

No, the Bare minimum is not enough.

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1930's America  
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The Great Depression changed the country in a number of ways. The economic loss, the low employment, and the overall hurt demonor of those who inhabited it was unprecedented. However with big problems comes big solutions and President Roosevelt had solutions to spare. The policies established during this time were complicated and are still often debated today if they were as revolutionary as once thought. However one thing can be certain, and that's these new deals often echo through our current policies today. We still use some of FDR's policies and some people today in the country rely on them. However one of these policies and it's administration isn't around today, and is barely spoken about. The National Youth Administration was made to help the youth during the Great Depression and it claims it did just that. However what if at the same time, it didn't? When speaking about the Great Depression it's so often easy to lose yourself in the topic of policies enactment and the working class that you often forget the issues pertaining to race. So in the conversation of the National Youth Administration (NYA) you can believe it helped the kids, but what if it didn't help the black kids? When reading about this history yourself, you can't help but to feel like the sole promise the NYA held, wasn't extended to the black youth of the country. And for that it's safe to say that maybe they actually did not help. Because racism and segregation was so prevalent during the time, the National Youth Administration did the bare minimum in providing for black youth and that instantly transpires for not doing enough, and not helping.

To have this debate, one must first have a clear understanding of what exactly the National Youth Administration was and what they intended to do. The NYA was established in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's words "To initiate and administer a program of approved projects which shall provide relief, work relief, and employment for persons between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five years who are no longer in regular attendance at a school requiring full time, and

who are not regularly engaged in remunerative employment."<sup>1</sup> There was a problem with young adults in the country during the Great Depression and that was the loss of jobs and school. We see the severity of this in an article written by Aubrey Williams, who was the director of the NYA in 1939. He writes that about 4 million young adults had no job and no schooling during this hard time.<sup>2</sup> This was making the economy even worse and something had to be done. Essentially what the NYA did was give young people jobs to work to combat economic loss. This administration was a branch of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC).<sup>3</sup> However another factor, a more important factor in the NYA was that it was also trying to keep kids in school.<sup>4</sup> Williams' article claims they did just that, having students be so well taught, their work was often featured in scholar journals amongst great names.<sup>5</sup> So the plan was overall, a simple one: keep young adults in school and provide work for those that needed it. Safe to say most thought this was a job well done. Jobs were made, like the CCC and some students continued to work. The NYA also heavily praised themselves for their diversity in the program. Williams writes how women who "Make up 43% of total enrollment, had to their credit such accomplishments as serving over 31,500,000 lunches to school children making some 2,500,000 articles for hospital supplies and producing in sewing rooms nearly 3,200,000 articles of clothing which were distributed to needy families."<sup>6</sup> The NYA was also known to show "kindness" to black Americans. The digital collections of the New York Public Library features the National Youth Administration collection, which is a collection of photos of youths in the program, working and learning. Majority of the photos are of black youths and they look very content and happy. It not only shows black men working on machinery, but also black

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<sup>1</sup> Roosevelt, Franklin *Executive Order 7086*.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, Aubrey "The Work of the National Youth Administration," *Living* 1, no.4 (1939): 65.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

women in school and even preparing surgical dressings.<sup>7</sup> These photos paint a narrative that the NYA was extremely helpful to black young adults and gave them many opportunities in the duration of its establishment. The NYA was in effect until 1943, a little after World War II began.<sup>8</sup> Today, the NYA isn't spoken about as much, and it's most likely many have no knowledge about it, since it's paled in comparison to FDR's other New Deal policies. However, the NYA does deserve some attention, more importantly some critiques, although it meant well, it fell short in many ways.

