

REMEMBERING THE NEW DEAL IN THE PARKS

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Abstract

The National Park Service (NPS) now faces a staggering \$11.5 billion maintenance deficit. By contrast, in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the NPS experienced a period of major construction and land conservation, thanks to the New Deal. This work was done by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). When the CCC was terminated in 1942, enrollees had performed work in 198 CCC camps in 94 national park and monument areas and 697 camps in 881 state, county, and municipal areas. The NPS also played a major role in the improvement and development of state parks nationwide, through their administration and supervision of CCC and WPA crews.

This presentation will briefly describe the contribution of the CCC and WPA and compare it with the current relatively feeble magnitude of the AmeriCorps program. During the New Deal nearly 3 million young men build functional yet beautiful infrastructure and planted 3 billion trees in federal, state and county parks and federal lands throughout the nation. Today AmeriCorps employs only 75,000 in the face of a tremendous need for infrastructure repair and employment. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in July 2015 that the number of unemployed youth 16 to 24 years old had increased to 20.3 million. Add to this the grim fact that homicide ranks among the top three causes of death for youth. An expanded AmeriCorps program is not only needed for parks but as a lifesaving alternative for young people. Surprisingly given the level of youth unemployment and youth violence, funding of AmeriCorps has been controversial.

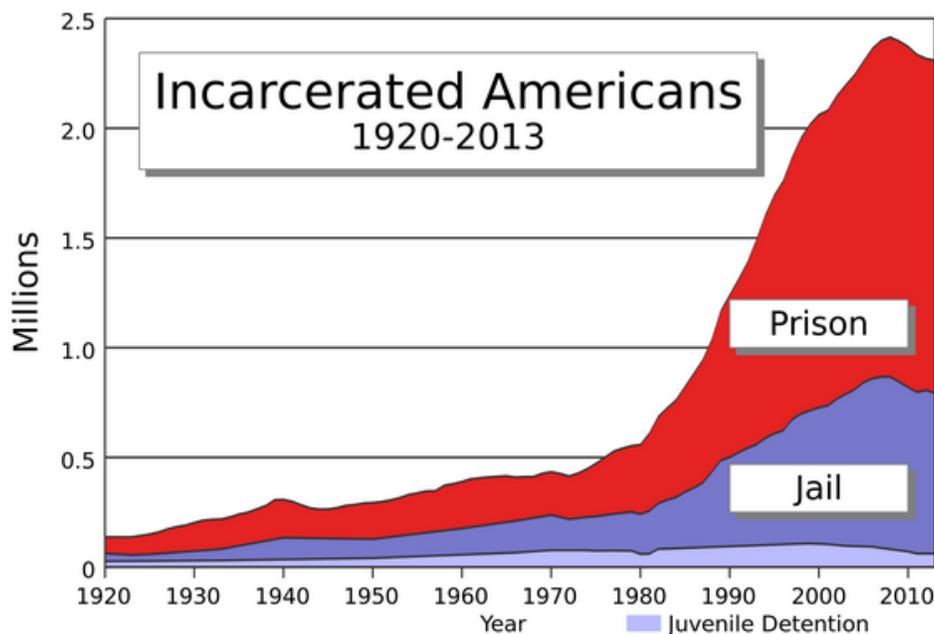
How can the NPS assist in dealing with its crumbling infrastructure and with the plight of young people in America? The NPS should increase its efforts to interpret the remarkable history of the CCC and WPA in the parks. Presently interpretation efforts are uneven, some parks do a thorough job, others do little or next to nothing to celebrate the CCC and WPA contributions. These interpretation efforts are seemingly not coordinated or encouraged at a national level. Greater efforts during this centennial year would be entirely appropriate to the NPS's initiative encouraging people to discover the meaning of national parks and to inspire "people to both experience and become devoted to these special places." Educated park visitors can become advocates for what could be a win-win solution for both parks and America's youth, contributing to a popular groundswell of support for the NPS and AmeriCorps.

