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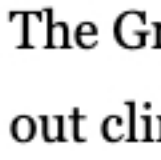
The keys to ensuring that a Green New Deal succeeds

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To tackle climate change, we must think locally and globally, not just nationally.



President Franklin D. Roosevelt delivers a fireside chat radio address in November 1937. (File/AP)



By **Neil M. Maher**

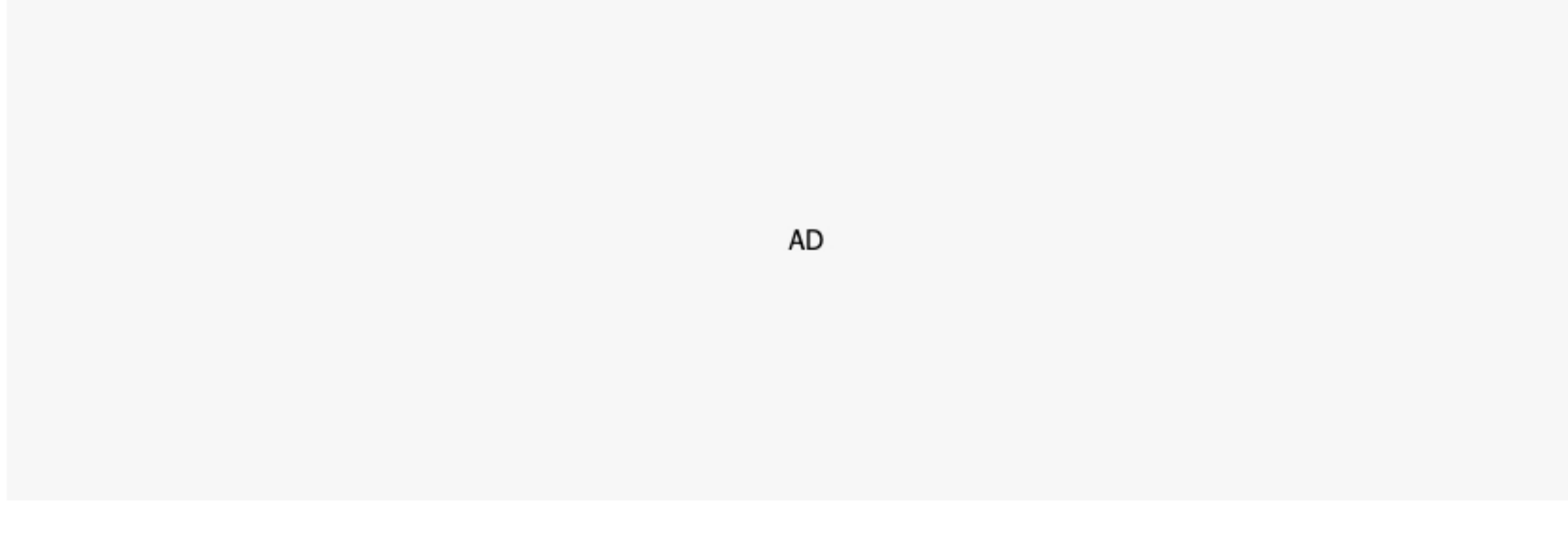
Neil M. Maher is professor of history in the federated history department at the New Jersey Institute of Technology and Rutgers University-Newark, and author of "Nature's New Deal."

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The Green New Deal is gaining momentum, with Democratic presidential contenders laying out climate change plans that echo the original initiative proposed earlier by Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.). Yet such proposals continue to focus on the national level, ignoring the need to motivate local communities and international governments in the fight against climate change.

To broaden the impact of these federal plans, Ocasio-Cortez and others should take a page from President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which was already green, thoroughly grass-roots and eventually went global. As Roosevelt reminded Congress in 1937, "it is not wise to direct everything from Washington. National planning should start at the bottom." The president also believed his agenda should have international significance.

