in a letter to Green. "I

² Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 76; Roger Biles, *A New Deal for the American People* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 1991), 128.

³ G. L. Castner to Colmer, March 26, 1935; J. T. Farr to Colmer, March 31, 1935; Chas Morgan to Colmer, April 2, 1935; William Green to Colmer, May 20, 1935, all in Colmer Papers.

shall be glad to support this and any other legislation affecting labor if I can possibly do so," Colmer informed the AFL president. Within days, however, the NRA was dead, and the fate of organized labor was uncertain. Workers in District Six feared that the gains made in the previous two years under the New Deal would be erased. Colmer now viewed the Wagner legislation as more than a helpful revision of the NRA. It had become a necessity.⁴

Long before the Supreme Court nullified the NIRA, Wagner was apprehensive about the agency's future. The senator also worried that the Court would not rule favorably toward additional labor legislation. Anticipating judicial scrutiny, he and his co-writers used language specifically intended to pacify the Court and create optimal success for the bill. In February 1935, Wagner first unveiled his labor proposal to the Seventy-fourth Congress. The bill had been drafted the previous year by Wagner, his staff, and representatives of the president's National Labor Relations Board, with no input from the Department of Labor or the NRA. While similar to Section 7(a), the proposed legislation provided significantly stronger accountability from the federal government. The bill guaranteed the right of workers to organize independently and to bargain collectively. Employers were prohibited from interfering, restraining, or coercing workers in any manner regarding their right to unionize. The legislation outlawed "dummy" unions, as the senator referred to them, controlled principally by management. Wagner's proposal also called for a revamped NLRB, composed of appointees selected by Roosevelt, whose job would be to prevent unjust labor

⁴ "NRA Held Unconstitutional," in *Congressional Sidelights*; Colmer to William Green, May 21, 1935, both in Colmer Papers.

practices by employers. Unlike earlier labor boards, this NLRB would serve as an autonomous tribunal for employee grievances against management. The previous NLRB, created by an Executive Order in June 1934, had been a progressive step for the administration, but it lacked any genuine means of protecting organized labor's rights. Wagner intended for the legislation to strengthen labor by correcting the defects of Section 7(a) and the existing NLRB.⁵

Wagner and his co-writers went to great lengths to define "commerce" and "interstate commerce" in the bill. Aware that the terms held significance for the Supreme Court's potential rulings, the Wagner team was meticulous with its phrasing. The bill's Declaration of Policy maintained that insufficient bargaining power between management and labor would hinder wage increases and reduce purchasing power, thus prolonging the Depression and obstructing the "free flow of commerce." The declaration suggested that management's rejection of collective bargaining would lead to more frequent strikes, also detrimental to the "free flow of commerce." The NLRB would preside over all matters concerning obstruction of the flow of commerce and disturbances regarding collective bargaining. Wagner maintained that legitimate collective bargaining practices would only accelerate the flow of commerce and aid, not hinder, purchasing power.⁶

⁵ Richard C. Cortner, *The Wagner Act Cases* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1964), 74-78; Richard Polenberg, *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933-1945: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 71; Biles, 128.

⁶ Cortner, 75.

Wagner's proposals immediately encountered both support and opposition. He planned to launch the legislation in the Senate, the more liberal of the two houses since the November 1934 elections, hoping that success there would persuade the other branches of government to follow suit. Corporate America, however, was in an uproar. The National Association of Manufacturers, the Automobile Manufacturers' Association, and the American Newspaper Publishers' Association all adamantly opposed the legislation. During the Senate Committee on Education and Labor's hearings in March, an ANPA representative predicted that Wagner's bill would lead "to a labor dictatorship." Other critics deemed the legislation one-sided, unfair, and unconstitutional. Labor interests, however, were generally supportive of Wagner's proposals. In April, the AFL held a symposium whose four hundred national delegates returned to their districts and wrote their congressmen in favor of the bill. On May 2, the Senate Labor Committee reported the bill, largely unchanged. Two weeks later the legislation passed overwhelmingly in the upper House, despite continued opposition from conservative senators and pro-business representatives who had stormed Washington to condemn the bill. With the Senate behind him, Wagner believed the administration would soon comply.⁷

At no point since the introduction of the legislation in February had anyone within the administration given the bill more than faint support. However, after the Senate Labor Committee's report in early May, administrative agencies rushed to claim the revised NLRB. Labor Secretary Frances Perkins, who had

⁷ Ibid., 76-78; William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 151.

played no role in drafting the legislation, hoped to add the NLRB to her department. Likewise, General Hugh Johnson, who had opposed the bill from its inception, hoped the NRA would control the NLRB. The Department of Justice, acting through Senate Majority Leader Joseph Robinson, had unsuccessfully attempted to control the NLRB's litigation policies. The sudden administrative infighting worried Wagner. More troubling, however, was that despite the Senate's endorsement, Roosevelt still refused to support the legislation.⁸

The president resisted for several reasons. He had scarcely been consulted in the drafting stages of the bill, and he disliked the separation of the NLRB from the Department of Justice. In early 1935, Roosevelt still maintained a centrist position regarding labor, preferring the NRA model of business-labor cooperation to Wagner's more far-reaching ideas. Although the president had maintained a precarious relationship with business elites in the first years of the New Deal, he desperately wanted their support in the coming presidential election. Roosevelt had no desire to jeopardize the support of business by endorsing Wagner's controversial legislation. Rexford Tugwell, in *The Democratic Roosevelt*, maintains that in early 1935, business support meant more to the president than that of the labor unions. Tugwell insists that in mid-1935 Roosevelt intended to ignore Wagner's bill and support impending social security legislation. By backing the social security proposal, the president

⁸ Cortner, 79.

believed that he could endear himself to the rank-and-file voters without having to negotiate with union leaders.⁹

However, May 1935 marked a turning point for Roosevelt. When the Senate voted overwhelmingly to pass the Wagner bill on May 16, the president finally offered nominal support. After months of refusal, Roosevelt had been coerced into backing the bill. As Wagner had predicted, support in the Senate was key. On May 20, a House committee reported the bill, convincing the president its passage was imminent. Four days later, Roosevelt and other administration officials held a conference with Wagner, United Mine Workers of America president John L. Lewis, and Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America president Sidney Hillman to discuss provisions for the final legislation. On May 25, the president announced his enthusiastic support for the bill.¹⁰

Factors beyond Roosevelt's control best explain his reversal on the Wagner bill. Earlier that May, the United States Chamber of Commerce had denounced Roosevelt's domestic programs. Try as he might, the president could not please pro-business interests, increasingly incensed at the course the New Deal seemed to be charting. Then, only days after Roosevelt endorsed Wagner's legislation, the Supreme Court invalidated the NIRA. In a unanimous decision, the Court deemed the New Deal recovery program unconstitutional, erasing organized labor's gains under Section 7(a) and the government-business partnership Roosevelt favored. The president viewed the assault on the NIRA as

⁹ Ibid., 80; J. Wayne Flynt, "The New Deal and Southern Labor," in *The New Deal and the South*, James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato, eds. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 66; Rexford G. Tugwell, *The Democratic Roosevelt* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1957), 336-37.

¹⁰ Stanley Vittoz, *New Deal Labor Policy and the American Industrial Economy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 148; Leuchtenburg, 151; Cortner, 81.

a threat to the entire New Deal, and he refused to watch idly as his programs were endangered. The indolence and indecision Roosevelt had demonstrated earlier in the year would give way to a renewed vitality unseen since the Hundred Days.¹¹

In June, the administration initiated a "Second Hundred Days" of legislative fervor centering on Wagner's labor bill and other social reforms. Although eager to return home from the scorching Washington summer, Congress remained in session at the president's request. Frustrated with business leaders and determined to protect his New Deal from the Supreme Court, Roosevelt urged the legislators to pass five key bills: Wagner's labor proposal, a social security measure, a banking law, a public-utilities holding company bill, and a tax bill aimed at the rich. Congress debated the measures throughout the summer and finally adjourned in late August. While the original Hundred Days Congress had emphasized recovery and relief in the wake of the Depression, the Second Hundred Days legislation represented the most sweeping social reforms that had ever come upon the floors of Congress. The reforms passed that summer further enhanced the relationship between the federal government and the American people and provided the framework for an emergent welfare state. In the end, the session represented a victory for the New Deal liberals, old progressives, labor interests, and the administration. In some form, Roosevelt received everything he requested.¹²

¹¹ Morgan, 70.

¹² *Ibid.*; Leuchtenburg, 150.

