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Norman Thomas as Presidential Conscience

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There are few examples of persistence in the face of failure in all of American history that rival Socialist leader Norman Thomas' attempts to influence President Franklin D. Roosevelt's approach to a variety of domestic reform and foreign policy issues from 1932–1944. Again and again, Thomas sought without success to bring the pragmatic, always political President to what the Socialist leader considered his more ethical, principled, and oftentimes moral position on issues. Again and again, Roosevelt, the consummate politician, chose what, in Thomas' eyes, seemed to be the expedient, rather than the just position.

The Norman Thomas-Franklin D. Roosevelt correspondence was the chief vehicle whereby Thomas presented and Roosevelt parried the Socialist leader's calls for presidential action.¹ This paper is an examination of the contents and significance of parts of that correspondence. Despite its variety, the correspondence can, without undue distortion, be divided into two general topical-chronological categories. The first, running from 1932–1937, is concerned with domestic matters. The second, running from 1937–1944, deals primarily with American security in an increasingly threatening world.

It is important to gain some perspective on the attitude of the two men towards each other at the time that Thomas initiated their correspondence. His perception of Roosevelt was controlled by a belief that no fundamental change would occur in America without the creation of a new political alignment. Writing to his old friend, Charles S. Fayerweather, on 21 March 1932 in response to this friend's positive assessment of candidate Roosevelt, Thomas took sharp exception to it.

I am sorry I don't share your faith in Governor Roosevelt. I think he is personally a nice fellow but I think his statement on the League of Nations, and his actions in regard to New York City are enough to put him out. . . . I still think we are not going to get anywhere I want to go until we get new party organization, and that requires the discredit of the old parties which, in spite of some good people in them, they richly deserve.²

To Thomas, Roosevelt's waffling on the controversial question of American entry into the League of Nations and his failure to vigorously proceed against the allegedly blatantly corrupt regime of New York Mayor James Walker marked him as a political opportunist, a representative of the irresponsible old political order that was such an anathema to him. Obviously the subsequent destructive impact of the Roosevelt mys-

tique and the New Deal on the Socialist Party worked to reinforce Thomas' initial skepticism.³

Roosevelt, on the other hand, had high regard for Thomas. As Felix Frankfurter noted, the President felt that Thomas was a fine person, though he regretted Thomas' refusal to serve on an unemployment study commission while Roosevelt had been governor of New York.⁴ Despite biographer W. A. Swanberg's insistence to the contrary, later correspondence indicates that Roosevelt remained cordial to Thomas even after their sharp exchange over the wisdom of preparedness in 1940.⁵

Thomas' initial appeal to Roosevelt came in the form of a telegram sent from Wichita, Kansas on 15 October 1932.⁶ In it, Thomas informed Roosevelt that the Democratic controlled Oklahoma State Election Board had chosen to overlook a petition with 40,000 signatures on it and deny Socialists a place on the Oklahoma ballot. He called for prompt action on the part of the Democratic presidential candidate to rectify the situation. Thomas also informed the President that he was sending him some questions regarding statements he had made about the unemployment crisis. Thomas thus initiated the process of holding Roosevelt accountable for both his and his party's actions even before he was elected president.

There is no record of Roosevelt replying to Thomas about the Oklahoma situation, but less than two weeks after he was inaugurated he did bring Thomas and fellow Socialist leader, Morris Hillquit, to the White House for a discussion of their proposed solutions to the Depression crisis.⁷ Roosevelt listened to the two Socialists speak on behalf of a nationalized banking system and criticize his proposal to create an "army" of unemployed workers to carry out government projects because of its low daily wage structure. The President rejected their banking proposal and ignored their complaints about the wage structure. Access without substantial influence proved very frustrating to Thomas.

Roosevelt administration internal memoranda do indicate that serious attempts were made to investigate the validity of Thomas' charges and complaints, but that practical political considerations often prevented action on them. On 10 May 1933, Thomas wrote to Presidential Secretary Marvin McIntyre attacking the practice of excluding Black tourists from the government owned tourist camps near the capital.