Paper

My interest in the New Deal goes back about two and half decades. My first New Deal public presentation was for the California Studies Conference in 1999 and was titled “The New Deal or the Raw Deal: Public Works and Public Debate.” I developed the presentation after thinking that California did not have a public infrastructure program comparable to the New Deal until I realized that the massive prison building boom of the 1990s was certainly on a similar scale. However, it was the polar opposite in terms of public policy. This reflected a national trend so that by 2014 an estimated 6,851,000 persons were under the supervision of U.S. adult correctional systems, including probation, prison, parole and jail.ⁱ

In contrast, the New Deal programs of the 1930s employed the down-and-out to build beautiful schools, libraries, parks and public structures of all types to benefit the greatest number, and through employment probably prevented many from committing crimes. (Although the New Deal did build some prisons and jails, they were very few relative to other types of structures.) The prison building of the 1990s was a program of creating infrastructure for a small but growing portion of society, and the “lock them up and throw away the key” mentality actually reduced the amount of rehabilitative training offered to inmates.ⁱⁱ Presently the total number of incarcerated Americans numbers is over two million, the highest rate per population for any large country in the world.ⁱⁱⁱ

Figure 1.

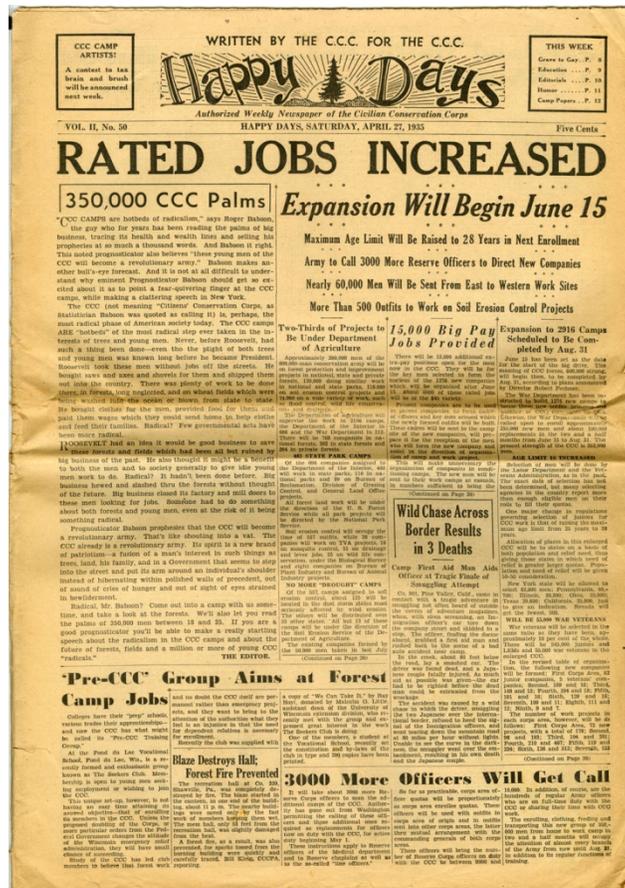


Incarcerated Americans 1920-2013
Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics

Now we find ourselves in an era that has many parallels to that of the 1930s. Following the massive financial meltdown of 2008, there have been minor increases in employment, but wages are flat and debt for many has increased. The New Deal programs of unemployment insurance, aid to dependent children, old-age pensions, and bank deposit insurance have prevented the financial chaos that the mass of the population experienced in the 1930s. However, the ever increasing wealth gap and ever decreasing availability of public services are facts of life in the 21st Century.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was the very first program enabled by the first legislation of the New Deal, the Emergency Conservation Work (ECW) Act, which was passed by Congress within days of Franklin D. Roosevelt taking office. Concern for young people and the environment was central to the public policy of FDR's administration. Adults could not afford to feed their families, and many young men left home and school of necessity, some riding the rails in search of work. The CCC was able to provide them with work, good nutrition and education. We know the results – the planting of three billion trees and the construction of park infrastructure at the national, state and local level.

Figure 2.