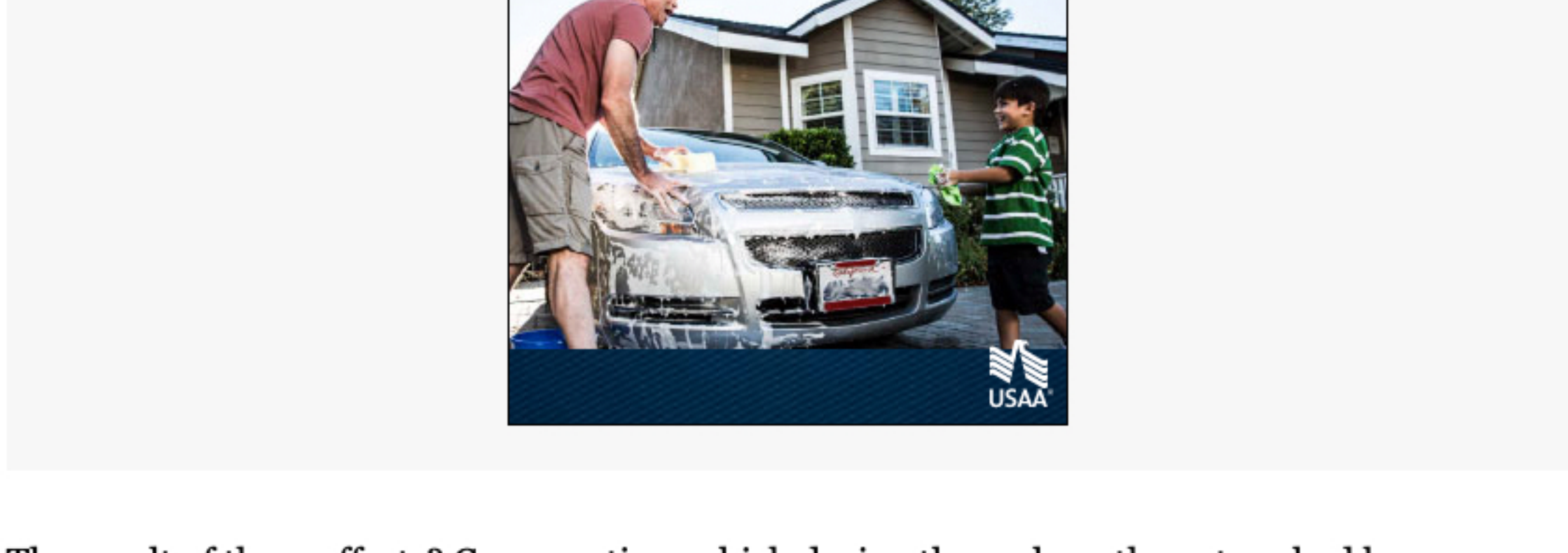
This strategy worked by giving local communities both in the United States and abroad a vested political and economic stake in conservation. To tackle climate change, which transcends national borders, the Green New Deal proposals must similarly think both bigger and smaller to more explicitly forge links between local and global action.



From his very first days in office, Roosevelt created a slew of New Deal programs aimed at solving an array of environmental problems: His Soil Conservation Service (SCS) slowed erosion on 40 million acres of farmland; the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) conserved water for cheap electricity and agriculture across a half-dozen states; and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) planted more than 2 billion trees, half the trees planted in U.S. history up to that point.

In many ways, the Green New Deal proposals follow this strategy by casting a wide environmental net in their call for carbon neutrality, the development of clean energy and investment in green infrastructure and manufacturing.

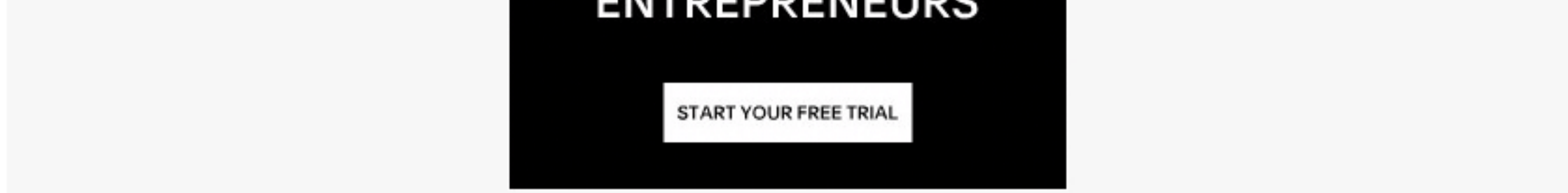
Yet Roosevelt's federal conservation programs succeeded in large part because they intentionally involved ordinary Americans on the local level. The SCS asked thousands of farmers from small agricultural communities to sign cooperative agreements that encouraged personal involvement in the program's local soil conservation efforts. The TVA established dozens of "demonstration farms" that taught nearby residents how to use phosphate fertilizer and cheap hydropower for agriculture and industry. And while the CCC enrolled more than 3 million young men and taught them how to replant entire forests, it also invited residents living near the CCC work camps to visit and learn about each camp's conservation projects.



