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A Commonwealth of Hope: The New Deal Response to Crisis

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A Commonwealth of Hope: The New Deal Response to Crisis, by Alan Lawson. The American Moment series. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. xv, 280 pp. Bibliographical essay, index. \$45.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Ellis W. Hawley is professor of history emeritus at the University of Iowa. One of his many books and articles is *The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence* (1966 and 1995).

In this elegantly written contribution to the American Moment series, Professor Alan Lawson provides an authoritative review of the New Deal's history and a thought-provoking reinterpretation of its origins and significance. The New Deal, he argues, emerged from the conjuncture of a crisis-induced opportunity for reform with the vision of a cooperative commonwealth developed between 1890 and 1916 and carried forward by incipient New Dealers. This vision called for a compassionate society moving toward a cooperative order of interdependent and increasingly efficient social units and in the process fusing national purpose with local experience, integrating central guidance with local and individual initiative, and generating an equitably shared and harmonious abundance. As it turned out, the realization of the vision was largely thwarted. But in Lawson's view, it shaped the main outlines of New Deal effort, left important legacies, and may still have a future as new reform opportunities arise.

In telling this story, Lawson begins with introductory material on the emergence of the commonwealth vision, its attractiveness for Franklin D. Roosevelt, the crisis produced by a failed "American System," and the responses foreshadowed by Roosevelt's campaign in 1932. He then focuses on the 1933-1935 efforts to fashion a cooperative commonwealth, looking in turn at financial reform, industrial policy, agricultural adjustment, welfare provision, and cultural promotion. He next examines how the New Deal "renewed its lease" in 1935 and 1936, and how it subsequently consolidated earlier reforms, overcame constitutional limitations, established a new political coalition, and laid the basis for an effective war administration yet did so at the cost of allowing its communal vision to fade and be thwarted. Finally, in a short but engrossing epilogue, Lawson comments on the fate of post-1939 liberalism and suggests that the unrealized but deeply rooted vision of 1933 might still guide American responses to a comparable crisis.

Interpretively, Lawson's book strengthens arguments that have stressed continuities between Progressivism and the New Deal. It also seeks, less successfully, to weaken delineations portraying multiple and clashing New Deals having different goals and succeeding each

other as the political picture changed. In this regard, Lawson dismisses the idea of a Third New Deal as "dubious." And while he recognizes policy shifts in 1935 and 1938, he portrays the Second Hundred Days and the Keynesian-informed New Economics as variations on his theme of efforts to fashion a cooperative commonwealth. In arguments that come through as slightly strained and a bit murky, he insists that they shared earlier goals and were still trying to balance individualism and collectivism, that the shift from planning to regulation and fiscal management was mostly a shift in methods and tactics, and that what needs emphasizing is the complementary nature of these various approaches, not their differences.

Students of Iowa history will be interested in Lawson's analysis of a farm program professing Jeffersonian ideals yet ending up with a subsidized agribusiness system in which yeoman farmers became a vanishing breed. Also likely to be of interest are his insightful portrayals of prominent Iowans in the New Deal, most notably Henry A. Wallace, Harry Hopkins, and Hallie Flanagan. But generally speaking, he has little to say about state-level reform efforts, either in terms of general patterns or as localized illustrations of national actions and developments. Nor is anything said about recent arguments, particularly by political scientists, attributing the limited achievements and liberalism's subsequent setbacks to the New Deal's failure to liberalize governmental institutions, structures, and cultures at the state level. Lawson's explanation of such shortcomings runs more in terms of crisis abeyance, conservative resurgence, and the political and policy mistakes of national officials.

Also largely ignored is the recent conservative revisionism viewing the New Deal as an aberrational departure from American traditions, which prolonged the depression and deserves study as an error to be avoided rather than something to revive and complete. Lawson's underlying assumptions and concluding comments make it clear that he views such contentions negatively. But he never confronts them directly or takes note of them in a lengthy bibliographical essay reflecting his thorough and up-to-date mastery of mainstream New Deal historiography. Still, his book might well become a contribution to the debates over such revisionism. And as a contribution to the scholarly mainstream, it stands out both as a useful and trustworthy synthesis and as a stimulating reexamination of ongoing interpretive debates. Specialists in the period and in American political development will want to read and ponder it, and teachers in those fields might well consider it for class adoption.