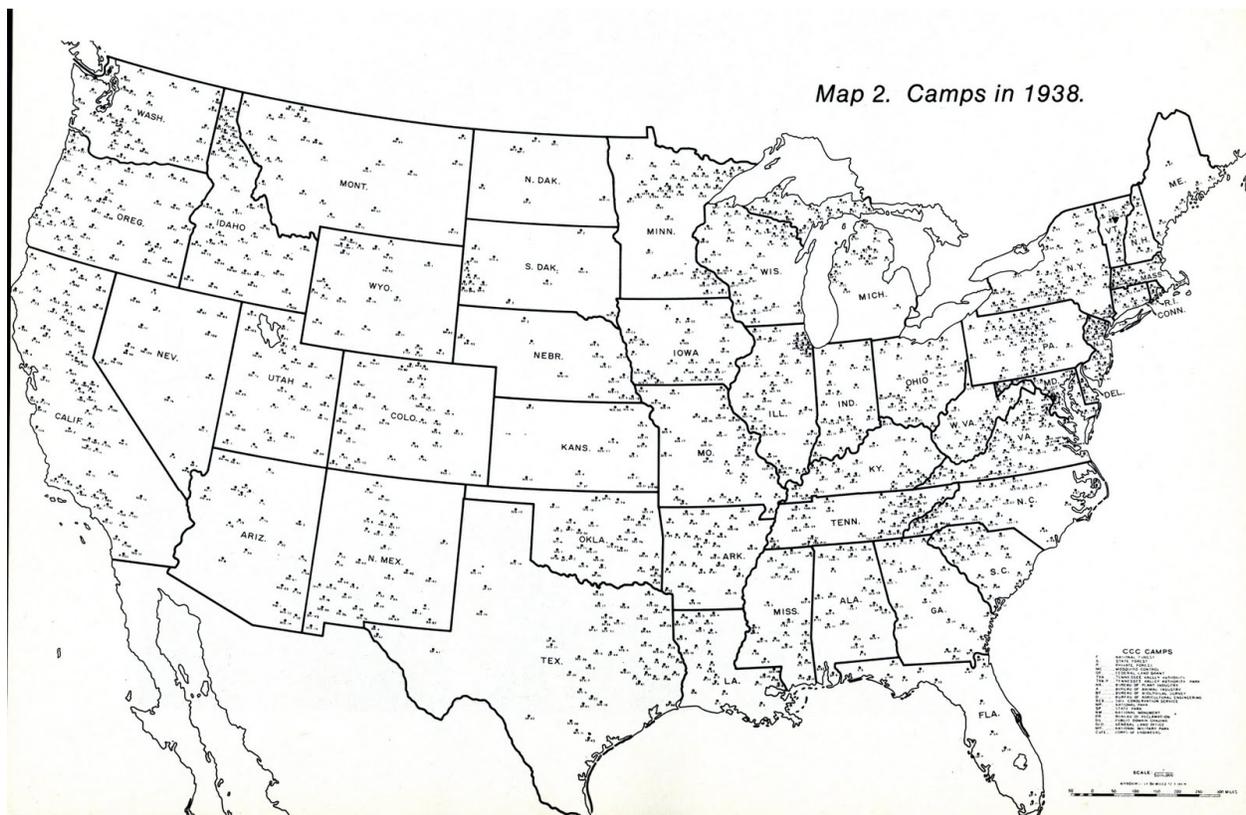


Happy Days, CCC Newspaper, April 27, 1935

Source: California State Archives

Thus, ironically in the midst of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the National Park Service (NPS) experienced a period of major construction and land conservation, thanks to the New Deal. This work was done both by the CCC and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). When the CCC was terminated in 1942, enrollees had performed work in 198 CCC camps in 94 national park and monument areas and 697 camps in 881 state, county, and municipal areas.^{iv} The nearly 3 million young men of the CCC not only built functional yet beautiful infrastructure and planted trees, they helped to protect forests by conservation work and fighting fires in federal, state and county parks and federal lands throughout the nation. The NPS also played a major role in the improvement and development of state parks nationwide, through their administration and supervision of CCC and WPA crews. Today, the WPA is best known for its poster series promoting the National Parks, and many parks still have interpretive exhibits created by it. (This paper will focus primarily on the CCC contributions to parks.)

Figure 3.



CCC Camps in 1938

Source: Stan Cohen, *The Tree Army, A Pictorial History of the CCC, 1933-1942*. Retrieved from http://cccreources.blogspot.com/2010_12_01_archive.html.

As explained by Harley Jolley, who joined the CCC in 1937, “We were taught the idea that ‘Hey, you can do things. You can do better than what you’ve done in the past. You do have a future.’ And we believed that.”^v This sentiment was echoed by every CCC enrollee I have interviewed – Milt Wolff, Archie Green, Travis Lafferty and Walter Atwood – or by others I have

had casual conversations with at CCC commemorations. Conversely, imagine the potential social dysfunction of those 3 million desperate young men on the streets during the 1930s without the option of CCC enrollment.