On July 5, Wagner's bill, officially titled the National Labor Relations Act, received the President's signature. The senator's efforts had finally culminated in significant gains for labor: federal protection of collective bargaining rights, an updated NLRB, the legalization of strikes, a permanent deathblow to company unions, and working conditions free from "unfair labor practices." The NLRA proved a crowning achievement of the New Deal, rectifying the imbalance of power between business and labor. Labor unions across the country applauded their newfound gains.¹³

In Mississippi, response to the Wagner Act was mixed. When Biloxi's Fleur De Lis Club, a social organization that included coastal workers, wrote Colmer insisting he support the Wagner bill, the congressman wasted no time relaying his support. "I favor all legislation which tends to the betterment of labor," Colmer assured the group, just days before the House vote. Soon, labor unions would be thanking Colmer for his support. Others within the district, however, were critical of the legislation. Letters from the sixth district's business elites poured in, one of which declared that the Wagner Act "will do more harm to industries in this country than any other bill that has been proposed in Congress." Colmer replied with courteous letters, assuring the businessmen that he would bear their interests in mind. Among the state's congressional delegates, only Colmer and Senator Theodore Bilbo earnestly supported the Wagner Act. Congressman John Rankin of Tupelo expressed fury toward the labor law and declared that if the legislation passed "the streets of southern towns would be red

¹³ Morgan, 76; Leuchtenburg, 151; Milton Derber, "The New Deal and Labor," in *The New Deal: The National Level*, ed. John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), I, 114.

with blood." Other Mississippi delegates, like Senator Pat Harrison, supported the measure solely on the basis of party loyalty. With a re-election campaign looming in 1936, Harrison had no interest in breaking with the administration, especially over a bill so certain to be enacted. Harrison's biographer, Martha Swain, suggests that Mississippi's senior senator, along with many other southern Democrats, supported the legislation while silently opposing it.¹⁴

Harrison's attitude toward the Wagner Act mirrored a growing anxiety among conservative Democrats, especially southerners, concerning the course of the administration. The Second Hundred Days marked a turning point for the New Deal, leaving earlier supporters confused and alienated. Increased hostility from business had forced the president's hand. Realizing he could not appease the business interests, Roosevelt defied them. The Wagner Act was only the tip of the iceberg. The Second Hundred Days produced the Revenue Act of 1935, a bill increasing taxes on corporations and the wealthy. Long advocated by radicals in Congress, the revenue bill centered on an extreme redistribution of wealth proposal. In its original form, the tax bill stunned conservatives in Congress and angered the business community. The Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Harrison, softened the bill's actual blow to business and the wealthy, but the message was clear: Roosevelt, who had once courted business' cooperation, was now adversarial. Although the final version of the bill

¹⁴ Wayne Flynt, "A Vignette in Southern Labor Politics: The 1936 Mississippi Senatorial Primary," *Mississippi Quarterly* 26 (Winter 1972-73): 90; P.A. Songe, Adam Bourdeaux, and Bernard Hebert to Colmer, June 3, 1935; Colmer to P.A. Songe, Adam Bourdeaux, and Bernard Hebert, June 4, 1935; L. N. Dantzer to Colmer, May 25, 1935, all in Colmer Papers; Morgan, 75; Donald Crumpton Mosley, "A History of Labor Unions in Mississippi" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Alabama, 1965), 127; Martha H. Swain, *Pat Harrison: The New Deal Years* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), 97.

was only a shell of the original, with little wealth actually redistributed, the break between Roosevelt and big business became permanent. According to William Leuchtenburg, the Revenue Act "created deeper business resentment than any other New Deal measure."¹⁵

The Public Utility Holding Company Act of the Second Hundred Days also generated further friction between New Dealers and conservatives in Washington. Though the bill ultimately passed the House with ease, its original version contained a controversial "death sentence" provision authorizing the Securities and Exchange Commission "to dissolve any holding company which could not justify its existence." Lobbyists representing private power companies flooded Washington, effectively protesting the death sentence stipulation. Many Democrats in both houses broke with the administration, handing Roosevelt his first substantial defeat. Even Colmer defiantly voted to axe the death sentence provision from the utilities bill.¹⁶

James T. Patterson, in *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal*, notes that the death sentence provision of the public utilities bill marked a significant turning point for many conservative Democrats, whose sentiments now shifted "from unhappy loyalty to open opposition." For the first time, they successfully defied the administration. Patterson maintains that "having left the New Deal on one key issue, these Democrats were to find it easier to do so again and again." The congressmen, many of whom originally supported the

¹⁵ Leuchtenburg, 152-54; Biles, 130.

¹⁶ Leuchtenburg, 155; James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 55.

New Deal as a conservative method of ending the Depression, were convinced that the Second Hundred Days had gone too far. As the session concluded in late August and the weary legislators returned home, a conservative coalition was emerging that would eventually prove troublesome for Roosevelt and his New Deal.¹⁷

Following the chaos of 1935's extended summer session, the second year of the Seventy-fourth Congress seemed tame. The Walsh-Healey Public Contracts Act would be the 1936 session's only major piece of labor legislation. David Kennedy notes that the Walsh-Healey Act reflected Roosevelt's preferred method of governing: direct partnership between government and business. Using contracts tendered by the administration, rather than the bargaining power of unions, businesses would be required to pay set wages and maintain quality working conditions for laborers. The act established an eight-hour day and forty-hour week for employees working for government contractors and provided overtime pay for excessive hours. Earlier in the session, Congress had increased funding for the New Deal work relief agencies, and workers wanted a share of the federal dollars that would be pouring into the state. Unions in south Mississippi urged Colmer to support the legislation.¹⁸

Roosevelt and Colmer both won reelection in 1936. In his first reelection bid, the president soundly defeated Alf Landon of Kansas, garnering over 60 percent of the popular vote. Roosevelt retained the expected support of

¹⁷ Patterson, 41, 75.

¹⁸ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 297; E.J. Barksdale to Colmer, March 10, 1936, in Colmer Papers.

traditional Democratic stalwarts and broadened the party's appeal to untapped voting markets. For the first time, African Americans and working class ethnic groups in large cities supported the Democratic Party in high volume. These voters contributed to the growth of organized labor during the New Deal. Angered by New Deal reform measures, pro-business elements withheld votes and money, yet organized labor's contributions helped offset the losses. The president viewed his margin of victory as both vindication of the New Deal and a mandate to extend it. His attempt to do so in 1937 would meet unexpected consequences.¹⁹

Colmer's popularity in 1936 was as high as it had ever been. He had won reelection decisively in 1934, largely because of his Hundred Days record. By 1936, however, the New Deal had encountered setbacks as well as triumphs. In a campaign stop that summer, Colmer defended his record:

My record in the brief time that I have represented you in Congress constitutes the record of the Democratic Party and its great, humanitarian leader, Franklin D. Roosevelt. For, with the exception of a few instances . . . I have seen fit, as a Democrat elected by a Democratic constituency, to go along with the Democratic Party and its great Democratic Chieftain, President Roosevelt. Therefore, if I am to be charged with the mistakes of President Roosevelt and the Democratic Party, then in all fairness and justice I should be given credit for the worthwhile accomplishments of the Democratic Administration and President Roosevelt.²⁰

While Colmer's support for the Roosevelt administration certainly contributed to his success in 1936, his popularity involved more than loyalty to the president. After all, other southern congressmen, including Mississippians, had defied the administration and suffered little political damage. If any single

¹⁹ Biles, 134-35; John A. Hudson and George Wolfskill, *All but the People: Franklin D. Roosevelt and His Critics, 1933-39* (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), 139.

²⁰ Campaign Speech, 1936, in Colmer Papers.

legislative trademark had endeared him to the voters of District Six, it was his support of labor. Throughout the 1936 primary campaign, national affiliates of various AFL unions urged their subsidiaries in Mississippi to continue to support Colmer. The International Brotherhood of Boiler Makers, Iron Ship Builders, and Helpers; the Brotherhood of Railway and Steamship Clerks; the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and Enginemen; and the Brotherhood of Maintenance and Way Employes [sic] all instructed local lodges to endorse Colmer. "Urge relatives and friends to do likewise," George M. Harrison, Grand President of Cincinnati's Brotherhood of Railway & Steamship Clerks insisted.²¹

Colmer welcomed labor's support. Demands in Washington afforded the congressman little time for campaigning, yet labor's public endorsement helped him compensate for time spent out of the district. Colmer recognized the letters from both national and local labor offices as invaluable. Before the late summer primary, Colmer wrote the AFL's Green, asking for the federation's official endorsement.

I believe that I have a well right perfect record in the support of labor legislation in Congress. I do not know what the custom of your organization is, but I have received endorsements from several of the organizations affiliated with the American Federation of Labor. If you could see fit to send me such an endorsement that I could use publicly in my campaign for re-election, I would appreciate it.²²

If not for factional politics, Colmer might have earned a third term without opposition in 1936. In April, C. H. Ramsay alerted Colmer that Senator Theodore

²¹ J.N. Davis to Officers and Members of all Subordinate Lodges in Mississippi, June 30, 1936; G.M. Harrison to Brotherhood Lodges in Mississippi, July 10, 1936; John McNamee to Colmer, July 13, 1936; F.H. Fljozdal to All Members of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes – State of Mississippi, July 16, 1936, all in Colmer Papers.

²² Colmer to William Green, July 30, 1936, in Colmer Papers.