What's also important to note is those who were in leadership positions at the NYA. As discussed previously, there was Aubrey Williams, director of the NYA and there was also Mary McLeod Bethune who was director of the NYA's Division of Negro Affairs.<sup>9</sup> Bethune, who was already a huge figure in civil rights, was the first black woman to be an administrator in the Federal Government, and used this to her advantage, often working hard to give black youths, better treatment and opportunities.<sup>10</sup> There was also much support coming from Eleanor Roosevelt. Roosevelt, who was much already involved with politics, especially involving black Americans, received many letters from children of the Great Depression during her time. The letters came from all races and for the most part, asked her for things they needed in their everyday lives, like bicycles and clothing.<sup>11</sup> These letters gave Roosevelt insight on what the lives were like for many of the youth in the country and because of that, Roosevelt was heavily involved with the NYA, being an initiator and arranging meetings between the program leaders

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<sup>7</sup> *A Student Preparing Surgical Dressings*, New York Public Library.

<sup>8</sup> Social Welfare History, "National Youth Organization," Social Welfare History Project, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/eras/great-depression/national-youth-organization/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jametta, Davis, "Providing a New Deal for Young Black Women: Mary McLeod Bethune and the Negro Affairs Division of the NYA," *Rediscovering Black History*, 2014, <https://rediscovering-black-history.blogs.archives.gov/2014/03/25/providing-a-new-deal-for-young-black-women/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Cohen, Robert. *Dear Mrs. Roosevelt: Cries for Help from Depression Youth*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 15.

and the President.<sup>12</sup> All three of these people, Williams, Bethune and Roosevelt (though she was never given an official role) were seen as both liberal and sympathetic to black Americans, so it made sense that black youth were given attention in the program. Jills Watt's book *THE BLACK CABINET: The Untold Story of African Americans and Politics During the Age of Roosevelt* speaks heavily about the black people working in the Roosevelt administration. Similar to the portrayal of the NYA, this book discusses how these black leaders were often ignored and put into positions that looked pretty on the outside but were quite useless on the inside, citing that even Bethune had many restrictions on her and couldn't help to the fullest of her capabilities.<sup>13</sup> With this in mind, taking a look at the NYA and what it accomplished makes sense, seeing that most of those in "charge" were put there for looks and the idea of actually treating black youths the same as whites wasn't as clear as it was first portrayed.

With all this in mind, it is now important to take into consideration how some historians feel on the matter. Looking at articles that mostly revolve around black youths in the NYA is essential because if not the topic at hand can get lost in the sea of white accomplishment. *The Participation of the Negro in the National Youth Administration Program* by Walter Daniel and Carroll Miller speaks heavily about black youths actual presence in the programs established by the NYA and how there wasn't much diversity. The article does acknowledge the integration of black leaders especially through the Division of Negro Affairs which played a heavy hand in the black youth being able to participate in the programs.<sup>14</sup> Towards the beginning of 1936 through 1937, a special fund was to be granted to black students from the NYA, the percentage of

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<sup>12</sup> Abramowitz, Mildred, "Eleanor Roosevelt and the National Youth Administration 1935-1943," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 14, no.4 (1984): 573.

<sup>13</sup> Jill, Watts, *The Black Cabinet: The Untold Story of African Americans and Politics During the Age of Roosevelt* (New York: Grove Press, 2020), 63

<sup>14</sup> Daniels, Walter & Miller, Carroll, "The Participation of Negroes in the National Youth Administration Program," *The Journal of Negro Education* 7, no.3 (1938): 359.

students given this fund went from 2.5% to 7.4%.<sup>15</sup> This percentage barely covered half of the 15.3% of black youths relief population.<sup>16</sup> To be more specific, the article also argues that the way the NYA determined these numbers did not add up appropriately. The NYA required that "Negro aided shall not be less than the proportion Negroes are of the total population aided."<sup>17</sup> This seems well executed however it's important to note that the total population is a relatively small number compared to the actual percentage of black youths in the relief population. Meaning, those black youths that are being helped are not the same number as those black youth who *should* be helped. The article argues that the criteria should've been established on this rule, since it would have broadcasted how most of the states' (Southern states) numbers would have been extremely under performing in the norm.<sup>18</sup> But since the NYA operated under the first criteria, these states were able to testify they were giving black youths "equitable treatment."<sup>19</sup> So to reiterate, the NYA did do some work, but it wasn't enough. The article also argues similar reasoning in terms of the work project programs, estimating that about 10% of black youths made up the work program which is about two thirds of the 15% percentage the NYA established needing help.<sup>20</sup> This again isn't a true number and gives leeway for mostly Southern states to do less while keeping up the appearance of doing the appropriate amount. Another huge factor this article argues against is the guidance and placement issue. The NYA also aimed at providing students with "Occupation information, counseling services, apprenticeship training and placement assistance."<sup>21</sup> This would have helped significantly had there not be only 4 places where black counselors were present.<sup>22</sup> The article argues that because of this, the placements are