The result of these efforts? Conservation, which during the early 20th century had been supported mostly by elites, became a grass-roots movement during the Great Depression era.

In short, the original New Deal inspired ordinary Americans to act locally, and gave them the tools to do so. Roosevelt tried to do something similar on the global level, believing that such a strategy could extend the influence of the United States internationally. "The work that has been done on the land here has made a difference between success and failure," explained Roosevelt's vice president, Henry A. Wallace, in 1942. "We should share everything we can with our good neighbors" around the world.

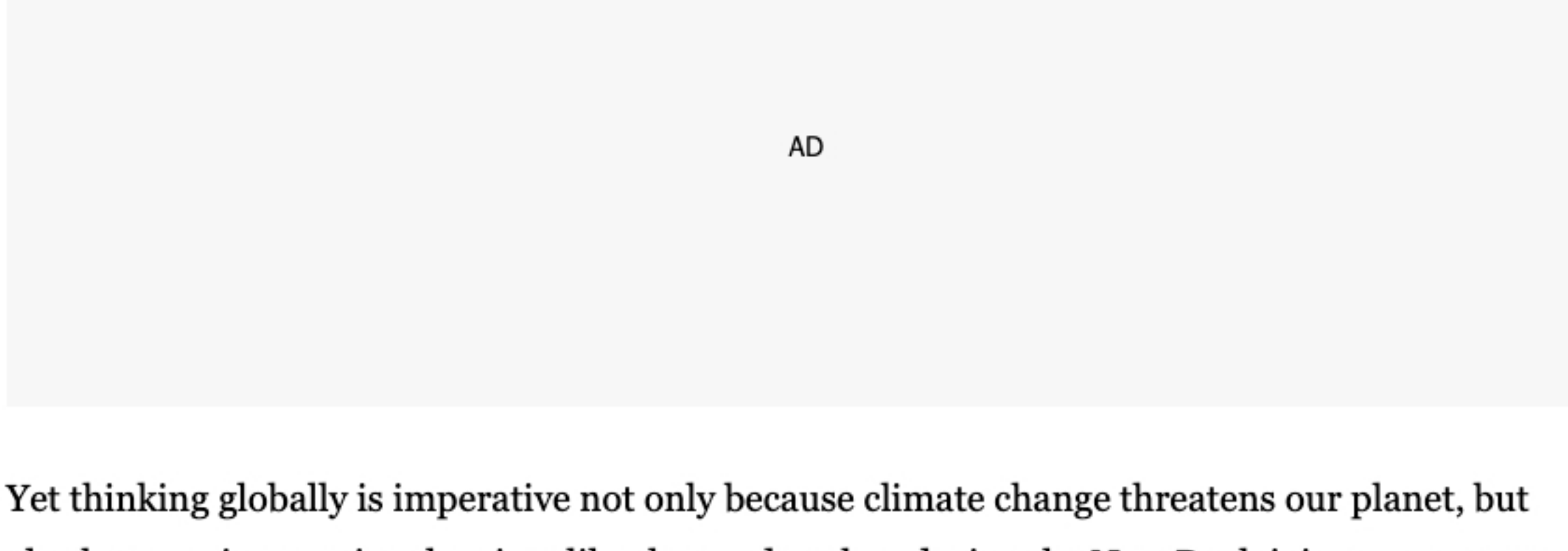
The New Deal took a global turn during World War II, when the Roosevelt administration promoted conservation abroad and foreign leaders responded by requesting help from the United States in establishing their own domestic conservation initiatives. These efforts, like those taken on the local level, introduced conservation to politicians, administrators and scientists outside the United States and educated them about New Deal conservation techniques. Roosevelt fervently believed that such international proselytizing could help strengthen America's allies during the war, reconstruct their economies after and ultimately halt the spread of communism.