Bilbo had come out in support of John Lumpkin for the District Six seat. "If we have any serious opposition, I believe Bilbo will develop it," warned Ramsay. Although Colmer and Bilbo were both ardent New Dealers, Bilbo considered Lumpkin a greater asset to his own political self-interest. Colmer, however, remained confident. "I had been expecting this," he informed Ramsay, "as the Junior Senator has let it be known that he would support Lumpkin against me. . . . I have never been a factional politician and do not want to be forced into being one now, but it looks like we are going to have to whip them both!" Colmer's confidence turned out to be well-founded. In a one-sided August primary, the incumbent congressman indeed whipped Bilbo's candidate by a margin of nearly three to one.²³

Two final factors emerging in late 1936 underscored Colmer's credentials as both a liberal and a champion of organized labor. On the state level, Governor Hugh White proposed a Balance Agriculture With Industry program designed to stimulate industrial expansion. For decades, the anti-corporate sensibilities of agrarian Populists—Progressives had restricted efforts to industrialize. White envisioned BAWI as a way to modernize Mississippi in the wake of shrunken agricultural markets. The proposal called for a new law enabling local governments across the state to issue bonds that would finance the construction of factories, which could be used to entice out of state businesses to relocate to Mississippi and create much-needed jobs. In

²³ C.H. Ramsay to Colmer, April 3, 1936; Colmer to C.H. Ramsay, April 6, 1936, both in Colmer Papers.

September 1936, the state legislature enacted White's Mississippi Industrial Act.²⁴

The act created a State Advertising Commission, a State Industrial Commission, and a State Planning Commission, all working together to attract industry into the state. Upon petition by 20 percent of the registered voters of any county or municipality, the Industrial Commission could, at its discretion, issue a Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity. The certificates allowed local governments to hold bond hearings regarding factory construction and land purchases. The most significant role of the three member Commission was to screen proposals from potential applicants looking to relocate to the Magnolia State.²⁵

Even though BAWI brought in twelve new businesses and put many Mississippians to work during White's administration, criticism abounded. Critics maintained that BAWI attracted only low-wage industries, providing little long-term relief to the state's economy. Also, no recognition was given to organized labor. BAWI's initial appeal for many of the northern companies electing to relocate was the anti-union climate in Mississippi. The governor made no secret of his disdain for labor unions. He assured prospective industries that labor

²⁴ Connie L. Lester, "Balancing Agriculture with Industry: Capital, Labor, and the Public Good in Mississippi's Home-Grown New Deal," *Journal of Mississippi History* 70 (Fall 2008): 235-44; James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: the Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 14.

²⁵ Lester, 249; Cobb, 14; Roger D. Tate, "Easing the Burden: The Era of Depression and New Deal in Mississippi" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1978), 182-83.

agitation in the state was minimal. White and the Commission behaved as if the New Deal's legislation and labor unions did not exist.²⁶

The divergent views of White and Colmer regarding labor are revealing. Both men wanted to see jobs created for the destitute constituents they represented. Both hoped industrialization could rescue Mississippi from the Depression. However, one man embraced labor legislation, and the other ignored it. Mississippi's desperate condition demanded immediate economic relief, which BAWI provided, but White's failure to recognize the rights of labor proved shortsighted, as shipyard magnate Robert Ingalls would later point out to him. White's conservative views regarding organized labor help emphasize Colmer's liberal position in 1936.²⁷

A second factor in late 1936 also illustrates Colmer's role as an effective advocate for organized labor. In September, the AFL suspended John L. Lewis's Committee for Industrial Organization, leading to an eventual split within the union. Although the industrial unions represented by the CIO achieved historic national gains during the 1930s, the predominance of craft unions would preclude any significant advances in Mississippi. Instead, the AFL largely continued to represent labor interests in the state. Historian Wayne Flynt maintains that by 1936, although unions were not as prevalent in Mississippi as in other states, organized labor was surprisingly active politically and "quite sophisticated for a state with so little union tradition." Flynt attributes this partly to the moderate policies of William Green and the AFL, whose strategy in

²⁶ Lester, 255-60.

²⁷ Lester, 260.

Mississippi, according to Donald Mosley, was "to sell itself as a friend of management, not unreasonable in its demands." While Colmer viewed Lewis as tyrannical and counterproductive to organized labor, he approved the approach of Green, whom he found likeminded and reasonable. Green's moderate demeanor would serve his union well, and the AFL's resistance to industrial unionism made the growth of organized labor more palatable in Mississippi. By distancing itself from the CIO in 1936, the AFL was able to achieve modest success in the state by the end of the New Deal.²⁸

Nineteen thirty-six would end well for both Roosevelt and Colmer. Congress and the American voters had given the president everything he desired. The citizens of District Six had done the same for their congressman. The New Deal would soon peak, however, winning scattered victories through 1938, but prolific legislative sessions mirroring those of 1933 and 1935 would not occur. For the president, 1937 would bring increased congressional hostility, the likes of which he had yet to encounter. For Colmer, the remaining years of the New Deal would present further opportunity to distinguish himself from his Mississippi colleagues in the House.

²⁸ Leuchtenburg, 111; Christopher L. Tomlins, "AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective," *Journal of American History* 65 (March 1979): 1021; Flynt, "A Vignette in Southern Labor Politics," 99; Mosley, 184.

CHAPTER IV
THE RISE OF THE CONSERVATIVE COALITION AND LABOR'S FINAL
VICTORY, 1937-1940

Only months removed from a sweeping national victory, Franklin Roosevelt would encounter unexpected hostility from the Seventy-fifth Congress. Thanks in part to his own political miscalculations, the president continued to alienate former supporters. An attempt to reorganize the Supreme Court, an ill-advised response to controversial sit-down strikes, and a mid-year recession troubled many lawmakers and led to a legislative deadlock. The conservative coalition on Capitol Hill, whose nucleus had formed during the Second Hundred Days, continued to gain members and momentum throughout 1937. This body would prove troublesome for the president. The landslide victory of 1936 convinced the New Dealers to enact a more radical legislative agenda, but the conservatives in Congress, especially southerners, were becoming increasingly uncooperative. Gradually, Bill Colmer would watch his southern peers break ties with the New Deal.¹

The first significant source of congressional dissent in 1937 arose from Roosevelt's infamous "court-packing" plan. Since "Black Monday" in 1935, the president had explored ways to circumvent the anti-New Deal rulings of the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, the Court continued to strike down New Deal legislation, and the Social Security Act and the Wagner Act appeared particularly vulnerable. The Court's strict interpretation of the Constitution threatened not

¹ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 250.

only to dismantle the administration's previous accomplishments but to prevent further social reforms as well. Roosevelt was convinced that the justices, not the Constitution, presented the greatest challenge to the New Deal.²

In February 1937, Roosevelt offered Congress a blueprint for judicial reorganization. Most legislators, unaware that it would be presented, were stunned by the proposal. In his *Congressional Sidelights* column, Colmer detailed the president's plan:

The Supreme Court is at present composed of nine judges. President Roosevelt now proposes that he be allowed to appoint one extra judge for each Justice over 70 years of age who continues to serve, with 15 set as the maximum number of Justices on the Bench. In other words, under this plan, if Judge Van Devanter, for example, continues to serve, President Roosevelt will have the right to appoint another judge to serve with him. Any appointment that is made must be confirmed by the Senate, and the appointment will be for life. Life-tenure of office is given to the Justices by the Constitution, and Congress has no power to change it.³

Roosevelt's request for judicial reform was partly practical, partly disingenuous, and wholly political. He explained to Congress that the additional justices were essential for promoting judicial efficiency. Furthermore, the president argued that the age of the current justices (the average being seventy-one) might impede their ability to rule soundly in an adverse economy. Along with the six potential appointees to the Supreme Court, the president desired to

² Ibid, 232; James T. Patterson, *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 85.

³ "The Supreme Court," in *Congressional Sidelights*, in William M. Colmer Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

name as many as forty-four additional judges to the lower courts. He viewed these courts as slow and overburdened as well.⁴

Roosevelt's presentation of the court scheme was flawed from the outset. At no point during the presidential campaign of 1936 had he declared judicial reorganization a priority, and Democratic leaders in both houses were incensed that they had not been informed about the bill. Even liberals recognized that the president was playing politics with one of the country's most sacred institutions. Despite any legitimate criticisms Roosevelt could cast upon the Court, support for his proposal was limited. As David Kennedy notes, "neither efficiency nor age was the real issue, and Roosevelt knew it . . . so did the country."⁵

Moderate and conservative Democrats who had feared breaking with the president were now presented a golden opportunity. Dragged by the New Deal's popularity further than anticipated, they had hesitated to oppose the administration openly. Roosevelt's attack on the hallowed Court, however, offered Democrats a chance to challenge the president without facing the wrath of an angry electorate. In the words of historian Martha Swain, former New Dealers realized that "retrenchment was now possible." For the first time, moderates in the Senate joined ranks with Republicans and conservative Democrats, who viewed the Court as the only means of restricting the New Deal's radical agenda. To hand Roosevelt the Court, the Senate feared, would create a dictatorship. House sentiments largely mirrored those of the Senate,

⁴ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 325-26.

