

Editorial

A Lesson From Franklin D. Roosevelt

“Necessitous men are not free men,” said President Franklin Roosevelt in his 11th annual message of Congress, given Jan. 11, 1944. He went on to outline his proposal for an Economic Bill of Rights which he wanted to see at the top of the national agenda after World War II ended, a proposal that included the rights to a home, medical care, jobs, and economic security overall.

But President Roosevelt was not only thinking of the domestic situation when he argued that people could not be left in a condition of destitution. In January 1945, he issued a message to Congress calling for immediate action on the Bretton Woods proposals for an International Monetary Fund and an International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. In this speech, FDR put forward the challenge of “measuring up” to the task of peace, something which he understood was not the same as the task of war. For peace, he argued, we need solid foundations of international political and economic cooperation.

But such foundations can only be established, FDR went on, if “solutions are found to the difficult economic problems we face today.” It was to find these solutions that he chose to propose the IMF and World Bank, which were intended to create the conditions for prosperity for all peoples.

In the immediate post-war conditions, there was not much question about what these institutions had to do. People in the liberated countries had to rebuild virtually from scratch, and find the means to feed and house themselves. Essential components for this reconstruction had to be provided from highly developed nations such as the United States, and credit—long-range, and low interest—had to be provided by new institutions. This meant, as FDR pointed out in his speech to Congress, that various forms of economic warfare of one nation against the other, had to be ended; stable exchange rates established; and the means for expanded channels of trade opened up throughout the world.

For almost two decades after FDR’s death, the philosophy which inspired these measures, and mechanisms which permitted them to go into effect, remained intact. There was a substantial recovery in war-torn

Western Europe and Japan, and moves in that direction in places such as South America and other parts of Asia. The imposition of the Cold War—something FDR was committed to preventing—impaired the same kind of progress in Eastern Europe, and between Eastern Europe and the West.

In the middle of the 1960s, however, the paradigm began to change, at first imperceptibly, and then full force, into not the conquering of poverty and want, but its “management.” Now, the idea was that mankind had used up too many natural resources—even produced too many people! People would have to survive by only meeting their “basic human needs.”

By the 1980s, it got worse. Economic cooperation now was replaced by economic competition, precisely the same kind of fighting for markets and resources and scarce funds which FDR was polemicizing against. Now, it was “each against all” in Hobbesian fashion, with nations being subjected to the cruel judgments of the “markets,” which didn’t have enough credit to dispense to all.

Eventually, we move to the George W. Bush era. By now, the ideas put forward by the likes of Henry Kissinger in the 1970s—that only those who “behaved” could receive the food and other materials they required—had become U.S. government and IMF/World Bank policy. Now, the concept was just the opposite of FDR’s. “Implement ‘democracy,’ and we may feed you,” the mantra goes. Even worse, if you don’t meet our conditions, we will ensure that you don’t get the resources you require.

The international financial reorganization we require today, which has been put forward by Lyndon LaRouche, has to go back to FDR’s concept. First come the requirements of humanity for food, shelter, work, energy, health. To facilitate that, we establish the necessary institutions of credit and trade, insulated from the predator speculators and money-grubbers who are only interested in their short-term profit.

If we want free men, which we surely do, we will act now to make sure they are not starving, sick, and poor. “True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence. ‘Necessitous men are not free men.’ ”