Certainly the present status of discrimination should not be allowed to exist anywhere in America, least of all in the capital of the nation. Of the fact of discrimination against colored tourist there can be no doubt in view not only of the experiences of delegates to our Continental Congress but to the admission of the secretary to the manager to whom I talked over the telephone.⁸

After investigating Thomas' charges, U. S. Grant III, Director of the Public Buildings and Public Parks of the National Capital, reported that when Thomas telephoned the camp and asked whether colored persons were admitted, the clerk on duty had informed him that it was a white camp.⁹ However, Grant explained.

Very few colored people ever register at the camp, and it has been possible heretofore to get rid of them without difficulty. However, it is recognized that legally they cannot be refused admission if they insist upon it. The tourist camp manage-

ment understands this situation, but also understands that the presence of colored people would probably have a tendency to drive away the other sojourners and by reducing the attendance in the camp make it impossible for it to pay expenses.¹⁰

To Thomas, such rationalizations were typical of the administration's willingness to place economic expediency above morality.¹¹

Sometimes the investigations came to the conclusion that Thomas' charges were incorrect or simply based on inadequate information. Writing in response to Thomas' charge that continued strife in the hosiery industry proved that the NRA machinery could not take care of the labor abuses that existed in many industries prior to the operation of the codes, administrator Leo Wolman asserted:

There is certainly no foundation for the belief that the operation of the Recovery Administration machinery cannot take care of the many abuses which existed in this and other industries before these industries began to operate under codes.

The hosiery industry is now in process of being organized. Only last week the National Labor Board made its first decision, which will unquestionably lead to the organization, under the auspices of the Full Fashioned Hosiery Workers Union, of twelve thousand employees in the City of Reading. Such an achievement could not have been had under any other circumstances.¹²

Thomas remained unconvinced that the National Labor Board could function fairly in the interests of workers.¹³

Thomas also tried to enlist Roosevelt's aid in correcting what many felt was a fundamental miscarriage of justice. On 14 November 1933, he wrote the President asking for his assistance in helping to obtain freedom for Tom Mooney.¹⁴ Mooney and Warren Billings were labor organizers who had been convicted for their alleged involvement in an explosion during the 1916 Preparedness Day Parade in San Francisco. Despite the admitted perjury of the witnesses who had testified against them, Mooney and Billings were kept in prison for years after their innocence was obvious because of anti-radical sentiment and political considerations. The case was further complicated by the time Thomas wrote Roosevelt because Mooney had refused parole and stubbornly demanded a full pardon.¹⁵

The President referred the letters to the Attorney General for a reply draft that became the basis of his 27 December answer to Thomas. In it, he said that federal involvement posed many difficulties because Mooney had been convicted of violating a state law.¹⁶ Roosevelt thanked Thomas for his interest, but refused to intervene.

Undeterred, Thomas again tried to prick the President's conscience a year later when he broadened his argument to call for the restoration of the political rights of 1,500 Americans who had lost them for violating state sedition laws during World War I.¹⁷ There was no administration action on Thomas' appeal. The administration, in effect, hid behind the skirts of a dual federalist argument to avoid involvement in a politically sensitive, controversial area.

Much of Thomas' correspondence with Roosevelt dealt with violations of civil liberties growing out of labor disputes. The Socialist leader repeatedly urged presidential action to protect the economic and civil rights of workers.¹⁸ During 1934 Thomas

became actively involved with R. L. Mitchell in attempts to organize the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. This union had evolved out of the mass evictions of tenant farmers in the middle South during the Depression years. Arguing that the tenants' problems were exacerbated by the AAA's cotton contracts which paid the plantation owners not to plant cotton and reduced the wages for fieldhands to 75¢ a day, Thomas worked to publicize the plight of the sharecroppers as a result of the failings of New Deal agricultural policies.¹⁹

Thomas became very vocal after he was prevented from speaking at a meeting in Arkansas by armed plantation owners in the midst of the organizational battle. After several attempts to move Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace to action on behalf of the poor Blacks and whites in the union, Thomas, on 25 February 1935 telegraphed the President.