⁵ Leuchtenburg, 233-34; Kennedy, 326.

and, according to James T. Patterson, the Court proposal united moderate and conservative representatives and showcased the president's vulnerability.⁶

Roosevelt's assault on the Court was a political disaster, and it was unnecessary. By May, the Supreme Court had upheld the two acts New Dealers considered most endangered, the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act. Moreover, in late spring, Justice Willis Van Devanter announced his plans to retire after almost twenty-seven years on the bench, allowing Roosevelt to add a pro-administration Justice to the Court and solidify a permanent majority favoring the New Deal.⁷

The president appointed liberal Hugo Black to the vacated seat. In his syndicated column, Colmer endorsed the choice and accurately described the mood in Washington regarding the nomination:

On Thursday of last week the President sent to the Senate for confirmation the name of Hugo L. Black, senior Senator from Alabama, to fill the vacancy on the Supreme Court. This created quite a furor on Capitol Hill. It was highly gratifying to the most ardent New Dealers but met with equal adverse criticism by the more conservative element. Senator Black is regarded as ultra-progressive, and the more conservative New Dealers take the position that on all constitutional questions appearing before the Court and affecting New Deal measures he would be like the billy goat at the animal convention—already voted.⁸

The outcome of the court-packing scheme was double-sided for the president. As usual, Roosevelt eventually got what he wanted, but this time he paid a high price. Black's presence made the Supreme Court considerably more liberal, but it also heightened the conservative coalition's sense of urgency.

⁶ Martha Swain, *Pat Harrison: The New Deal Years* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), 167; Patterson, 95, 165-66.

⁷ Leuchtenburg, 236-38.

⁸ "Black To The Supreme Court," in *Congressional Sidelights*, in Colmer Papers.

“Congress,” as Patterson notes, “would have to take the Court’s place in stopping the New Deal.” The administration now faced a new level of congressional hostility that would diminish legislative achievements.⁹

In addition to the court reform setback, Roosevelt faced criticism in 1937 for his response to a series of “sit-down” strikes by CIO unions. By sitting down at the workplace, strikers took control of plants for extended periods of time, often with violent results. Neither federal nor state governments would employ force to remove the strikers, alarming even middle-class property owners across the country. Roosevelt condemned CIO leader John L. Lewis and his tactics, but conservatives in Congress branded the president as apathetic to the rights of business and private property owners. The refusal to use force against the strikers hurt the president politically.¹⁰

In Mississippi, businessmen viewed both the strikes and the CIO with disdain. B.B. Davis, a hotel proprietor from Waynesboro, asked Colmer, “Why in the name of High Heaven, don’t you Congressmen and Senators pass some measure putting a stop to this striking business going on over the Nation? . . . Are you just going to sit there and allow Lewis and his Alien Cohorts to ruin the manufacturing interests of the Country?” Roscoe Ford, a Marion County attorney, agreed. “The principles of democracy [sic] laid out by Jefferson and Jackson and Cleveland appeal to me,” he wrote Colmer, “but somehow, the interpretation of these principles by these great Party leaders is not the same interpretation that John L. Lewis and Sidney Hillman give.” Ford feared that the

⁹ Leuchtenburg, 238-39; Patterson, 190.

¹⁰ Anthony J. Badger, *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989), 267; Leuchtenburg, 241-243.

president had forsaken national recovery for the radical CIO agenda: "I think the President is badly in need of some advice from somebody other than these chronic uplifters and social welfare workers."¹¹

Colmer, too, disliked John L. Lewis. "Your letter was rather emphatic," he replied to Davis. "For this, I do not censure you. On the contrary I can readily understand your righteous indignation. . . . It is beyond me to understand how anybody could condone this unlawful method of depriving people of their property." He suggested, however, that local government, not Congress, was responsible for failing to act. "Sit-down strikes," Colmer insisted, "are violations of the law of trespass of every state in the union, and if the state officials in states having these strikes saw fit to evict them they could do it."¹²

Other prominent Mississippians also expressed contempt for the CIO. Senator Pat Harrison had "no sympathy with sit-down strikes" and viewed John L. Lewis as little more than an agitator. Editor Fred Sullens found Lewis and his organization deplorable. While never a fan of organized labor, Sullens recognized the AFL as the lesser of two evils. The editor declared the militant CIO a hazard to the country and considered Lewis "far more dangerous than Scarface Al Capone." According to John Ray Skates, the *Daily News* editor's hatred of Lewis "became almost a mania." In a *Nashville Banner* article, Congressman John Rankin stated that the CIO was "communism run riot," filled with agitators who wanted to destroy southern industries. "The widening industrial future of the South," he claimed, "must not be imperiled by Communist

¹¹ B.B. Davis to Colmer, April 9, 1937; Roscoe D. Ford to Colmer, June 2, 1937, both in Colmer Papers.

¹² Colmer to B.B. Davis, April 13, 1937, in Colmer Papers.

intrigue or unfair procedure by agencies clothed with federal authority." Although Colmer's rhetoric was not always as colorful as that of his fellow Mississippians, this would be the only labor issue on which he would agree with them during the entire New Deal.¹³

Along with the court plan and the sit-down strikes, a serious economic downturn in mid-1937 caused early supporters to reexamine their loyalty to the administration. After four years of slow but steady economic gains, the country slid into deep recession. This recession proved troublesome for the administration; a break in the economy would signal that the New Deal had failed to alleviate the Depression. Between Labor Day and Christmas, two million Americans lost their jobs, and industrial output dropped at a pace near that of the months immediately following the crash of 1929. Voters had eagerly supported the New Deal because it seemed to solve the economic crisis, but by the end of the year, it was clear that the New Deal had not created total stability.¹⁴

Blame for the recession lay largely at the administration's feet. Although deficit spending had been vital to the New Deal's recovery efforts, the years of economic growth convinced the president that it was now safe to slash expenses. In an attempt to placate the balanced-budget faction in Washington, Roosevelt cut federal spending by ten billion dollars in June. The results were disastrous.¹⁵

¹³ Swain, 150, 209; John Ray Skates, Jr., "Fred Sullens and the Growth of Organized Labor," *The Southern Quarterly* 10 (July 1972): 347; "A Threat to the South," *Nashville Banner*, July 28, 1937, in Colmer Papers.

¹⁴ Leuchtenburg, 243-44; Biles, 143.

¹⁵ Biles, 143.

The financial collapse puzzled Roosevelt. He neither anticipated the recession nor knew how to fix it. His advisors in the administration offered mixed counsel. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau, who believed that a balanced budget was vital to encourage investment, recommended that Roosevelt keep federal spending to a minimum. Other advisors, notably SEC commissioner Jerome Frank and Federal Reserve Board head Marriner Eccles, maintained that only federal spending would stimulate the economy and end the recession. After months of wavering, the president sided with the latter, but economic stability would not be achieved immediately.¹⁶

The "Roosevelt Recession" of 1937 played a significant role in uniting conservative Democrats and Republicans. Patterson maintains that the dire economic conditions caused leaders in both houses to seek a "permanent bipartisan coalition" against the administration. The recession was a third and final catalyst in 1937 allowing disgruntled congressmen, especially southerners, to sever ties with the New Deal. Although the administration's failures in 1937 were glaring, Colmer remained hesitant to shift his allegiances. As he watched many of his southern colleagues jump off of the Roosevelt bandwagon, Colmer did not budge. He determined that the New Deal, though weakened, still had more to offer the folks back home in south Mississippi.¹⁷

The New Deal did, in fact, have one major piece of legislation left in its arsenal. Since the collapse of the NRA, the administration had quietly been preparing a wages and hours bill. In mid-1935, Labor Secretary Frances Perkins

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Patterson, 189.

instructed her department's attorneys to compose multiple drafts of a law setting a minimum wage rate with a mandatory increased rate for hours beyond a maximum work week. Roosevelt fully supported Perkins' proposal. The Walsh-Healey Public Contracts Act of 1936 provided a partial template for the Roosevelt-Perkins plan. Though limited to federal contracts, Walsh-Healey established an eight-hour day and forty-hour week and demanded that employers pay wages set by the Labor Department. Many viewed the proposal as both a "token of good faith" from the administration to organized labor and an indication that the New Deal intended to create better working conditions and provide fair compensation for employees.¹⁸

After the recent political setbacks, Roosevelt and Perkins were anxious to revive the New Deal, and their plan centered on the fair labor standards proposal. Perkins sent a draft of the bill to Benjamin Cohen and Thomas Corcoran, two of Roosevelt's closest legal advisors, who then readied the bill for Congress. In its earliest form, the bill dealt solely with wage and hours provisions, but Roosevelt, believing that it would be well received by Congress, added a strict provision preventing children under the age of sixteen from working in industries involved in interstate commerce.¹⁹

On May 24, 1937, Roosevelt offered the bill to Congress. Senator Hugo Black, who had yet to ascend to the Supreme Court, and Massachusetts Congressman William P. Connery, who would die within a month, sponsored the legislation in their respective houses. The original bill authorized Congress to

¹⁸ Kennedy, 297; Jonathan Grossman, "Fair Labor Standards Act on 1938: Maximum Struggle for a Minimum Wage," *Monthly Labor Review* 101 (June 1978): 24.

¹⁹ Grossman, 24-25.

