

## CHAPTER VII

# THE DEPRESSION, WORLD WAR II AND PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

### The Elections of 1932 to 1956

The stock market crash in October 1929 heralded the greatest non-violent economic and political realignment in the history of the United States.<sup>1</sup> Investors and savers lost millions as stock prices fell 50 to 80 percent virtually overnight, property values plummeted and banks failed. The farming community was completely disrupted as one-quarter of the farmers lost their land while others left crops in the field because the cost of harvest was too great or prices too low. The impact on the average worker is well documented as the unemployed reached unparalleled highs.<sup>2</sup> The economic turmoil spread worldwide and there was little prospect for improvement. In reaction to the Great Depression, the role of the Federal government in America was to be unalterably changed both in its relation with the people and with the various states. Maryland's depression experience, perhaps not as severe as other sections of the country, was drastic nevertheless.<sup>3</sup> In 1931 unemployment approached 20 percent and by 1932 Maryland's industrial plants were operating at 40 percent of capacity. Bank failures and credit crunches greatly disrupted agriculture and commerce contributing to one-quarter to one-half of willing workers being without jobs in some rural counties.

The magnitude of the economic problems created, if not demanded, social and political change. Thus, after 32 years of Republican success in presidential elections, Maryland voters returned to the Democratic camp embracing the "New Deal" and the Roosevelt personality in the next four elections beginning in 1932. What is more significant than the mere numbers of election returns is the realignment in the base of support for the Democratic and Republican parties.<sup>4</sup> The economic turmoil galvanized the support of labor interests for the Democrats.<sup>5</sup> The black community, bearing a disproportionate share of the material hardship, began drifting toward the Democratic party, its former enemy, as the generations of Republican support had yielded many words but few deeds.<sup>6</sup> The rural farming interests needed the expanded Federal government role and in the 1930s expressed its appreciation at the ballot box. The transformation of Maryland Democrats can be seen in the rise of President Roosevelt and the fall of Governor Ritchie. While the activist and socially concerned national leader was in the middle of the first of his four Presidential terms, the independent states' rights Governor was in the process of a painful rejection by Maryland voters in his 1934 effort for a fifth term.<sup>7</sup>

The cultural shock of the Depression was enough to change national and state politics but the waves were hardly calmed by the outbreak of World War II. This global conflict accelerated and accentuated the pace of change sweeping aside any