Yesterday Arkansas Plantation owners renewed efforts yo [sic] crush southern tenant farmers union by investigating mob violence on top cruel evictions and unwarranted arrests of organizers. Since A.A.A. policy is involved in situation imperative you exert power and influence for justice and to prevent serious tragedy.²⁰

Thomas followed up with a letter on 9 April accusing the plantation owners of a reign of terror and requesting a meeting with Roosevelt to describe the true situation in the cotton belt.²¹

Presidential advisor Harry Hopkins drafted a reply which Roosevelt sent to Thomas on 22 April saying that the Department of Agriculture and the FERA would be delighted to have Thomas' recommendations on the situation submitted in writing.²² Refusing to be put off, Thomas wrote again on the same day and also on the 23rd asking for an appointment in May. His second letter, in accordance with Hopkins' advice, listed the specific acts of violence committed against members of the union.²³ The administration gave in and scheduled an appointment for Thomas to discuss the situation.

The meeting did little to enhance Thomas' respect for Roosevelt. When Thomas tried to show the President how the vaguely worded tenants' rights section of the cotton contract were being used against them, Roosevelt brushed his comments aside, remarked that he was a better politician than Thomas, and urged Thomas to be patient because there was a new generation of leaders rising in the South.²⁴ Roosevelt's hand wringing response was convincing evidence to Thomas that the President was the prisoner of the corrupt old party system that forced him to put political accommodation of the Southern establishment above fundamental human rights.

After some rather heavy-handed attempts by Roosevelt and Secretary of Agriculture Henry Wallace to discredit Thomas and other AAA critics, the administration did move in the face of national publicity about the plight of the sharecroppers and tenant farmers to bring about an improvement in their condition. In July 1935 the Farm Security Administration was established to aid stricken farmers, and the administration supported passage of the Bankhead-Jones Act that provided 50 million dollars in low interest loans so tenant farmers could purchase land. Thomas condemned these moves as ineffective gestures given the numbers who needed such help.²⁵

Thomas also became involved in the highly publicized attempts of the CIO to

hold public meetings in Jersey City, New Jersey in the mid-thirties. There, Democratic machine boss, Mayor Frank Hague, an avowed enemy of unions, had banned the use of public parks by pro-union speakers on the grounds that the speakers were communists. When Thomas defied the ban and tried to speak in Jersey City, he was arrested and “deported” on a ferry to New York City. Thomas and the advocates of free speech thus found themselves pitted against one of the most powerful Democratic machine bosses who, in fact, was vice chairman of the Democratic National Committee.²⁶

Once again, Thomas held the President responsible. On 25 June and again on 5 July, Thomas wrote the President urging action by the federal government in Jersey City. The Attorney General drafted the reply sent to Thomas on 7 July stating that the Justice Department would be glad to receive any claim on behalf of Thomas indicating a violation of any federal statute.²⁷ Thus, the use of a federal/state distinction again enabled the administration to steer clear of Thomas’ initial attempts to involve it in a politically embarrassing situation.

Unwilling to let the Roosevelt administration off the hook so easily, Thomas persisted. Taking advantage of Hague’s intemperate charge in December 1938 that the Bar Association had been manipulated into opposition to his candidate for a federal judgeship by Thomas and other “Communists,” Thomas again wrote the President. He informed the President that he regarded Hague’s remarks as nonsense, but that it was rumored in New Jersey that Roosevelt had agreed to nominate Hague’s choice to a federal judgeship. Such an endorsement, Thomas argued, was something an honest candidate would avoid.²⁸ In accordance with a presidential memo dated 29 December, Presidential Secretary McIntyre wrote to Thomas informing him that “. . . nothing is going to be done on this matter for several weeks.”²⁹ Once again, the administration retreated from responsibility with purposeful ambiguity. As Thomas was soon to discover, his attempts to sway the President on foreign policy questions would prove just as frustrating as his efforts on domestic problems.