“set minimum-wage scales and maximum-hours schedules,” of forty cents per hour and forty hours per week. The bill also created an independent labor board consisting of five appointees selected by the president. The board was given authority to “increase minimum standards after proper hearings, if collective bargaining had been attempted and failed.” Lastly, the bill included the child labor restriction. The president insisted that the bill be passed immediately, but Congress proved hesitant.²⁰

Thus began the most heated debate District Six would endure throughout the entire New Deal, with Colmer playing the role of mediator. The wages and hours dispute created more hysteria among south Mississippi businessmen than any piece of legislation the administration had yet presented. Like many southern congressmen, business leaders in District Six had grown weary of the New Deal’s social reforms and what they perceived as Roosevelt’s radical new agenda. Many among south Mississippi’s elite had accepted the early New Deal as a conservative means of combating the Depression. By 1937, however, their support was waning. By contrast, labor’s support for the president had continued to grow, and workers in the district were pleased to hear of the impending wages and hours legislation. Colmer would be forced to appease both interests.

Initial resistance in District Six centered on the bill’s lack of regional wage differentials, and opponents feared that the legislation would cripple industries in, not only Mississippi, but the entire South. Throughout the New Deal, southern politicians and businessmen argued that the “kindly” living conditions of the

²⁰ Patterson, 149; George E. Paulsen, “Ghost of the NRA: Drafting National Wage and Hour Legislation in 1937,” *Social Science Quarterly* 67 (June 1986): 250.

South allowed for a lower, yet fair, wage scale, making regional differentials necessary. "If this hour and wage legislation without a differential is put into effect and it closes the industries at Columbia, Hattiesburg, Laurel, Picayune, Gulfport, and Pascagoula, it will be difficult for your friends to stir up any enthusiasm for your candidacy for any office," wrote Marion County attorney Roscoe Ford. In a separate letter, Ford attempted to explain the wages and hours dilemma to Colmer. "This bill is designed," he said,

to destroy Southern industry and if enacted in the law will absolutely have that effect. . . . With no differential at all existing, the moment such a Bill passes, you may expect every industry affected to cease operations and to dismantle. . . . Mills in the extreme South have but one natural advantage and that is climate, resulting in a saving on fuel used to heat the home, the cost of clothing and the cost of food. The living cost per week for a laborer in the South living on the same standard of living as a laborer in the North, is at least \$5.00 less than in New England and the Middle States. In other words, a girl earning \$50.00 per month in the South is getting net just as much as a girl earning \$70.00 per month in New England or the Middle States. . . . If this Ellenbogen Bill passes, or any other one passes without the proper wage differential, you may expect the plants . . . to dismantle . . . and move elsewhere. Anybody who thinks to the contrary is simply not informed on the subject. . . . I hope that you will be able in a proper way to persuade the President to recede from Secretary Perkins' position, and give the South a little chance.²¹

Ford's letters were among the first Colmer received regarding the wages and hours fight. In his reply to Ford, Colmer conceded that he had given the impending bill little deliberation. For the next year, however, no piece of New Deal legislation would be brought to Colmer's attention more frequently. The

²¹ Patterson, 151; Roscoe D. Ford to Colmer, May 14, 1937; Roscoe D. Ford to Colmer, May 10, 1937, both in Colmer Papers.

wages and hours bill would become "political poison" in Mississippi, and Colmer would be forced to drink.²²

As the debate over wages and hours legislation continued in Washington, south Mississippians expressed their reservations. "If this bill is enacted into law, it means the end of our business," wrote a disgruntled furniture store owner from Laurel. "We simply cannot operate on 35 or 40 hours a week, and our business will not justify us in putting on two crews. . . . As we see it, if the President and the Congress would just call it a day . . . it would be the best thing for the country." J. B. Wheat, a lumberman from Hancock County, shared similar sentiments. "We employ regularly . . . some 75 to 100 families to whom we pay fair wages," he wrote. "Our employes [sic] are happy and contented, but if we have to subscribe to such a bill . . . we will simply have to close our operations and throw all these good friends and neighbors out of employment."²³

The child-labor provisions aroused concern as well. Lumberton attorney John Yeager wrote Colmer on behalf of fellow Pearl River County resident W. H. Slocomb. Slocomb's vegetable container plant employed approximately thirty to thirty-five young men, between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, who worked seasonally to earn money for school. According to Yeager, the plant serviced states as far away as Colorado. Yeager and Slocomb feared that the standards imposed by the wages and hours bill would "knock many worthy school boys out of employment . . . thus depriving them of the completion of high school or junior

²² Colmer to Roscoe D. Ford, May 16, 1937, in Colmer Papers; Walter J. Heacock, "William B. Bankhead and the New Deal," *Journal of Southern History* 21 (August 1955): 356.

²³ W.M. Baker to Colmer, May 26, 1937; J.B. Wheat to Colmer, June 9, 1937; both in Colmer Papers.

college work." As confusion surrounded the impending legislation in mid-1937, Yeager's and Slocomb's concerns were both relevant and misguided. Colmer understood that the child-labor provisions intended to prevent the exploitation of children in industry, not eliminate the summer earning potential of sixteen-year-old students. Likewise, Colmer agreed that Slocomb's employees should continue their work. "You and I know," he wrote Yeager, "that many of our most substantial citizens were able to get their start so to speak from their ability to make a few dollars in the summer to return to school in the winter."²⁴

Letters endorsing the wages and hours proposal also flooded Colmer's office. Both organized and unorganized laborers in the district urged Colmer to support the bill. "Just a line to tell you that I am a sawmill man and we want the eight hour law," wrote a Hancock County worker. "You see Bill, it takes us sixteen hours on the job some days to make fifteen cents per hour and meat is thirty-five cents per pound. Now what must we do?" On the night of July 28, a meeting was held in Laurel for Jones County citizens favoring the bill. "We the people of Jones County, Mississippi in mass meeting assembled do hereby endorse said legislation and urge upon our Senators and Representatives in Congress to support and urge its enactment into law," their resolution declared. Perhaps the most revealing letter in the summer of 1937 came from Hattiesburg attorney William Haralson, who informed Colmer,

This letter is being written to you as a State Committeeman of Labor's Non-Partisan League, as well as in the capacity of a citizen. I have received several communications, pro and con, about the Black-Connery Labor Act. In talking to a great many people, I find that the working class

²⁴ John A. Yeager to Colmer, May 28, 1937; Colmer to John A. Yeager, June 1, 1937; both in Colmer Papers.

are very much interested in this bill being passed, and at this session of Congress. They do not care so much about what hours and wages are fixed. What they want is some new standard by which the working people will receive a decent wage, and won't have to work day and night. I am writing you because I know you want to hear what the folks are talking about. The people feel that they have very little, so far, to show for their endorsement of the New Deal, and they are going to be mighty disappointed if this labor bill is not passed.²⁵

The fate of the Black-Connery bill, however, would not be decided in 1937's summer congressional session. In the Senate, the legislation met opposition from Republicans and southern conservatives, who objected to expanding the New Deal. Surprisingly, the AFL and CIO also opposed the bill and requested that it be amended. Both William Green and John L. Lewis expressed apprehension about the labor board, which, they feared, would undermine labor's greatest weapons, collective bargaining and the strike. Also, Green and Lewis feared a board selected by any incumbent administration, which would potentially leave the unions at the mercy of an anti-labor president. After nearly two months of legislative quarreling, the Senate approved a weakened bill 56-28. In early August, the House version reached the Rules Committee and met further opposition from hostile Republicans and southern Democrats. Colmer reported, "The Committee is sharply divided on the best methods for handling this perplexing question. Most southern members feel that there is grave danger if the bill is enacted into law, of injuring rather than helping

²⁵ J. C. Ott to Colmer, August 13, 1937; W. E. Welch to Colmer, July 29, 1937; William Haralson to Colmer, August 9, 1937; all in Colmer Papers.

labor.” The bill would languish in the Rules Committee for the remainder of the summer.²⁶

Furious over the committee's inaction, Roosevelt attempted to force Congress' hand. On October 12, he called for a special session, beginning the following month. Convinced that the wages and hours bill deserved immediate attention, Roosevelt hoped a second round of congressional debate would yield results. After eleven months of administrative blunders and party infighting, however, many former New Dealers continued to oppose both the administration and the bill.²⁷

As the special congressional session neared the holiday season, the mood in Washington was far from merry. After their brief autumn recess, Republicans and conservative Democrats had returned to the Capitol seemingly more eager than ever to block further New Deal legislation. Despite pressure from Roosevelt, the Rules Committee still refused to release the bill. Then, in late November, Congresswoman Mary Norton of New Jersey, the House Labor Committee chair, offered an amendment to the wages and hours bill and campaigned to bring it to the House floor. By December 2, Norton had collected the 218 votes required to get the bill out of committee, but another barrier thwarted her efforts.²⁸

²⁶ Patterson, 149-150; Ronnie Steinberg, *Wages and Hours: Labor and Reform in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 112; James A. Robinson, *The House Rules Committee* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1963), 17; “Wages and Hours Legislation,” August 13, 1937, in *Congressional Sidelights*, in Colmer Papers.

²⁷ Patterson, 189-190.

²⁸ Paulsen, 252.