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 360.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 361.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 363.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*.

too scattered and unstable to give answers and help to the problem of unemployment for black young adults, citing that the Negro Affairs couldnt have obtain a clear answer because the numbers were too small on all aspects of black youths working, the kind of work they were doing and the rate black youths were joining the private industrty.<sup>23</sup> Again, doing the bare minimum which effectively made no real substantial claim. Overall we don't know if those black youths in the program were really placed in jobs that actually suited their needs and fit their abilities. Because of the reasons stated above, Daniels & Millers reached their conclusion that the NYA did not treat their black youths as well as they could have and I agree heavily with them. The benefits provided did not reach the number of those black youths that did need help which caused no real substantial change to take place. The main cause was segregation, when you have two separate educational and social facilities that are seperated because of race there will most always be an unfair treatment on the minority side.<sup>24</sup> Black youths numbers were there, but they arent big enough to make a real change and for the NYA did not achieve its goals.

However some historians believe that the NYA did achieve their goal, and did so in a revolutionary way, like Florence Corley and her atricle *The National Youth Administration in Georgia: A New Deal for Young Blacks and Women*. Corley argues that not only did black leaders hold substantial power in the NYA but that white leaders also wanted black youths to be treated fairly as well, citing Georgia as her main example through its "revolutionary" achievements.<sup>25</sup> Going on to cite NYA files for Georgia, the article argues that not only did black students receive aid higher than most places in the country, but also for women overall as well.<sup>26</sup>

The article quotes Florence Barksdale, a professor at the Atalanta University by saying that

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<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 364.

<sup>25</sup> Corley, Florence, "The National Youth Administration in Georgia: A New Deal for Young Blacks and Women," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 77, no.4 (1993): 735.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 738.

"Without NYA assistance, more than half of ... [these] Negro college students would have found it impossible to remain in school for an entire year."<sup>27</sup> The article also argues that black youths were adequately represented in the NYA and that those black students who were in the program were extremely grateful and felt that the programs actually did help, even going as far to cite some of the black students and their experiences.<sup>28</sup> The article also recalls that while there was segregation present, black students and white students still made the same earnings.<sup>29</sup> The article seems to be a love letter to the NYA, specifically the Georgia division, only focusing on the accomplishments the NYA achieved but not necessarily the numbers in a more broad context. Because of this, a heavy fault is in the article. While it is important to note the NYA did help black youths, taking it out of context to strengthen the argument isn't a fair reasoning on whether or it helped to the fullest of its capabilities. The article barely discusses actual numbers of blacks students being helped, only what the black students did. The article also argues heavily on the leadership side of things, bringing up those incharge and their want for more diversity and values for black youths to be present. That doesn't excuse the fact that black youths still were being given relief at a disproportionate rate. It is respectable that the NYA gave these black students such opportunities, but it is also not enough because those that were helped were a small fraction of the percentage. Only paying attention to what the NYA accomplished isn't going to help this debate of whether the NYA did enough, because it would be easy to argue that they did enough because they helped black students, but when comparing to numbers and social standpoints of the time, it was in fact not enough.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 739.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 738.