A couple decades after the CCC disbanded, in the 1970s, two other CCC-like programs benefited the national parks. The Youth Conservation Corps (YCC) and the Young Adult Conservation Corps (YACC) performed a variety of maintenance and resource management projects, including tree planting, river cleanup and erosion control, invasive plant reduction, trail maintenance and improvement, building rehabilitation and wildlife research. According to Rebecca Mills, Chief of Youth Programs in the western region national parks from 1978-1981 and later the superintendent of Great Basin National Park, “the program gave the youth much more than a good job---it gave them a place in an organization staffed with dedicated people committed to the Park Service mission and it taught them a lot about conservation and public service, and work.”^{vi}

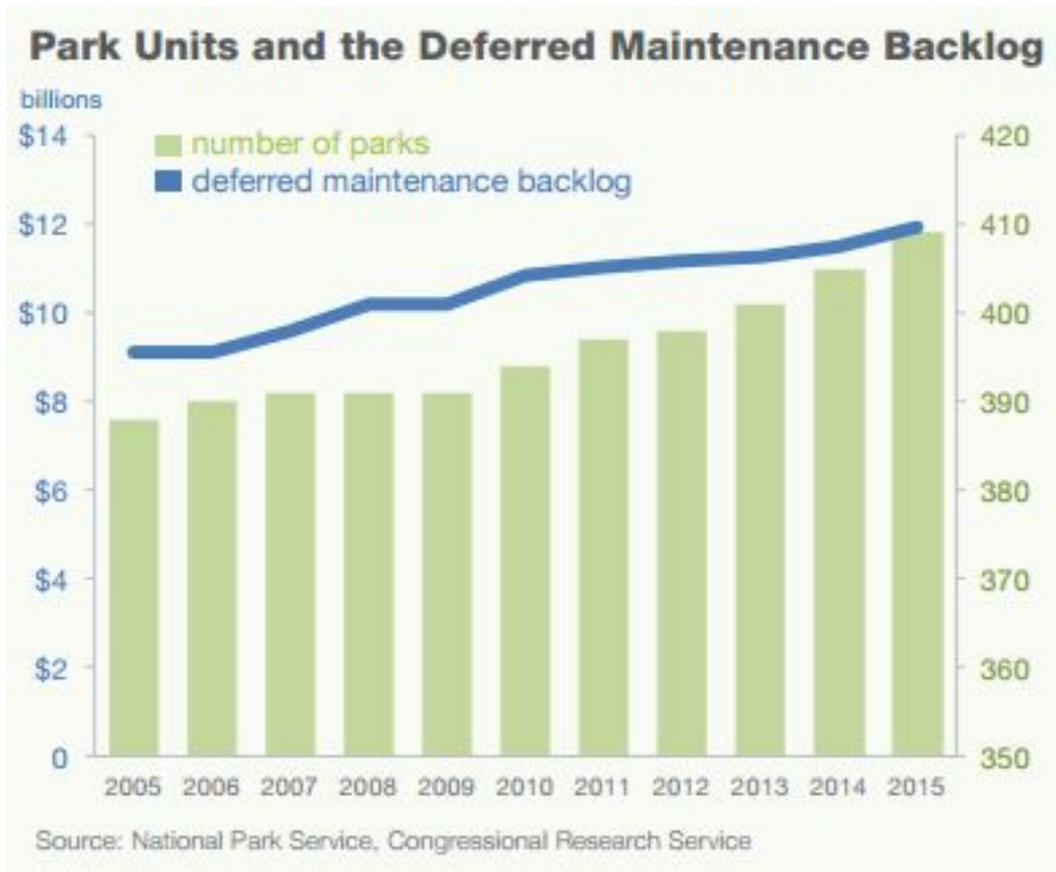
Figure 4.



**Old Santa Fe Trail Building, Constructed 1937
Photo by Harvey Smith, September 2015**

Now, decades since the remarkable work of the CCC, the NPS faces a staggering \$11.5 billion maintenance deficit.^{vii} Crumbling infrastructure in national parks is not only an aesthetic problem for visitors from all over the world but a potential safety hazard and a national embarrassment. Our historic structures are in danger, and issues like the invasion of non-native species of plants and animals into park ecosystems also need to be addressed.^{viii} Additionally, the Union of Concerned Scientists reports the growing consequences of climate change are putting many of the country's most iconic and historic sites at risk.^{ix}