Green and the AFL remained unhappy with the bill. Having already expressed opposition to the proposed labor board, the union also refused to support Norton's amendment, which would have reduced the board to a single administrator within the Department of Labor. In late 1937, Green's objective was to protect his craft unions from what he feared might become a pro-industrial union board. Also, Green wanted the Department of Justice to enforce the wage and hour standards to safeguard subsequent gains. Only days after Norton had secured enough votes to send the bill to the House floor, Green forced Congress to reconsider.²⁹

The AFL's dissatisfaction with the labor bill was no secret, and Colmer agreed with the union's anti-CIO sentiment. Green wrote Colmer twice during the special session to explain the Federation's position and to solicit support. "The American Federation of Labor," he informed Colmer on November 22,

feels that the character of the changes to the present draft of the Fair Labor Standards Bill now before the House Rules Committee is such that proper consideration thereof can only be had before the House Labor Committee, where it was originally considered, rather than on the floor of the House. It feels, therefore, that the draft should be referred back to that committee for amendments or that a new bill be substituted.³⁰

From his *Congressional Sidelights* pulpit, Colmer offered his two cents to the residents of District Six:

This possibly is the most highly controversial piece of legislation that has come before Congress in many years. The South is almost unanimously opposed to this measure on the theory that it will — first, prevent, or at least retard, the industrialization of the South; second, that it will close down a large number of small industries as well as some larger ones at a time when unemployment is so heavy . . . On the eve of battle on this legislation in the House we find the House of Labor divided. The bill is

²⁹ Grossman, 26; Patterson, 195.

³⁰ William Green to Colmer, November 22, 1937, in Colmer Papers.

being fostered and sponsored by John L. Lewis' Committee for Industrial Organization while William Green, the head of the American Federation of Labor, is vigorously opposing the bill in its present form.³¹

On December 16, Green wired Colmer one final time during the special session. "I respectfully request," he said, "you vote to recommit (the bill) to the appropriate committee for revision, study, and necessary changes in order to make it a practical and constructive measure." The next day, Colmer voted with a slight majority in the lower house to recommit the wages and hours bill to Norton's Labor Committee. James T. Patterson hailed the vote as "the most smashing defeat Roosevelt had ever received in the House." Although a defeat for the administration, the vote represented a solid victory for Green and the AFL.³²

Pat Harrison biographer Martha Swain maintains that "not one of the seven Mississippians voted for the bill" when it arrived on the House floor in mid-December. She fails to differentiate, however, among Mississippi's seven nays. Colmer's vote to recommit the bill to committee in no way reflected the anti-labor sentiments of District One's John Rankin or District Three's Will Whittington. Nor did it indicate opposition to either the administration or the principles of wage and hour standards. Colmer was rather, simply, responding to the concerns of Green and members of the AFL affiliates who dominated the labor movement in District Six. As he explained to his constituents, "An open fight was waged by the John L. Lewis controlled CIO, who advocated the legislation and the William Green AFL, who opposed it. This resulted in many Representatives who are ordinarily

³¹ "Wages and Hours," in *Congressional Sidelights*, in Colmer Papers.

³² William Green to Colmer, December 16, 1937, in Colmer Papers; Patterson, 195-96.

favorable to labor legislation voting to recommit the bill, which course was advocated by the AFL."³³

Recommitting the wages and hours bill to the House Labor Committee would be the last congressional action of 1937. Twice, Roosevelt had watched conservatives stall the administration's top legislative priority. As the holidays approached, Congress adjourned with the bill's fate yet to be determined. Before heading home for Christmas, Colmer concluded, "Just what the future of this type of legislation is, no one knows at this time."³⁴

Less than three weeks after recommitting the bill, the lawmakers reconvened for a third session of the Seventy-fifth Congress. The administration, again, made wages and hours legislation a priority. For the next four months, Roosevelt, Perkins, Green, Norton, and Georgia Congressman Robert C. Ramspeck worked to refine the bill. In April, the House Labor Committee reported an AFL approved bill, which, like its predecessors, met hostility from Republicans and southern Democrats on the Rules Committee. Finally on May 6, Norton once again rallied enough support to have the bill discharged from the committee and brought to the House floor for a vote.³⁵

By May 1938, the wages and hours frenzy had occupied the attention of south Mississippians for an entire year. As the showdown in the House approached, business leaders in District Six bombarded Colmer with mail. Representatives of the Masonite Corporation, F.S. Senton Cotton Company, and Eastman-Gardiner Hardwood Company of Laurel; Hattiesburg Compress

³³ Swain, 165; "Wages and Hours," in *Congressional Sidelights*, in Colmer Papers.

³⁴ "Wages and Hours," in *Congressional Sidelights*, in Colmer Papers.

³⁵ Grossman, 27-28; Patterson, 242-43; Leuchtenburg, 262.

Company; and Goodyear Yellow Pine Company of Picayune urged Colmer to oppose the bill. Gulf Coast hotels, banks, law offices, and chambers of commerce did the same. "It seems to me that the South has been knifed enough already," Laurel businessman J. W. Bailey pleaded.³⁶

Organized labor also lobbied Colmer. Green, Lewis, and Sidney Hillman, of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America, urged him to support the revised wages and hours bill, as did numerous unions in District Six. Hattiesburg's International Association of Machinists solicited Colmer's "whole-hearted support," and the Mississippi State Federation of Labor, upon learning that the bill had been "OK'd by William Green," added its endorsement. Most compelling, however, was a stirring resolution from Gulfport's Central Labor Union. The document had been composed at a May 19 joint meeting of the state's eight Central Labor Unions, all of which were AFL affiliates and five of which were located in District Six. The resolution, which also denounced a recent meeting of southern industrial leaders in New Orleans, defined southern labor's demands:

Whereas, the Southern industrialists, with their usual hypocrisy and deception pretend to base their opposition to the Wage and Hour Bill on the alleged ground that it will cripple and retard industrial activity and development in the South, but in reality are opposing it because they are determined to do all in their power to keep the workers of the South chained to the chariot-wheel of starvation wages and degrading conditions of work in order to extract still more profits from the sweat, blood, and tears of Southern workers, who are rebelling as never against industrial despots and oligarchs of the South, therefore,

³⁶ J. H. Thickens to Colmer, May 5, 1938; F. S. Senton to Colmer, May 6, 1938; J. W. Bailey, to Colmer, May 10, 1938; F. L. Mathews to Colmer, May 23, 1938; L. O. Crosby to Colmer, May 9, 1938; Walter Read to Colmer, May 24, 1938; W. H. Ellsworth to Colmer, May 16, 1938; K. S. Foster to Colmer, May 3, 1938, all in Colmer Papers.

Be It Resolved that we, the representatives of organized labor in the State of Mississippi, feel it our stern duty to raise our voices in behalf of all Southern workers, the organized or unorganized, and to promote with every means at our command the speedy passage of the Wages and Hours Bill during the present session of Congress; and to condemn and denounce as hypocritical and false the prophesies of calamity to Southern industry made by the Southern Industrialists who conferred and conspired against the said Bill in New Orleans, and

Be It Further Resolved that the Southern industrialists and all others of a like mind who oppose the Wage and Hour Bill, are the avowed enemies of the Southern working class, and are a stumbling block to the development of the South toward a higher and fairer [sic] civilization, in that the said industrialists are willing for the millions of the Southern masses to remain crucified on the CROSS OF EXPLOITATION AND GREED erected by the hands of those same industrialists.³⁷

On May 24, 1938, the wages and hours bill easily passed in the House, 314-97. Patterson notes that of the fifty-six Democrats who opposed the bill, fifty-two were southerners. After three years of increased New Deal liberalism, these representatives permanently broke with the administration. Colmer remained one of few southerners, and the only Mississippian, to support the wages and hours legislation. In what had become the decade's most contentious political issue, Colmer stood alone among the Mississippi House delegation. Two days later he boasted to the Gulfport Central Labor Union, AFL, "No doubt you know by this time that I was the only member of the Mississippi delegation who voted for this bill. I hope, as one who is sincerely interested in the South . . . that those who think this will destroy our section of the country will find that their apprehensions are not well-founded."³⁸

³⁷ William Green to Colmer, May 3, 1938; John L. Lewis to Colmer, May 4, 1938; Sidney Hillman to Colmer, May 5, 1938; S. O. Morris to Colmer, May 13, 1938; J. C. Bullock to Colmer, May 12, 1938; Robert L. Reed to Colmer, May 19, 1938, all in Colmer Papers.

³⁸ Patterson, 245; Colmer to Robert L. Reed, May 26, 1938, in Colmer Papers.

After passing the House, the bill moved to a Senate-House Conference Committee, where it received further modifications. The committee placed administration of the law under a single agent in the Department of Labor and set the hourly wage rate at twenty-five cents the first year with scheduled gradual increases lifting it to forty cents by 1945. The bill set the maximum number of hours per week at forty-four for the first year and forty-two the second year. In the third year, the forty hour week would be implemented, and employers maintained the right to exceed the hour limitations if time-and-a-half wages were awarded. The bill protected children under the age of sixteen from hazardous and exploitive industries and, thanks to pressure from the southern delegates, exempted many agricultural workers. Among Mississippi's delegation, only Colmer and Senator Bilbo voted for the final version of the bill. Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act, as it was officially titled, on June 25, 1938. After nearly fourteen months of legislative wrangling, the administration could finally declare a victory for its bill and for organized labor.³⁹

In the weeks following, Colmer's acclaim grew both in Congress and among the national labor unions. House Majority Leader Sam Rayburn of Texas wrote to thank him for his loyalty to the Democratic Party. "You will gain power and influence in years to come," Rayburn pledged. William Green declared Colmer "a most favorable champion of the AFL's legislative program." The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, Iron Ship Builders, and Helpers of Kansas City and the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employes [sic] of Detroit sent similar gestures of goodwill. Colmer embraced the role of labor

³⁹ Grossman, 28; Patterson, 245-46.

spokeman. His address at the Mississippi State Federation of Labor convention later that summer in Gulfport marked the height of his New Deal liberalism:

Mr. President and Fellow Laborers, I think I am justified in putting myself in your category as a laborer, for, as you know, in these past few years I have had the distinction of being a Representative in the American Congress. The duties of that office have been so onerous [sic] and exacting that if one fulfilled in any substantial part those duties he has certainly had to labor. The ironical part of it is that while we have been trying to shorten everybody else's hours that they must labor we have at the same time been adding to our own. I regret to advise that the much "cussed" and discussed Wages and Hours Bill exempts Members of Congress from enjoying its benefits.

