

Civilian Conservation Corp

The Consequence of Compromise

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“The Green Slopes of our forested hills lured our first settlers and furnished them the materials of a happy life. They and their descendants were a little careless with that asset.”

President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 1931

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, President of the United States from 1933 to 1945, impacted a younger generation of Americans by teaching them that the amazing natural resources that our country provides deserved to be recognized and maintained, so generations to follow would have the tools to uphold a gratitude for nature and a thankful sense for life (see Appendix A). Roosevelt’s groundbreaking initiative called the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) inspired hundreds of Americans to consider the preservation of our nation’s natural wonders and serve as a shining example of overcoming conflict through compromise.

Many of the central features of the program were developed in response to early criticisms by other political figures and administrations. Nonetheless, the CCC became a role model for training programs that specialized in a variety of jobs including journalism and multiple professions in the arts. Roosevelt strived to inspire people through his projects, one of them being the CCC. By giving our country a chance to start anew, he showed millions of Americans that even he knew our world is worth saving.

The country started this downward spiral in October 1929. A day known as Black Tuesday put the nation in a blind panic; it was the start of a life-changing, history-making event that would last for ten years. Banks crashed leaving people broke, unable to buy food or other necessities. Naturally, the people of America thought to grow their own food, but no one knew how, not to mention that it would not have mattered given the huge drought that happened in the early 1930's. By stopping almost all agriculture production this drought, known as the Dust Bowl, could have put the country in a standstill all by itself. But combined with the banks crashing, the country was on the path to bankruptcy and was lost on how to repair the damage that had been done. The banks crashing also forced the government to be very careful and smart with what they spent their budget on, and conservation did not get funding. As the standards of living decreased, the amount of government spending on conservation projects plummeted to almost nothing, leaving our beautiful, rolling hills to fend for themselves. Forest roads were deteriorating, trees were dying and with no one replenishing our resources, they started to run out.

On March 9th, 1933 Franklin Delano Roosevelt ordered the best of his senior staff to find a way to get 500,000 men working on conservation projects by that summer. With the Great Depression sending waves of poverty and starvation throughout the country, the committee was hesitant to stop their current projects, but Roosevelt was insistent that this be their top priority. So the staff followed orders and began working on a plan. Over the course of twelve days, Roosevelt and his committee members came up with a proposal they thought to be more modest than the original order. It called for a quarter of a million (250,000) men employed to work on

conservation projects by the summer. They sent that proposal to Congress on March 21, 1933, and the proposal was signed into law only ten days later.

The bill was entitled the Emergency Conservation Work program (ECW) and the name Civilian Conservation Corp became official in 1937, four years later. As soon as the bill was passed, the committee came up with a set of criteria for the workers. All enrollees had to be between the ages of 18 and 25. The men had to be unmarried and most of the workers were from families that had already applied for relief. Then came the issue of pay. The program was planning to run on government money and hoped they would receive donations and funding once the program was up and running. They decided the men would receive \$30 a month and would be required to send \$22 to \$25 back to their families. They hoped this would improve the economy by giving families money to spend on food and other things they needed; therefore, helping to restore hope, faith and economic structure.

Throughout the nine years of the Civilian Conservation Corps, over three million men were employed, including over 250,000 African Americans and 80,000 Native Americans. Camps were segregated, and sometimes even had a fence between cabins containing workers of different races, but every man was allowed to work. The rules were different for different races though. They were all paid the same, but the criteria differed. White men could not be married, but men from Native American tribes had no restrictions on marital status.

Camps differed when it came to schedule. At some camps the schedule never fluctuated, it always stayed the same but at others they would be changed depending on the littlest thing like season or state of mood. At the Devil's Lake camp in Wisconsin, the men were kept to a specific regimen. On a regular day, meaning days that were not holidays or breaks, the men worked a nine hour day, waking up at 6:00 am and eating breakfast at 6:30 am. They then went to their work sites and worked for six hours before heading back to the mess hall for lunch at 12:15 pm. They went back to the worksite until about 4:15 pm, returning to the barracks for the daily recruit inspection at 4:45 pm. At this time, barracks would be inspected and the flag would be taken down. The troops then returned once again to the mess hall for dinner at 5:00 pm.