So during the 1940s, the SCS developed soil erosion programs in Mexico, Venezuela, Columbia and a dozen other Latin American countries. By the 1950s the TVA had helped to design water development plans for Egypt and Israel in the Middle East and India and Pakistan in Southeast Asia. The domestic grass-roots strategies of New Deal conservation were soon an international model that foreign governments used to implement conservation strategies in their own local communities.

We still see the global reach of Roosevelt's conservation programs today. Brazil recently created a CCC-like program that puts jobless Brazilians to work planting trees, while similar tree-planting programs have also operated in China along the Yangtze River and through Wangari Maathai's Greenbelt Movement in Kenya. Even war-torn Afghanistan created its own "Afghan Conservation Corps."

But while many in the rest of the world still remember the New Deal's global sweep, today's Green New Deal initiatives have only paid lip service to this international past. Former vice president Joe Biden's plan hopes to "rally the rest of the world to meet the threat of climate change," while Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) calls for a "Green Marshall Plan," but neither Democratic presidential hopeful offers specifics. Nor does Ocasio-Cortez, who promotes internationalization of green technology and expertise but again offers little guidance for such global exchanges.



Yet thinking globally is imperative not only because climate change threatens our planet, but also because international action, like that undertaken during the New Deal, joins grass-roots communities that are separated by language, culture, politics and thousands upon thousands of miles. Shared local action on a global level is our only hope.

A successful second Green New Deal will also avoid the mistakes of the New Deal. On the environmental front, Roosevelt's soil erosion programs planted non-indigenous species that spread uncontrollably, his TVA built dams that silted up rivers and halted fish migrations and the CCC drained swamps in the name of mosquito control and in the process severely decreased biodiversity.

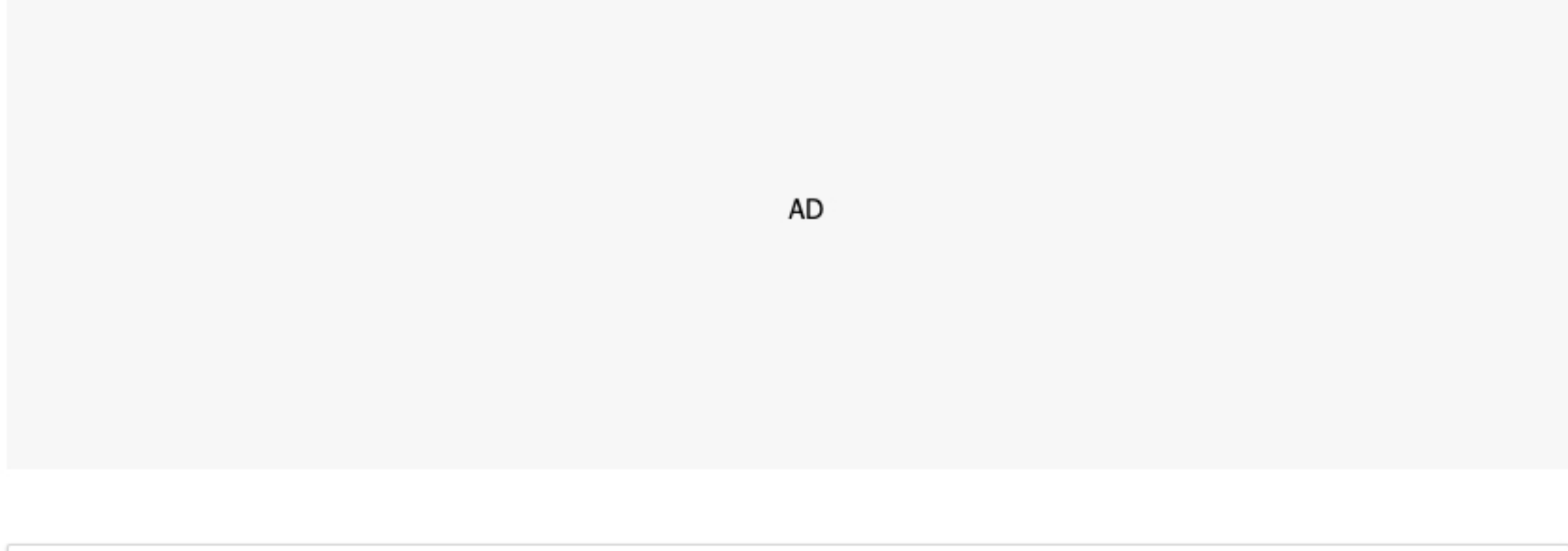
These programs could be socially and politically unjust as well: The CCC racially segregated its work camps and refused to let women participate; the SCS favored larger farms for its soil conservation work; and the TVA built dams that tended to submerge poor white and black communities under hundreds of feet of water, while sparing those of wealthier residents.