As one who began his career as a laborer in a sawmill at the tender age of 10 years for the magnificent salary of fifty cents a day for twelve hours work, and as one who has served as janitor of a Ward School in order to attend High School here in Gulfport, and who subsequently worked his way through college and has worked ever since for whatever I may have achieved, I feel at home among you.

The American Federation of Labor . . . is headed by none other than that slow-thinking, stalwart, true, and tried friend of the man whom we love to think of as earning his living by the sweat of his brow, one of America's outstanding citizens occupying a position in America that is second only possibly to that of the President of the United States himself, William Green. . . . I am sure it would be interesting to you to know that some three weeks ago I had the privilege and the pleasure of visiting with this distinguished man and outstanding citizen for some thirty minutes. We discussed the problems of Labor. We exchanged views of the importance of the relationship between employer and employee, between Government and Labor.

Always having entertained a very high regard for your distinguished National President, I left his office more convinced than ever that the rights and the cause of American Labor was in good hands as long as William Green continued to be at the helm of the Ship of Labor. In this connection I wonder if may not be pardoned if I refer to the fact that Mr. Green took occasion to personally comment upon the fact that in response to his suggestion I had voted against the first Wages and Hours Bill and commended me for voting for the last one. I am happy to say to you that since I have returned to Mississippi one of the most pleasant incidents that has come my way has been the receipt of a personal letter of

commendation and recommendation from William Green upon my legislative record in the Halls of Congress.⁴⁰

The Seventy-fifth Congress adjourned in late June, and Colmer returned to his district to campaign. Having been in Washington for fifteen of the previous eighteen months, he anxiously anticipated election season in Mississippi. He was opposed in 1938 by former ally, R. G. (Dick) Wooten. The ambitious Wooten boasted to south Mississippi lumber tycoon L. O. Crosby, "I can render a real service to my district, my party, and the country," but the skeptical Picayune businessman attempted to set Wooten straight. "Dick," he asserted, "you do not have a chance. You will be wasting your time, because Bill Colmer has made a record for himself and I do not believe there is a man in the district who would come anywhere near defeating him." Crosby's prediction was accurate. The late August primary revealed that Colmer had suffered little political backlash from his controversial wages and hours vote. Instead, District Six's congressman seemed more popular than ever. Of the 24,000 votes cast in the district, nearly 18,000 went to Colmer.⁴¹

The Fair Labor Standards Act became the New Deal's final landmark piece of legislation. Throughout 1939 and 1940, the strength of the conservative coalition in Congress and the distraction of escalating tensions in Europe and the Pacific prevented further social reform. When Mississippi State Federation of Labor treasurer J. C. Bullock complained to Colmer that the Seventy-sixth

⁴⁰ Sam Rayburn to Colmer, June 8, 1938; William Green to Colmer, June 27, 1938; Harry Nicholas to Colmer, July 26, 1938; Fred H. Fljozdal to Colmer, July 29, 1938; 1938 speech to Mississippi State Federation of Labor in Gulfport, all in Colmer Papers.

⁴¹ R. G. Wooten to L. O. Crosby, March 5, 1938; L. O. Crosby to R. G. Wooten, March 9, 1938; 1938 Election Results, all in Colmer Papers.

Congress had done little to enact more labor reforms that year, Colmer replied, "The President has requested, and Congress has agreed, not to take up any matters at this session except the neutrality bill." The war clouds descending on Washington effectively ended the New Deal. The foreign crisis would dictate Roosevelt's policies for the next six years, and the nation would soon mobilize for war.⁴²

By the end of the decade, Colmer had become one of District Six's most esteemed residents. "Everybody knows that Bill Colmer is a good congressman," the *Greene County Herald* reported in early 1940. "The people of this district know it, and the men in high places in Washington know it." Colmer's constituents, like most Americans who had suffered greatly during the Depression, looked to the federal government for assistance. His votes in Washington had helped to provide a good deal of it to south Mississippians, especially the laborers. Despite backing legislation that would lighten their wallets, he was also able to maintain the support and lasting friendship of business leaders in the district.⁴³

Colmer's support for organized labor set him apart from most of his southern colleagues. The New Deal provided a framework for developing the weak labor unions that existed in District Six, and the National Industrial Recovery Act, the National Labor Relations Act, and the Fair Labor Standards Act all exemplified labor proposals that Colmer believed would lead to better working conditions. Representing the state's most diverse district compelled

⁴² J. C. Bullock to Colmer, September 27, 1939; Colmer to J. C. Bullock, September 29, 1939, both in Colmer Papers.

⁴³ "A Valuable Man," *Greene County Herald*, in Colmer Papers.

Colmer to endorse legislation that many of his colleagues refused to support, and from 1933 to 1939, his labor record in the House remained unequaled by few southerners and no Mississippians. After seven years in Washington, Colmer had proven himself as both a friend to labor and an ardent New Dealer. In the summer of 1940, the *Laurel Leader-Call* reported, "so far as we know, our representative, Bill Colmer, has no announced opposition to reelection. Nor should he."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 6, 1940, in Colmer Papers.

CHAPTER V

EPILOGUE

In the early 1940s, as the New Dealers turned their attention from reform to war, Bill Colmer began a political transition of his own. "You may not believe it, but I came to Washington as something of a liberal," he commented to a friend near the end of his congressional career. In 1939, the Roosevelt administration rewarded Colmer by securing him a position on the powerful House Rules Committee, the same committee that had buried the wages and hours bill in three consecutive congressional sessions. In 1945, he was selected chairman of the House Special Committee on Postwar Economic Policy and Planning, a prestigious appointment that would send Colmer throughout Europe and the Middle East to explore foreign trade and economic development. By that time, his transition from liberal to arch conservative had already begun.¹

As Numan Bartley has noted, the definition of "liberal" would change in the post-War years. "As racial issues, and most especially segregation in the South, moved to the top of the agenda for national reform, what had been the nation's number-one economic problem took on the aspect of the nation's number-one moral problem," he wrote. Southern Democrats would be forced either to embrace the changing racial norms, or to abandon liberalism altogether. Like

¹ Obituary of William M. Colmer, *New York Times*, September 11, 1980, national edition; Wolfgang Schlauch, "Representative William Colmer and Senator James O. Eastland and the Reconstruction of Germany, 1945," *Journal of Mississippi History* 34 (August 1972): 196.

most of his colleagues, Colmer chose the latter. The ardent New Dealer “forsook reform and opted for conservatism.”²

The first step came in 1942 with the split between Colmer and the AFL’s William Green over labor’s role in the war effort. Colmer considered the rights of labor subordinate to winning the war. “I have been preaching for months,” he asserted, “that we must all make sacrifices if we expect to win this war . . . we cannot win if we insist on keeping all our social reforms and carrying on business as usual.” Months after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the CIO and AFL infuriated many congressmen, including Colmer, by pressing for further labor reforms, including the continued legality of wartime strikes. Colmer informed the Mississippi State Federation of Labor that the laboring man “has no more right to strike against his country when he is engaged in vital defense production than the soldier or sailor has to desert the colors.” When the Bricklayers, Masons, and Plasterers Union in Gulfport asked Colmer to oppose anti-labor legislation, he refused. “The question of whether or not we shall survive or become the slaves of Hitler is the great question before us,” he responded. “I am sure that you agree with me that as your Representative in the Congress I should place the vested interest of the country in this hour of crisis above everything else.” Colmer’s reluctance to support labor in 1942 angered Green, who then endorsed Colmer’s opponent Ben Stevens, in the primary that summer.³

² Numan Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 69,71.

