

**The Great Depression****Primary Source**

# from *The Making of the New Deal*



**ABOUT THE READING** This reading is an excerpt from a memoir by Wilbur J. Cohen, who helped to draft the Social Security Act.



*As you read pay attention to the process of drafting and then passing the legislation.*

I was a student at the University of Wisconsin from 1930 to June 1934 in economics, and when I returned to Madison early in July I was told to go immediately to see Professor Edwin Witte's wife, Florence. He had gone to Washington to become the executive director of the President's Cabinet Committee on Economic Security, Mrs. Witte said, and he had been looking for me to be his assistant in Washington. That was thrilling news. I was twenty-one years old and I didn't quite know what to do. Money was a scarce item. I went to see Professor Witte, who was in Harry Hopkins's office. The following Monday I went to work.

My primary responsibility was research; I did the summaries of all the foreign systems of old-age assistance, old-age **pensions**, and unemployment insurance. There was then no widespread system of social security in the United States . . .

Professor Witte was a man of **encyclopedic** knowledge . . . he put together reports to the President that covered the whole field of social insurance, including old-age, survivors, disability, unemployment, mothers' pensions, vocational

**VOCABULARY**

**pension** an amount of money paid regularly

**encyclopedic** covering many subjects

**respectively** one by one in the order given

**The Making of the New Deal, *continued*****Primary Source**

rehabilitation, aid to the blind, aid to the disabled, and maternal and child health. In a period of six or seven months he drafted the essential plans . . .

It is phenomenal that Congress passed this major piece of legislation in about eight months. The men who were most significant were Representative Robert L. Doughton of North Carolina and Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi, chairmen of the House and Senate Finance Committees, **respectively**. . . It took the genius of Franklin D. Roosevelt to get these conservative southerners to back this radical financial instrument. I've pondered that for some years—how he was able to persuade these very conservative southerners to be his lieutenants in the legislative development of this act. It was not because they were believers in the redistribution of income in the United States, but they had seen the South devastated by the depression, and the fact that there was going to be *some* kind of income for the old and unemployed seemed to them a way of preserving the southern way of life.

**Cohen was surprised that the Social Security laws were passed so quickly.**

**Cohen was impressed that President Roosevelt got Doughton and Harrison, who were conservatives, to back such liberal laws.**

**WHAT DID YOU LEARN?**

- 1.** What was Wilbur Cohen's job for the Committee on Economic Security?

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- 2.** Why did conservative southerners Doughton and Harrison work to get the Social Security Act passed?

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