The debate of whether the NYA actually did enough in helping black students seems to always run heavily on the background context of those in charge. Most of the articles pertaining to this question includes the leaders put in place in the NYA and seems to use that as a reasoning as to why the NYA was a huge help. While it is true the Roosevelt Administration hired important black figures during a crucial point for race in the country, it is not agreeable to argue that this action alone made the NYA effective in helping the black youth that needed relief. An article that has similar reasoning to this is *Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Youth Administration: A Case Study of Power Relationships in the Black Cabinet of Franklin D. Roosevelt*. Joyce Ross adds context into the debate on whether the NYA was helpful enough to black students. The article agrees heavily with Watts and her book, citing that most of those black leaders in the administration were there for looks and had no real substantial power, often having low wages and being overpowered by southern whites in the states.<sup>30</sup> The article goes as further to state that not only did black leaders, like Bethune not be given any real substance in power, but oftentimes the policies and information Bethune provided was disregarded for racially segregated reasons. The article specifically points out how white state officials were able to bend these rules of equal opportunities for kids citing:

Again, no guidelines had been established regarding the Division's and the Director's power relationships with national and state officials. Mrs. Bethune also was informed by black state officials that because black state assistants were the subordinates of the state directors, the latter retained the authority to administer Negro programs as they saw fit, a factor which portended discrimination, especially in the south.<sup>31</sup>

This can serve as supporting evidence that the NYA did not help black youths to the fullest of its capabilities because those who oversaw it did not want to do that. The article further supports this claim by stating that southern state directors complained to national executives when black

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<sup>30</sup> Ross, Joyce, "Mary McLeod Bethune and the National Youth Administration," *The Journal of Negro History* 50, no.1 (1975): 11.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

state assistants were communicating directly to Bethune about the NYA in their areas, these directors felt that they should be given full jurisdiction over their affairs in their particular state.<sup>32</sup> The national executives overruled Bethune and gave the state directors jurisdiction, ultimately giving those southern states, who still had segregation systems in place and discriminatory tendencies the power to conduct the NYA programs how they saw fit.<sup>33</sup> Essentially, those who were put into place to make sure black youths were included and represented in the NYA were robbed of their powers and placed there for show, and this effectively caused the NYA to not work to the fullest of their capabilities because those who had control still believed in segregation and less relief for black people. There wasn't a lot of actual change going on in the government despite the rise in black employment and that is purely because southern states were still in charge.

With all of the information provided I can conclude that the Nation Youth Administration did the bare minimum in providing relief for black youth, despite their promise to help all persons between 16 and 25. The program's true numbers reveal the small portion and disproportionately black youths that were actually helped. It can be argued that the NYA ultimately did the best it could by not only providing black youth with unprecedented relief, but by also employing high numbers of black directors which again had never been done before. However again that does not automatically mean the NYA did enough due to the actual factual evidence that those black people in these programs were underpaid, and disregarded and kept from making important decisions due to state officials wanting to remain in jurisdiction and running these programs how they wanted to, which often included segregation and discrimination. By not implicating desegregation, and by keeping those who know the black community the best away from

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

deciding factors and positions, the NYA was ultimately hurt when considering the fullest potential it had to help black youths of the country. The bare minimum is not revolutionary, and it is not something to be praised of.

Despite this conclusion, credit should still be given where it's due. Most recounts of the NYA by black youths who were helped seemed to be fairly positive. It was a genius concept to have a program dedicated to what is usually considered to be a limbo age and a often forgotten group of the Great Depression. These children not only had their jobs ripped away from them like so many others, they lost their schooling too, and in most cases they lost their family when they had to leave and look for work elsewhere. Something had to be done in order to help these children and the NYA seemed like it could've and for most white youths, it did. However it did not extend to black youths, and for that reason we can not call it fair and we can not say it did the best it could have. Oftentimes, accountability is avoided and excuses are told to make matters light, and that is a clear theme when discussing the past political systems that relate to black Americans. We have now reached a time where those can point out the flaws and not accept the excuses. Today isn't perfect, but it is not segregated, programs still hire black employees for looks, but now black employees and call it out. Today, black teenagers aren't giving fair opportunities to go forward in life, but now as a black youth I can write this essay and say that. There will always be more work to do and I believe that because our history is pained, enough will not come in this lifetime. But it's worth a try. We got here because those in power saw that the precedent was not enough and changed it. The NYA could've done that but it didn't, and for that we have no choice to conclude that did not do what it was supposed to do. We can not live in this world and just do the bare minimum, nothing changes that way. It is when we see a problem

and fix it in its entirety do we get change, and after our long and painful history, change is what we need.

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