**Social Security**

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| **Historian Interpretation 1: Carl Degler** | **Historian Interpretation 2: Bart Bernstein** |
| Historian Carl Degler argued that the New Deal was revolutionary. He believed that the New Deal represented a drastic change in how Americans viewed government and its role in the economy. Rather than expecting economic troubles to be solved by market forces (a faith in "laissez-faire economics"), Americans began to expect the government to act in times of economic trouble and intervene to help make things better.Degler saw Social Security as a piece of this change, signaling that Americans viewed the government as responsible for ensuring that older Americans would live decent lives. This was a shift from thinking that this responsibility lay only with individuals and families. The American public was ready for a change after experiencing the severe conditions during the Great Depression, when banks were failing, industries were faltering, and people were unemployed. Degler argued that the New Deal constituted a permanent shift in the American public’s expectations: they now wanted the government to be an active player in the economy.*Carl N. Degler, "The Third American Revolution," in* Out of OurPast: The Forces that Shaped Modern America,*1959.* | Historian Barton Bernstein, writing in the late 1960’s, argued that the New Deal was no revolution, and that the changessuggested by Degler and others had been exaggerated. TheNew Deal was a narrow program of limited reform that excluded millions of Americans. Bernstein saw the New Deal asfundamentally a conservative program partly motivated by a fearof more radical ideas (like those proposed by Huey Long).Specifically, Bernstein saw the Social Security Act as more symbol than substance. Workers had to contribute to their old age pensions and could not depend on government contributions: thus, it was a limited kind of aid. More than one out of every five workers was excluded from the pension plan,including those who worked on farms and as domestic help, and this workforce was disproportionately black or female. Bernsteinargued that while the New Deal reduced suffering, it did notdeserve the praise for revolutionizing America that others lavished upon it.*Barton Bernstein, "The Conservative Achievements of Liberal**Reform," in* Towards a New Past*, 1968.* |
| **Summarize Degler’s argument in your own words:** | **Summarize Bernstein’s argument in your own words:** |

**Guiding Questions: Open Social Security Student Materials**

**Document A: FDR**

1. **Sourcing** Who gave this speech and when? Who is the intended audience? How might that influence the content and tone of the speech?

2. **Close Reading** What four programs are included in the Social Security bill? How does Social Security represent FDR’s program of “relief, recovery, and reform”? For each of the three words, write one quote or example that illustrates connections.

**Document B: NAACP**

1. **Close Reading** What four groups does Houston say are excluded from Social Security?

2. **Corroborating** What would NAACP representative Houston say about FDR’s speech (Document A)? Select a line from Document A: FDR and explain how Houston might disagree.

**Document C: Stealing**

1. **Sourcing** What does the author tell us about herself? What kind of person do you think she is based on the information in this letter?

2. **Close Reading** What was M.A. counting on to support her in old age? And why has she lost faith that this will support her?

3. **Contextualizing** How does this author generally feel about the New Deal? How does her phrase “security at the price of freedom” capture those feelings?

Using information from the movie and all three documents, write one paragraph in response to the following question: *Which historical account of Social Security is more accurate, Degler’s or Bernstein’s?*

Both the NAACP representative and the woman in Document C were unhappy with Social Security. How did their concerns differ?

How would FDR have responded to the complaints in Document B and C?

Let’s go back to the historians. Do these three documents support Degler or Bernstein? Explain.

Which historian do you agree with? Why?