After they finished eating their dinner, the rest of the time was theirs. Most of the recruits would head to the Welfare and Recreational Building. This is where they could read or write in the building's library, play various games, practice music on the facility's piano or write letters to their families back home. In each barrack, there was space and accommodations for 50 men. Each had their own cot and each had a storage container to hold personal items, clothes and valuables. Other than the cots, no furniture was allowed in the barracks. This was why, instead of in the barracks, the men spent most of their free time in the recreational facility.

Almost immediately, Roosevelt started to recruit associations and companies to help fund and supervise the program. The first to accept was the Red Cross. They donated medical supplies such as gauze and bandages to the camps, along with sending workers and volunteers to help supervise the camps and work sites. Now that the program had sponsors, Roosevelt put all of his

time getting the U.S. Army on board. He hoped the Army would supply camps for the men to stay in while they worked, and train the enrollees for the hard, intense labor they would endure. He also hoped that the Army would help supervise the camps and work sites. After months of persuasion, the army agreed and Roosevelt and his committee moved on to details. They decided each camp would contain 200 men, and the camps would be organized by different projects and objectives. They thought having the men who worked on projects together living in the same camps would help spark some comradery between workers while hopefully boosting morale and increasing the efficiency of the projects. Work sites were supervised by the National Parks Service, the Forest Service and a small part of the Interior Department.

Because of the Army's huge participation in the formation and enforcement of the CCC's regulations, and the enormous part it played in the creation of the program, Roosevelt and the CCC started to receive complaints and concerns from families about the program being too strict and military-like. These complaints were justified, given the men wore modified Army uniforms, and lived in military status tents and housing. But CCC officials published a response, making it clear that there would be no drills or weapons training, no saluting and no Military Police or guardhouse. They hoped their response would calm down the press, and give the CCC a break from critiques.

At this point, things seemed to be moving well. They had a plan, they had sponsors, they even started getting camps ready, and the first set of enrollees were being trained. Then the head of the Forest Service, Robert Y Stuart (see appendix B), published a comprehensive report,

disagreeing with Roosevelt on almost all of the details they had decided on for the CCC. Stuart felt that there should be over 2 million men to work on curtailing erosion, planting trees, and creating and maintaining forest roads. After publishing his opinion, a lot of people agreed with him. The CCC now had a large group of people against the program and with training already in session, they just had to wait it out. The CCC organizers figured as soon as the program got going, people would realize that it was a worthwhile idea that would help the country get back on its feet. But the naysayers held their ground. With the large community of people following Stuart's lead, other big corporations and important government figures came out with their honest opinions as well. It turns out that there was only a small percentage of people who thought that the CCC was worth the time and effort that had been put into it. Undeterred, Roosevelt stood his ground, and continued with training, until the first group was ready to start work on their first project.

During all of this controversy and turmoil from the press, the CCC was also dealing with issues within their own program. The Red Cross volunteers were fighting for more academic opportunities for workers in the camps. The volunteers from the Red Cross fought especially hard for this movement, arguing that it would create more opportunities for jobs and give the men a better chance of success after they left the program. Even though many committee members agreed with their proposal, this movement just was not a priority, nor was it in the budget. With the CCC's budget consisting of mostly donations and a small amount of government funding, they did not have the time or money to hire professors to teach.

By the end of the first year, the program began to receive fewer complaints and had found that they had a large number of supporters and donors. The CCC had completed 24 conservation projects for a multitude of different parks and forests. After the first year, things started to run more smoothly. More people started to donate and the budget for the CCC began to grow. The CCC eventually started to add more and more educational opportunities. In the end, almost 75% of the men went on to successful careers after they left the program, further serving their country by making the economy even stronger.