The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War created an agonizing crisis of belief for Norman Thomas—one in which he surrendered his absolute pacifism in the face of what he considered the growing danger of Fascism.³⁰ This position caused him to pressure the Roosevelt administration to allow the sale of munitions to the Spanish Republic. However, the Roosevelt administration faced strong counter pressure from the isolationists, as well as significant members of the American Catholic hierarchy who, opposing the anti-clericalism of the Spanish Republic, urged the President to apply the Neutrality Acts to the Spanish Civil War and thus deny the Republican government the right to buy arms from the United States.

Prophetically fearful of the effects of such a policy on the Spanish Republican cause, Thomas wrote Roosevelt on 29 December 1936 regarding newspaper reports that the administration was about to ask Congress for legislation to make it impossible for the Spanish government to buy any military supplies from the United States. Such an action, Thomas argued, would work against world peace by, in effect, disarming the Republic in the face of well-armed, cruel rebel armies.³¹ Such a policy would encourage more Fascist aggression.

Roosevelt responded on 7 January 1937 with a letter drafted for him by R. Walter

Moore of the State Department stating that the Secretary of State with his support had at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War taken a definite stand on the subject of the export of arms to that country—a stand that was in conformity with our well-established policy of non-intervention and with the spirit of the recent Neutrality Acts.³² Translation: The Republican government would get no arms from the United States. Adherence to the letter of the law suited the political situation that the administration found itself in in early 1937.

Thomas did not let the matter drop. After a visit to Europe in the spring of 1937 that included conferences with Spanish Republicans, he again wrote the President on 9 June 1937 on the question of the application of the Neutrality Acts to Spain.³³ This time, armed with evidence from Spain, he charged that American arms shipments to other countries, especially Fascist Italy, were being transshipped to Spanish Fascist rebels. He urged the President to apply the Neutrality Acts to Italy to cut this supply. Such an action would at least balance out what he felt was the unfair impact of the Neutrality Acts on the Spanish Republic.

Writing on behalf of the President, Secretary of State Cordell Hull pointed out that the administration was the recipient of widely divergent advice on the Spanish situation

. . . all of which I can assure you are being given consideration.

You may be certain that this Department is scrutinizing with particular care all exportations of arms, ammunition, and implements of war from this country in order to assure itself that the law prohibiting direct or indirect shipments to Spain shall not be violated. I have received no information of any kind which would led me to believe that up to the present time that law has been violated.³⁴

Given the blatant support of the rebels with men and arms from both Italy and Germany, Thomas viewed the administration position as one based on hypocrisy governed by political opportunism. He never forgave Roosevelt for his contribution to the Spanish tragedy.

Two years later (in September 1939), the German-Russian invasion of Poland caused Thomas to again call for the application of the Neutrality Acts to an aggressor, this time against the Soviet Union. By this time Thomas had moved towards a stronger belief in isolationism as a means of avoiding American involvement in war while Roosevelt had become convinced of the need for a more active approach to the threat of Fascism, one that required freeing the United States from the arms embargo restrictions imposed by the Neutrality Acts.

On 23 September 1939, Thomas wrote the President charging that the Soviet Union was waging undeclared war on Poland in collusion with Hitler. Then, remembering the administration's earlier attitude toward the application of the Neutrality Acts in the Spanish situation, Thomas chided the President.

Hence it seems clear that your Neutrality Proclamation governing the export of arms and munitions of war should now be extended to the U.S.S.R. This

I say without implying that it is the duty of France or Great Britain or any other power to declare war on Russia. I am concerned only with the clear intention of our own laws. The Neutrality Law should be applied in the case of this action by Russia and it should have been applied in the Far Eastern conflict. The law as it stands should be enforced even although you have recommended its change.³⁵

To Thomas, the issue was clear-cut. The intention of the law demanded its application. What Roosevelt had enforced against Republican Spain should now be enforced against the Soviet Union. He closed with a statement that was indicative of the gap between his and the President's positions.