³ Colmer to W. M. Morgan, February 28, 1942; Colmer to J. W. Cameron, January 24, 1942; G. L. Castner to Colmer, March 28, 1942; Colmer to G. L. Castner, March 30, 1942, all in William M. Colmer Papers, McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

Additional labor legislation in 1947 underscored Colmer's growing conservatism, as well as organized labor's continuing difficulties in Mississippi. The Labor-Management Relations Act, known as Taft-Hartley, represented a business victory over organized labor. Business leaders in District Six viewed the act as a much-needed revision of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935 and believed managers, not workers, must maintain control of their respective industries. Many in Congress, including Colmer, supported the bill as a means of weakening the power of radical labor leaders like John L. Lewis. "As a real friend of the laboring man, I don't want to see anything done that would destroy the labor movement," Colmer stressed, but "unfortunately some of our national labor leaders were drunk with power; and there was a real danger of their pulling the temple down upon the heads of labor."⁴

After the war, the increasing prominence of civil rights within the liberal agenda accelerated Colmer's political transformation. The racial overtones of Nazi ideology and Cold War competition for influence in the third world made the racial status quo in America increasingly unsustainable. Likewise, African Americans wanted recognition for their services abroad and became more assertive. As the civil rights initiative became linked to the Democratic Party, many southerners like Colmer wanted no part. By the 1950s, Colmer had emerged as a leader within the Southern Bloc, the House delegates opposed to the civil rights movement, and led the opposition against 1954's *Brown v. Board of Education* desegregation decision. During his congressional campaign in 1956, Colmer noted the importance of the election. He stated, "The next two

⁴ Colmer to H. B. Harrison, June 19, 1947, in Colmer Papers.

years should determine whether the forces which have set out to destroy the Southern way of life will prevail." Later that summer, Colmer successfully used his position as ranking member on the Rules Committee to slow down further civil rights legislation.⁵

Colmer's final years in Congress marked the height of his conservatism. In 1960, he almost lost his position on the Rules Committee when he campaigned against the Kennedy-Johnson ticket. Only his seniority saved him, and seven years later, he became chairman of the committee. Colmer used his position as committee chair to "knife" ideological opponents, as liberal Mississippi Congressman Frank Smith put it, whenever possible. In 1966, the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* declared Colmer "the most conservative former liberal in the House."⁶

In March 1972, Colmer announced his plans to retire, despite, he said, "a strong urge personally, aided and abetted by close friends, to continue my humble efforts in behalf of sound, conservative government. But, I realize that there must be an end to all things including my continuation in the Congress." At Colmer's annual seafood luncheon at the Capitol, President Richard Nixon, the most conservative president since the New Deal began, announced that a special White House dinner would be planned to honor Colmer for his years of

⁵ Robert L. Flegler, "Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism, 1938-1947," *Journal of Mississippi History* 68 (Spring 2006): 27; Bartley, 95; "Colmer Will Seek Re-election In 6th" and "Colmer Slows Down Civil Rights Bill," newspaper clippings in William Colmer file, Series V, Mississippi State AFL-CIO Records, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta.

⁶ James A. Robinson, *The House Rules Committee* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1963), 77; "Colmer Sure To Make Rules Post Crucial One," newspaper clipping, July 30, 1966, in William Colmer file, Series V, Mississippi State AFL-CIO Records, Southern Labor Archives, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta; Dennis J. Mitchell, *Mississippi Liberal: A Biography of Frank E. Smith* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 88.

service. "Bill Colmer has more guts and courage and determination than most any man I know," Nixon told the crowd.⁷

Reflecting on his long career in Congress, Colmer stated, "My service in the United States Congress has been an exacting but also a rewarding experience. It has provided the extraordinary experience of serving in the administration of six Presidents as well as personal contacts with a number of world leaders including Sir Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin." Like many politicians, Colmer left a mixed legacy on Capitol Hill. At times, he bravely stood alone, and other times he typified the status quo. Ironically, the liberal principles he fought for in the 1930s paved the way for changes he would detest in later years. By 1972, Colmer's status as a powerful House conservative underscored the contrast of his liberal past. More importantly, however, remained factors outside of his control. Since he had arrived in Washington in 1933, not only had Bill Colmer changed; so had the definition of liberalism.⁸

⁷ Retirement Statement by Colmer, March 6, 1972; Newspaper article quoting Richard Nixon, both in Colmer Papers.

⁸ Retirement Statement by Colmer, March 6, 1972, in Colmer Papers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Colmer, William M., Papers. McCain Library, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

Hopkins, Harry L., Papers. Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park.

Mississippi State AFL-CIO Records, Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library, Atlanta.

New York Times, September 11, 1980.

Secondary Sources

Badger, Anthony J. *The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989.

Bartley, Numan V. *The New South, 1945-1980*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995.

Biles, Roger. *A New Deal for the American People*. Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991.

Bellush, Bernard. *The Failure of the NRA*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1975.

Bettsworth, John K. *Mississippi: A History*. Austin, TX: The Steck Company, 1959.

Brinkley, Alan. *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Burns, James MacGregor. *Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1956.

Busbee Jr., Westley F. *Mississippi: A History*. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2005.

Cobb, James C. *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade for Industrial Development, 1936-1990* 2nd ed. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993.

Cortner, Richard C. *The Wagner Act Cases*. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1964.

- Dana Jr., Donald M. and Chester M. Morgan. *A Priceless Heritage: The Story of Mississippi Power Company*. Gulfport: Mississippi Power Company, 1993.
- Derber, Milton. "The New Deal and Labor." In *The New Deal: The National Level*, edited by John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975.
- Durrenberger, E. Paul. *Gulf Coast Soundings: People and Policy in the Mississippi Shrimp Industry*. Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1996.
- Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. *Mississippi: The WPA Guide to the Magnolia State*. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1938.
- Fickle, James E. *The New South and the "New Competition": Trade Association Development in the Southern Pine Industry*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980.
- Fleegler, Robert L. "Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism, 1938-1947." *Journal of Mississippi History* 68 (Spring 2006): 1-27.
- Flynt, J. Wayne. "A Vignette in Southern Labor Politics – The 1936 Mississippi Senatorial Primary." *Mississippi Quarterly* 26 (Winter 1972-1973): 89-99.
- Flynt, J. Wayne. "The New Deal and Southern Labor." In *The New Deal and the South*, edited by James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 1984.
- Giles, William Lincoln. "Agricultural Revolution, 1890-1970." In *A History of Mississippi*, vol. II, edited by Richard Aubrey McLemore, 177-211. Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973.
- Grant Jr., Phillip A. "The Mississippi Congressional Delegation and the Formation of the Conservative Coalition, 1937-1940." *Journal of Mississippi History* 50 (February 1988): 21-28.
- Grossman, Jonathan. "Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938: Maximum Struggle for a Minimum Wage." *Monthly Labor Review* 101 (June 1978): 22-30.
- Heacock, Walter J. "William B. Bankhead and the New Deal." *Journal of Southern History* 21 (August 1955): 347-359.
- Hines Jr., Tom S. "Mississippi and the Repeal of Prohibition: A Study of the Controversy over the Twenty-First Amendment." *Journal of Mississippi History* 24 (January 1962): 1-39.

- Hudson, John A. and George Wolfskill. *All but the People: Franklin D. Roosevelt and his Critics, 1933-1939*. London: The Macmillan Company, 1969.
- Kennedy, David M. *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Lester, Connie L. "Balancing Agriculture with Industry: Capital, Labor, and the Public Good in Mississippi's Home-Grown New Deal." *Journal of Mississippi History* 70 (Fall 2008): 235-263.
- Leuchtenburg, William E. *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940*. New York: Harper and Row, 1963.
- Mitchell, Dennis J. *Mississippi Liberal: A Biography of Frank E. Smith*. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2001.
- Moore, John Hebron. "William H. Mason, Southern Industrialist." *Journal of Southern History* 27 (May 1961): 169-183.
- Morgan, Chester M. *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985.
- Mosley, Donald Crumpton. "A History of Labor Unions in Mississippi." PhD diss., University of Alabama, 1965.
- Nuwer, Deanne Stephens. "The Biloxi Fishermen are Killing the Goose that Laid the Golden Egg": The Seafood Strike of 1932." *Journal of Mississippi History* 66 (Winter 2004): 325-352.
- Ownby, Ted. *American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830-1998*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999.
- Patterson, James T. *Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967.
- Paulsen, George E. "Ghost of the NRA: Drafting National Wage and Hour Legislation in 1937." *Social Science Quarterly* 67 (June 1986): 241-254.
- Polenberg, Richard. *The Era of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933-1945: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000.
- Robinson, James A. *The House Rules Committee*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1963.
- Rowe, Neil Michael Bruce. "William M. Colmer: His Role as a Leader in the

- House of Representatives." Honor's thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 1989.
- Schlauch, Wolfgang. "Representative William Colmer and Senator James O. Eastland and the Reconstruction of Germany, 1945." *Journal of Mississippi History* 34 (August 1972): 193-213.
- Schlesinger Jr., Arthur M. *The Age of Roosevelt: The Coming of the New Deal*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959.
- Skates Jr., John Ray. "Fred Sullens and the Growth of Organized Labor." *Southern Quarterly* 10 (July 1972): 341-351.
- Skates Jr., John Ray. *Mississippi: A Bicentennial History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1979.
- Steinberg, Ronnie. *Wages and Hours: Labor Reform in Twentieth-Century America*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1982.
- Swain, Martha. *Pat Harrison: The New Deal Years*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978.
- Tate Jr., Roger D. "Easing the Burden: The Era of Depression and New Deal in Mississippi." PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 1978.
- Tomlins, Christopher L. "AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective." *Journal of American History* 65 (March 1979): 1021-1042.
- Tugwell, Rexford G. *The Democratic Roosevelt*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1957.
- Vittoz, Stanley. *New Deal Labor Policy and the American Industrial Economy*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987.