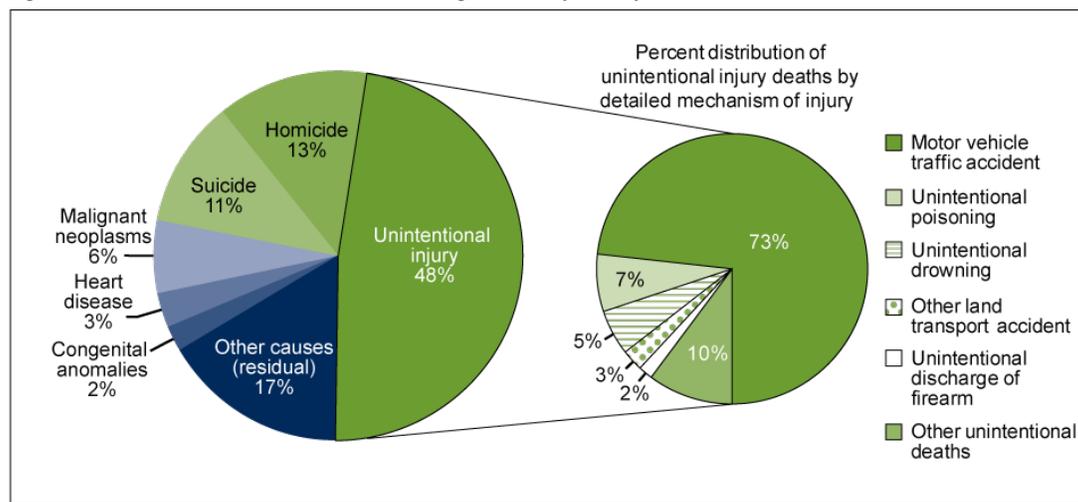
Figure 5.



How can the NPS deal with its crumbling infrastructure? The answer certainly could be in the AmeriCorps program, which is a modern version of the CCC. However, AmeriCorps employs only 75,000 in the face of a tremendous youth unemployment rate.^x The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported in July 2015 that the number of unemployed youth 16 to 24 years old had increased to 20.3 million. Add to this the grim and disturbing fact that homicide and suicide rank among the top three causes of death for youth. An expanded AmeriCorps program is not only needed for parks but as a lifesaving alternative for young people. Surprisingly given the level of youth unemployment and youth violence, funding of AmeriCorps has been controversial.

Figure 6.

Figure 2. Percent distribution of all deaths to teenagers 12–19 years, by cause of death: United States, 1999–2006



SOURCE: National Vital Statistics System, Mortality.

My direct experience with AmeriCorps youth showed me the value of the program. I was director of Wildcat Canyon Ranch Youth Program, an environmental educational nonprofit. We partnered with AmeriCorps crews to do maintenance work on a 7 acre ranch located adjacent to a regional park. For most of these multi-ethnic, inner-city youth, the AmeriCorps experience provided a welcome alternative to their urban neighborhoods and introduced them to learning teamwork with their fellow crew members and to experiencing the physicality of outdoor labor. It improved their education level, bettered their physical and emotional health, introduced them to nature and issues of the environment, and improved their job prospects.

Diversity in the parks is an issue that has been taken up by the NPS during this centennial year. A 2015 report on outdoor participation by the Outdoor Foundation found that, in 2014, participants in outdoor activities were 70 percent White.^{xi} Additionally, a coalition of civil rights and conservation groups is calling for public lands to be more inclusive over the next century. They have started a petition drive to urge President Obama to issue an executive order to make public lands more diverse.^{xii}

A practical and literal boots on the ground approach to diversity would help to make it a reality. An expansion of AmeriCorps that included both urban and rural youth, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and Native American youth would bring a more diverse group of young people into the parks who would likely return to visit their work sites and other parks. I have spoken with former CCC men and their descendants who have returned and told stories of the work that was done in their younger years. Saul Beltran, who worked with a mostly Chicano company from Los Angeles on the restoration of La Purisima Mission in Lompoc, California, reminisced at a 75th anniversary celebration of the CCC in 2008 that, "The CCC took me off the street and taught me how to exist with others my age that came from different cultures and different religions."^{xiii}

Of course, skills learned by CCC workers were applied in World War II and later in life. Today's AmeriCorps workers would be learning skills that could be applied to permanent employment in parks, construction and various green jobs. Some may become park rangers, and hopefully be able to express similar feelings as that of the oldest National Park ranger Betty Reid Soskin, 94 years old and African-American, who has written, "I am able to speak my truth and bring my whole self into the process...I'm experiencing the respect of my community and my colleagues."^{xiv}

Granted it may be difficult for the NPS to advocate directly to Congress for support of AmeriCorps, but it could increase its efforts to interpret the remarkable history of the CCC and WPA in the parks. Presently interpretation efforts are uneven, some parks do a thorough job, others do little or next to nothing to celebrate the CCC and WPA contributions. I have observed in many national parks that these interpretation efforts are seemingly not coordinated or are they encouraged at a national level.

