



# The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the Origins of the American Welfare State

*Michele Landis Dauber*

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Even as unemployment rates soared during the Great Depression, FDR's relief and social security programs faced attacks in Congress and the courts on the legitimacy of federal aid to the growing population of poor. In response, New Dealers pointed to a long tradition—dating back to 1790 and now largely forgotten—of federal aid to victims of disaster. In *The Sympathetic State*, Michele Landis Dauber recovers this crucial aspect of American history, tracing the roots of the modern American welfare state beyond the New Deal and the Progressive Era back to the earliest days of the republic when relief was forthcoming for the victims of wars, fires, floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes.

Drawing on a variety of materials, including newspapers, legal briefs, political speeches, the art and literature of the time, and letters from thousands of ordinary Americans, Dauber shows that while this long history of government disaster relief has faded from our memory today, it was extremely well known to advocates for an expanded role for the national government in the 1930s, including the Social Security Act. Making this connection required framing the Great Depression as a disaster afflicting citizens though no fault of their own. Dauber argues that the disaster paradigm, though successful in defending the New Deal, would ultimately come back to haunt advocates for social welfare. By not making a more radical case for relief, proponents of the New Deal helped create the weak, uniquely American welfare state we have today—one torn between the desire to come to the aid of those suffering and the deeply rooted suspicion that those in need are responsible for their own deprivation.

Contrary to conventional thought, the history of federal disaster relief is one of remarkable consistency, despite significant political and ideological change. Dauber's pathbreaking and highly readable book uncovers the historical origins of the modern American welfare state.

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