The Civilian Conservation Corps is an fascinating example to refer to when talking about overcoming conflict through compromise. After doing this project, I realize that historic programs like this should be recognized more and used as a model for future programs. History can repeat itself and that it is important to remember our past and the things our country has overcome. This program was more like a movement than anything else. By creating opportunities for all men, no matter their race, this program proved it was ahead of its time. The impact of the CCC speaks for itself: during the nine years of its existence, over three billion trees were planted, roads were built and much was done to improve soil erosion. I think that no one could have envisioned the impact of this program better than its creator, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who truly understood that our natural environment was worth saving.

After speaking to one of the amazing veterans who worked in the CCC and then went on to fight for his country in World War II, I have found a new respect and appreciation for stories that I have been told since a very young age. Mr. Sulima is one of only a handful of CCC

program participants still living and it was an honor to hear his story firsthand. I learned so much from talking to him and his story greatly impacted my perspective on the importance of taking care of our natural resources. Even though some of these men have been commended with medals and honors like flipping the coin at the Super Bowl, it will not be enough until each of these men have been recognized, remembered, and commended for the work they did. These men helped to rebuild our country, one stone slab, one hiking trail, one tree at a time.

Appendix A



August 12 1933 FDR visits with CCC enrollees at Camp Roosevelt

Speakerman , Joseph M. “Into the Woods: The First Year of the Civilian Conservation Corps.”

National Archives and Records Administration, National Archives and Records

Administration, 6 Nov. 2006,

www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html.

Appendix B



Riverbend Park shortly after CCC work (left). Riverbend Park today (right).

“River Bend Park After CCC Work.” *National Parks Service* , Washington DC,
www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html.

“River Bend Park Today .” *National Parks Service* , Washington DC,
www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html.

Works Cited

Primary

“Blue Mound CCC Boys Have Arrived Here .” *Baraboo News-Republic*, 5 Aug. 1935, pp. 1–7. I used this to find out when work at the CCC camp in Devils Lake started and when the boys arrived. I also used this to find out the boys' schedules and what kind of facilities were in the camp.

FDR Visits with CCC Enrollees . 12 Aug. 1933. I wanted to show Roosevelt interacting with the workers and the program and I thought that this photo encompassed a small part of his involvement in the program.

“River Bend Park After CCC Work.” *National Parks Service* , Washington DC, www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html. I used this photograph to show what a National Park looked like soon as the CCC had finished working on a conservation program.

“River Bend Park Today .” *National Parks Service* , Washington DC, www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html. I used this photograph so that I could show what a National Park that had been worked on by the CCC looked like in this day in age.

“Roosevelt Insists on Longer Session .” *New York Times*, 21 Mar. 1933, pp. 1–2. I used this source for quotes from the White House and to find out what was discussed in meeting like this when speaking about starting the New Works Program.

Secondary

“Civilian Conservation Corps.” *National Parks Service*, U.S. Department of the Interior, www.nps.gov/thro/learn/historyculture/civilian-conservation-corps.htm. This source provided information about what kinds of projects the Civilian Conservation Corps did for our National parks and focused more on the projects and the conservation aspect of the program.

“Civilian Conservation Corps.” *Social Welfare History Project*, 6 Oct. 2017, socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/great-depression/civilian-conservation-corps/. This source helped me to understand more of the personal effects that the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Great Depression had on families and the citizens who were impacted by the program. This website focused more on the social issues the program caused and the politics that were involved.

Pells, Richard H, and Christina D Romer. “Great Depression .” *Brittanica*, 27 Oct. 2017, www.britannica.com/event/Great-Depression/Economic-impact. I used this source to help better my knowledge on the Great Depression and expand my background knowledge on the subject.

Speakerman , Joseph M. “Into the Woods: The First Year of the Civilian Conservation Corps.” *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, 6 Nov. 2006, www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/fall/ccc.html. This was the source I used the most. I used this as an overall source of information including dates, numbers and names. This source was used throughout my paper and helped to inform me on my topic pertaining to all aspects such as politics and conservation.