During a recent visit to Rocky Mountain National Park, I was driving on the road toward the high mountain pass. I spotted a hitchhiker holding skis and stopped to give him a ride. He explained he was a former park employee who knew the ski trails, and although the lift had been removed several years ago, he still enjoyed skiing well-remember trails. I mentioned my quest to find CCC sites in the park, and he pointed out the two nearest former CCC camps which were not noted on the park map. This was information not readily available from the visitor centers; park volunteers and most rangers knew little about the CCC in the park. Clearly my unique experience of picking up a hitchhiking former ranger underscores it is not the best or likely way for a typical visitor to find out about the CCC in a park!

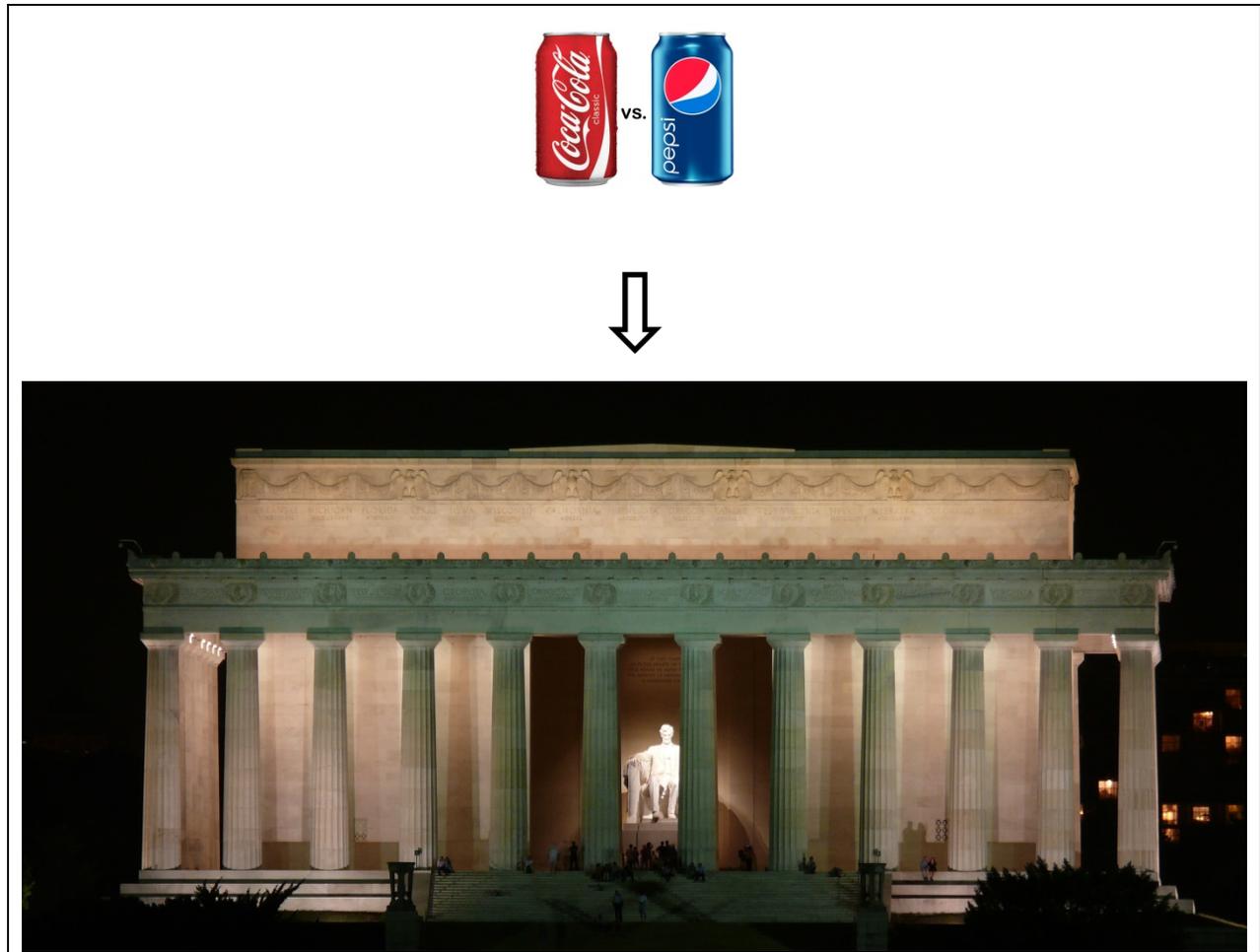
Park visitors who are adequately informed about park history and the CCC can potentially have influence on their elected officials to support AmeriCorps. In my work with both the National New Deal Preservation Association and the Living New Deal, I often hear the comment, "The New Deal did so much beneficial work, why aren't we doing this now?" This is the question national park visitors should be asking.

