

## History Backs the Green New Deal – A Response

Kevin Baker, “Where Our New World Begins: Politics, Power, and the Green New Deal,” *Harper’s Magazine*, May 2019.

Kevin Baker, a journalist and author of award-winning historical novels, supports the Green New Deal. It isn’t blanket support; he sees that changes and compromises will be needed to make it fly. But he argues that history backs his thesis that the deal could work.

His starting point is to revisit the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a government-funded series of projects under President Roosevelt’s New Deal that restructured poverty-stricken Tennessee and revived the farming industry. Although charmingly dated, a government documentary on YouTube called *The Valley of the Tennessee* offers some strong before-and-after images. Various Hollywood films fictionalize the TVA.

Baker then turns to Oklahoma during the Dust Bowl Thirties to show how science saved the region and turned it into a flourishing part of the American economy. He reveals how land developers suckered farmers into believing such malarkey as “The rain follows the plow.” Ken Burns’s documentary on the subject vividly describes the tragic consequences and the innovative cooperative solutions.

Somewhere in between Baker alludes to various other New Deal-inspired projects, including the Works Progress Administration (WPA) that put people to work, including artists, writers, and other jobless Americans.

Historically, Baker notes, Americans have demonstrated that by working together cooperatively they can produce solutions that benefit everyone. Contrast it today with a corporation-driven economic machine that cannot function without profiting from ongoing conflicts abroad and the subsequent lucrative contracts to rebuild devastated societies.

History is Baker’s tool for supporting progressive change and he uses it to illustrate how the Green New Deal is the next best hope for rescuing a sinking ship. But not everyone is listening to history’s call. Baker rebuts the non-believers and the knee-jerk responses to the deal, focusing in particular on the argument that “We can’t afford it” mantra.

Baker is no socialist, nor a Democratic Socialist like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a co-author of the deal. But he sees socialistic solutions as part of what is needed. The Green New Deal does not provide all the solutions, he agrees, but it points the way to finding them. One clear direction is looking backwards.

Whatever his political persuasion, Baker has argued convincingly through a lens trained on American history that there are sound historical reasons why Americans need to take it seriously. He concludes that the ideas put forward in the deal are “in line with what we have done before, when we had to.”

Some will argue that history also teaches us that it takes cataclysmic event, like the bombing of Pearl Harbor or the attack on the World Trade Center towers, to awaken citizens to the fact that all of us are in the crosshairs of climate change.

This view is akin to saying we need to burn down a city to save it. How many more tornados need to roar through Kansas, floods thrash communities in Alabama, hurricanes bash Florida, and wild fires rage in the Pacific Northwest before we accept that the cataclysm is upon us?

Baker argues that we cannot afford to brush history aside but must embrace its lessons and act on them to solve the current and future crises. He asks, “What is to be done?” and he suggests that the Green New Deal is the latest signal that the country needs to mobilize a repeat of history and it needs to do it soon.

Yet regardless of the number of natural disasters related to climate change, a vast swath of the population reject the Green New Deal. The initial step is to persuade Americans that climate change is real and that it threatens us all.

Some will refuse to be persuaded and President Trump regularly bolsters their disbelief. He and his loyal climate-denying sycophants pounce on the deal as a socialist plot. In spite of the overwhelming evidence presented by the world scientific community, the naysayers insist that it is not killing the planet. In fact, Trump recently ordered the Environmental Protection Agency (now an oxymoron) to “undermine or discard research showing the most dire risks of inaction on climate change.”

The Green New Deal, Baker submits, is “meant to be a restoration, a return to the sort of fairness, the human balance, the dignity of a working life wantonly abandoned and derided by so many of our politicians and commentators. If we are to survive, it will be necessary to ignore them. Obviously, they have nothing more to offer.”

In short, the Green New Deal may be the only light ahead as the freight train of history rushes headlong into certain disaster.

## About Kevin Baker

In 1993, Baker's first book, *Sometimes You See it Coming* (1993), a contemporary baseball novel loosely based on the life of [Ty Cobb](#), was published.

He was the chief historical researcher on [Harold Evans](#)'s illustrated history of the United States, *The American Century* (1998).

He was a columnist ("In the News") for *American Heritage* magazine from 1998 to 2007. In 2009 appeared on [C-SPAN](#)'s *Washington Journal* and *The Colbert Report*, to discuss the [Obama presidency](#).

Baker is the author of the *City of Fire* trilogy, published by [HarperCollins](#), which consists of the following historical novels: *Dreamland* (1998); the bestselling *Paradise Alley* (2002); and *Strivers Row* (2006).

The middle volume of the trilogy won the 2003 [James Fennimore Cooper Prize for Best Historical Fiction](#) and the 2003 [American Book Award](#). *Paradise Alley* was also chosen by bestselling *Angela's Ashes* author, Frank McCourt, as a *Today Show* book club selection.

In 2009, he wrote *Luna Park*, a graphic novel illustrated by Croatian artist [Danijel Žeželj](#).

A writer of over 200 newspaper and magazine articles, Baker was the recipient of a 2017 Guggenheim fellowship for non-fiction.

Baker lives in [New York City](#), where he is a contributing editor to [Harper's Magazine](#) and a regular contributor to Politico.com, *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, and *The New York Times Book Review*.