May I add for myself and the Party to which I belong that we oppose the change in the Neutrality Law except as change may strengthen it. I hope to have an opportunity to develop this point of view before the appropriate Congressional Committee.³⁶

Never the prisoner of consistency, Roosevelt brushed aside Thomas' request in a characteristically noncommittal letter, much like those he had sent many times in the past when the Socialist leader had tried to draw him into controversy. The President assured Thomas that:

You may be sure that we have been giving and shall continue to give the most careful consideration to every phase of neutrality as it develops, including that to which you specially refer, and we are glad to have your views on the subject.³⁷

Thomas' suggestion, of course, though obviously consistent with both the letter and the spirit of the Neutrality Acts, would have obviously restricted the President's freedom of action to deal with crises in foreign affairs at a time when he was convinced of the need for more discretion.³⁸

The correspondence continues through the fall of 1944 with Thomas thrusting and Roosevelt parrying on such pre-Pearl Harbor issues as American preparedness, refugee aid, Atlantic convoying, the safety of the Spanish Loyalist leaders; and after Pearl Harbor, on the wisdom of the President's wartime policies.³⁹ Suffice it to say, in summary, that, while Roosevelt's responses became more substantive and less evasive from 1940 onward, the two leaders' visions of how to conduct the business of government never did coincide.

Thomas' biographers have noted an uncharacteristic harshness in his criticism of the President.⁴⁰ They have explained this in terms of Thomas' personal dislike of Roosevelt's political opportunism and lack of guiding principles, as well as the Socialist leader's frustration caused by the destructive impact of the New Deal on the Socialist Party. These arguments, while plausible, do not go far enough to explain the sharply conflicting values reflected in the Thomas-Roosevelt correspondence. Thomas' critical position was rooted in something more fundamental than political sour grapes. His calls for social justice, his moral idealism, and his refusal to accept things as they existed were hallmarks of his entire career.

It is not surprising that they were the mainstays of his attack on the President. The harshness stemmed from Thomas' feeling that Roosevelt could have made the

presidency a different kind of office, one marked by highly ethical leadership.⁴¹ Thomas' attitude brings an important question to mind: Was it fair to expect this behavior from Roosevelt given the Socialist leader's beliefs about the need for a reorganization of the entire political order?

The correspondence also underscores the role that the vastly different perspectives of the two leaders played in shaping their political beliefs. Both Roosevelt and Thomas mentioned this point in a number of letters.⁴² The President, burdened with the responsibilities of power, usually practiced the arts of accommodation, compromise, and pragmatism. Thomas, far removed from the exercise of power, was able to develop a vast breadth of critical range in his letters to the President. His was the classic freedom of criticism without responsibility.

The impact of these differing perspectives proved to be crucial. The correspondence suggests that, because of his convictions, Norman Thomas' lack of perception of the primacy of opportunism and compromise in American politics left him the "idealistic ghost" at the banquet of American politics.⁴³ In contrast, Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose sense of the political rarely failed him, sat at the head of the table. The Thomas-Roosevelt correspondence presents an important perspective, one that illuminates the continuing tension between idealism and realism in American politics.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise noted, all of the correspondence and memoranda cited in this article are located in the "Norman Thomas" Folder in Box 4840 of the President's Personal file, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library, Hyde Park, New York. All such documents will be identified with a specific brief citation followed by the letters "RL."
2. Thomas to Fayerweather, 21 March 1932, RL.
3. Murray B. Seidler, *Norman Thomas: Respectable Rebel*, 2nd ed. (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1967), p. 118.
4. As cited in Seidler, p. 226.
5. W. A. Swanberg, *Norman Thomas: The Last Idealist* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1976), p. 258. See the extensive correspondence in the Thomas Folder covering the 1941–1944 period.
6. Telegram, Thomas to Roosevelt, 15 October 1932, RL. Original in the papers of the Democratic National Committee, RL.
7. Harry Fleischman, *Norman Thomas: A Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1964), p. 139.
8. Thomas to McIntyre, 10 May 1933, Coll. 93-D, Box 15, Official File, 1933–1945, folder marked "Colored Matters," RL.
9. Memorandum, Grant to McIntyre, 24 May 1933, Coll. 93-D, Box 15, Official File, 1933–1945, folder marked "Colored Matters," RL.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Seidler, p. 116.
12. Wolman to General Hugh Johnson, 17 August 1933, RL.
13. See Norman Thomas, "Surveying the New Deal," *The New World Tomorrow*, 17 (18 January 1934), 38; and "The New Deal: No Program of Security," *The Southern Review*, 1 (1935), 365–72.
14. Thomas to Roosevelt, 14 November 1933, RL.
15. See James C. Duram, *Norman Thomas* (New York: G. K. Hall-Twayne Publishers, 1974), pp. 91–93 for a summary of Thomas' long involvement in the Mooney case.