The New Deal's international conservation efforts also were often hijacked by diplomats in Washington, who used them more to promote America's Cold War foreign policy than as a means of helping developing countries better manage their own natural resources.

The current crop of Green New Dealers must be careful to avoid such mistakes. They must involve, and fund, scientists to study the unintended consequences of constructing green infrastructure, investing in what's known as green manufacturing and reducing carbon emissions with, for instance, solar panels that require huge amounts of energy to manufacture, transport around the world and install. They must ensure that access to these programs is open to all and encourage participation from poorer Americans, who will be more severely affected by climate change. And they must implement any Green New Deal through international partnerships and in cooperation with global environmental initiatives rather than putting America first in such efforts.

A Green New Deal that builds on Roosevelt's successes while paying heed to its failures represents a powerful campaign to fight climate change. Joining grass-roots initiatives in the United States with similar efforts in other countries will invite more voices into the climate change dialogue and in so doing, better prepare the United States to respond equitably to the climate crisis's environmental, social and political fallout.



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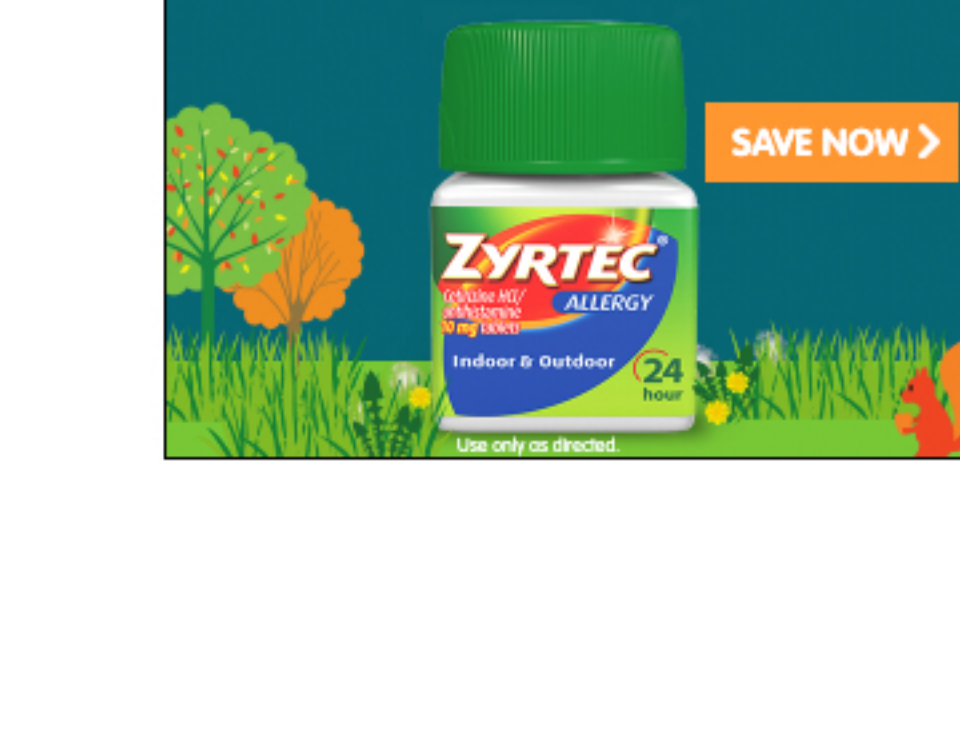
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