

# The Limits of Symbolic Reform: The New Deal and Taxation, 19331939

Mark H. Leff

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In The Limits of Symbolic Reform, Mark Leff examines the gap between politics and economics, between symbol and substance in the New Deal. The New Deal never lacked for controversy, and tax policy reliably aroused the fiercest of emotions. Franklin Roosevelt's celebrated tax reform proposals - presented amidst verbal barrages against 'economic royalists' and the 'unjust concentration of wealth and economic power' signified almost nothing in terms of revenue. Cosmetic higher rates on upper-income brackets generated far less revenue than lower-profile New Deal taxes on agricultural products, liquor, and payrolls (through social security) that burdened low incomes. But while 'soak the rich' tax initiatives were economically inconsequential, they were politically crucial to the image of compassion and action projected by the New Deal. Leff's analysis clarifies the reform priorities and the balance of political and economic that produced this paradoxical New Deal tax machinery.



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