16. Roosevelt to Thomas, 27 December 1933, RL.
17. Thomas to Roosevelt, 18 December 1934, RL.
18. Telegram, Thomas to Roosevelt, 4 September 1934, RL; and Thomas Folder, RL, *passim*.
19. Norman Thomas, "Victims of Change," *Current History and Forum*, 42 (April 1935), 36–41. The key article on the subject is M. S. Venkataramani, "Norman Thomas, Arkansas Sharecroppers, and the Roosevelt Agricultural Policies, 1933–1937," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, 47 (September 1960), 225–46. See also, Fleischman, pp. 145–149.
20. Telegram, Thomas to Roosevelt, 25 February 1935, RL.
21. Thomas to Roosevelt, 9 April 1935, RL.
22. Roosevelt to Thomas, 22 April 1935, RL.
23. Thomas to Roosevelt, 22 and 24 April 1935, RL.
24. Fleischman, pp. 151–52.
25. Venkataramani, p. 240.
26. Fleischman, pp. 159–62.
27. The letters are summarized in a memorandum entitled "The Attorney General," 29 June 1938, RL.
28. Thomas to Roosevelt, 27 December 1938, RL.
29. McIntyre to Thomas, 29 December 1938, RL.
30. For an excellent explanation of his thoughts on this, see Norman Thomas, "The Pacifist's Dilemma," *The Nation*, 144 (16 January 1937), 66–68.
31. Thomas' letter is summarized in a memorandum entitled "State," 4 January 1937, RL. See also, Seidler, pp. 203–205.
32. Roosevelt's letter is summarized in the same memorandum cited in footnote #31.
33. Thomas to Roosevelt, 9 June 1937, RL.
34. Hull to Thomas, 28 June 1937, RL.
35. Thomas to Roosevelt, 23 September 1939, RL.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Roosevelt to Thomas, 28 September 1939, RL.
38. For a discussion of Roosevelt's move towards intervention, see chapters 12 and 13 of William E. Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).
39. Thomas to Roosevelt, 11 June 1940, 3 January 1941, 9 January 1941, 11 August 1942, 9 April 1943, 5 May 1943, 22 May 1944, and 9 November 1944, RL; and Roosevelt to Thomas, 9 January 1941, 25 August 1942, 24 April 1943, 15 June 1944, and 21 November 1944, RL.
40. See especially, Seidler, pp. 224–28. See also, Fleischman, pp. 195–96.
41. Seidler, p. 228.
42. See, for example, Roosevelt to Thomas, 14 May 1941, RL; and Thomas to Roosevelt, 9 April 1935, RL.
43. Bernard Johnpoll, *Norman Thomas: A Pacifist's Progress* (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1970), pp. 287–88 and 292. While faulting Thomas more heavily than his biographers for the failure of American Socialism, Johnpoll sees Thomas' approach to politics as dominated by his calvinistic background with its strong sense of conscience and clear perception of right and wrong. Such values made it very difficult to develop the art of compromise in his approach to politics.