During the 75th anniversary of the CCC in 2008, the State of California Parks commemorated the CCC at several of its major development sites throughout the state. This may be a model for what the NPS can do nationally. Events, brochures, standard signage, commemoration of the few still living CCC and WPA workers and ongoing archival research helps the park visitor to learn and to appreciate the history of the essential contributions to park infrastructure. Another model may be the Department of Interior funding program, administered by NPS, for interpretation of Japanese-American internment camp sites.

The maintenance deficit of the NPS and its possible alleviation by a new CCC-like effort is also critical in a broader perspective. As pointed out by FDR, "It took a bitter struggle to teach the country at large that our national resources are not inexhaustible and that, when public domain is stolen, a twofold injury is done, for it is a theft of the treasure of the present and at the same time bars the road of opportunity to the future."^{xv} We are certainly aware there are

those who promote privatization of the public sector or urge returning federal lands to the states, advocating that very theft of the public domain FDR warned about.

Figure 7.



If branding rights are not appropriate here, why are they appropriate for any national monument or park?

Photo source: Public Domain/Ad Meskens

An aspect of my New Deal work involves protection of New Deal sites and artwork. After a three year struggle by a coalition of local citizens and a legal team consisting of a pro bono lawyer, the city attorney, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Berkeley, CA post office was saved from imminent sale to a private party. During this effort I learned about several conservative think tanks and their influence on Congress in attempting to privatize not only the USPS., but also Transportation Security Administration (TSA) and other aspects of the public sector.

The case of the NPS is similar to other sectors of government – think tanks call for privatization, Congress reduces funding, think tanks and elected officials point to the

inefficiency of government, privatization is proposed as the solution. However, time and again it has been shown that privatization of public programs and resources have certainly enriched the private sector, but it has increased costs to the taxpayer and decreased public services.^{xvi} The NPS maintenance deficit has been taken up by one such think tank, Property and Environment Research Center (PERC), with its ideology of “free market environmentalism” which focuses on profit-based rather than human-based solutions to the deficit problem.

The proposed weakening of NPS rules governing corporate sponsorships points to the slippery slope of increased privatization.^{xvii} Rather than moving to corporate branding, the NPS should focus on celebrating the historical fact of the huge contribution of public sector programs in building our parks and preserving our natural resources. A new CCC or expanded AmeriCorps could give the NPS what it lacks in dollars, and the NPS would not have to go seek private donations/corporate partnerships. But, of course, increasing AmeriCorps funding or the NPS budget depends on a functional Congress supportive of the public sector.

Figure 8.



**Former CCC Workers with Current AmeriCorps Workers, Leeds, Utah
Photo by Harvey Smith, September 2011**

Educated park visitors can become advocates for what could be a win-win solution for both parks and America’s youth, contributing to a popular groundswell of support for the NPS

and AmeriCorps. Greater interpretive efforts during this centennial year would be entirely appropriate to the NPS's initiative encouraging people to discover the meaning of national parks and to inspire "people to both experience and become devoted to these special places."^{xviii}

Harvey Smith is project advisor to the Living New Deal and board president of the National New Deal Preservation Association. He is author of the Arcadia Publishing book *Berkeley and the New Deal*. He was co-curator of the 2010 exhibit "The American Scene: New Deal Art, 1935-1943" at the Bedford Gallery in Walnut Creek, CA and curator of the 2011 exhibit "Art and Activism: The New Deal's Legacy Around the Bay" at the Canessa Gallery in San Francisco. He received a B.A. in English and master of public health degree from U.C. Berkeley and has worked as an educator, public health worker and researcher, radio journalist, horse rancher and union carpenter.

Endnotes

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