INTRODUCTION

The Townsend Plan's Image Problem

Because of the efforts of our national membership, the aged people of this nation today are receiving millions of dollars annually in the form of old-age pensions which they had never received before. This is the result of the individual work of our members carrying forward the message of security and thus making our nation pension-conscious.
   —Francis E. Townsend, 1943.[1]

With the exception of probably not more than a half-dozen members [of the House of Representatives], all felt that the Townsend [pension-recovery bill] was utterly impossible; at the same time they hesitated to vote against it. The Townsend [Plan] had the effect of taking away from the economic security bill its strongest natural support—that of the old people.
   —Edwin E. Witte, 1937.[2]

IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION, older Americans rallied behind a proposal. Francis E. Townsend, a sixty-seven-year-old physician from Long Beach, California, suggested that the government pay $200 per month for Americans sixty years old or older who agreed not to work and to spend the money right away. This pension-recovery plan would free jobs, end the Depression, and provide the aged with security. Dr. Townsend landed on the cover of *Newsweek* when a bill based on his idea was introduced in Congress in January 1935, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt forwarded his own social security legislation. Led by its secretary Robert Earl Clements, the Townsend Plan,[3] the name affixed both to the idea and to the organization promoting it, called on its affiliated Townsend clubs to flood Washington with letters. Soon the Townsend Plan spread from its western outpost across the nation. Townsend clubs claimed nearly a fifth of Americans over sixty years old, 2 million altogether, a size never reached by any organization in the civil rights or women's movement, and the Townsend Plan was raising funds at a more rapid clip than the Democratic Party. Townsend was back on the cover of *Newsweek*, and the Townsend

TABLE I.1.

Top 25 Social Movement Organizations in the Twentieth Century, by Number of Articles in Peak Year, in the *New York Times*

	Group	Year	Total
1	American Federation of Labor	1937	1,050
2	Black Panthers	1970	1,028
3	Congress of Industrial Organizations	1937	786
4	NAACP	1963	762
5	Ku Klux Klan	1924	672
6	Congress of Racial Equality	1964	418
7	Anti-Saloon League	1930	409
8	Townsend Plan	1936	402
9	Students for a Democratic Society	1969	381
10	American Legion	1937	362
11	America First Committee	1941	280
12	John Birch Society	1964	255
13	American Civil Liberties Union	1977	252
14	League of Women Voters	1937	246
15	Moral Majority	1981	221
16	Southern Christian Leadership Conference	1968	215
17	German American Bund	1939	200
18	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee	1966	195
19	Veterans of Foreign Wars	1950	180
20	American Liberty League	1936	175

Note: No individual labor unions are included.

Plan was featured in the nation's movie theaters. In terms of yearly coverage in the *New York Times*, the Townsend Plan's for 1936 ranks it as the eighth-most publicized U.S. social movement organization of the twentieth century.

Instead of passing the Townsend Plan's bill, however, Congress adopted the Social Security Act. With far less generous and more restricted benefits than Townsend's proposal, the security act addressed the immediate poverty of the aged with Old-Age Assistance (OAA), a federal-state matching program, and also created a national old-age annuity program. The Townsend Plan kept the pressure on for years, and although the doctor's pension-recovery proposal never passed, old-age benefits were increased again and again, and the fledgling annuity program was eventually transformed into Social Security as we know it today. In his 1943 autobiography *New Horizons*, Townsend was not shy about taking credit for these developments, and many of his contemporaries were inclined to agree. In *Social Security in the United States* (1936), Paul Douglas, economist, reformer, and no fan of Townsend, conceded that the mobilization behind his proposal "probably did weaken the die-hard opposition to the security bill." Scholarship often concurs. The political scientist

Abraham Holtzman concludes that the Townsend Plan's impact was substantial, as do the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and the social scientists Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward.[4]

Yet the Townsend Plan may not have been so influential. It reached its zenith in membership and attention after the passage of the Social Security Act, and when Social Security was greatly upgraded in 1950, the Townsend Plan was a spent force. Today it is largely forgotten. It seems possible, too, that the Townsend Plan had some detrimental effects. It fought the social security legislation in 1935, and its congressional endorsements usually went to Republicans, whose party often combated augmentations in old-age security. In his seminal book *The Development of the Social Security Act*, Edwin Witte, the University of Wisconsin economist and executive secretary of the committee that wrote the bill, complained that the Townsend Plan impeded the cause of old-age security, and President Roosevelt considered himself, not Dr. Townsend, to be the author of Social Security.[5] Also, Townsend's proposal was attacked as wildly extravagant by virtually the entire economics profession—despite the fact that in 1935 the Townsend Plan reduced the amount of its pension to about $60 per month. More soberly, the historian Edward D. Berkowitz shows that the movement for old-age security had generated great momentum before 1934, and the sociologist Ann Shola Orloff argues that the Townsend Plan may have induced Witte and his colleagues to make old-age policy more conservative than it would have been.[6] The standard view is a weak version of Witte's argument. The Townsend Plan may have helped to keep old age foremost in the Social Security Act, but it was erratic in action and faded in influence once that act went into effect.

This dispute among contemporaries and scholars suggests several historical questions: Did the Townsend Plan bring about the Social Security Act? Did it influence the process by which Social Security as we know it was created? Why and how, if at all, did the Townsend Plan—and social spending challengers like Huey Long's Share Our Wealth and other groups in the old-age pension movement—contribute to the development of social policy? Is the conventional wisdom true? Or did the Townsend Plan and the pension movement produce other long-lasting benefits for the aged—such as increasing their possibilities for future organization, providing an identity that was useful in politics and elsewhere, or simply improving their image or what people called them? Witte had no qualms about employing the undignified construction "the old people" to refer to the elderly, who also were often referred to by many a jocular label, such as "oldsters." Was Townsend, as he portrayed himself, a hero for the aged?

In addressing this dispute about the impact of the Townsend Plan, I follow it from its origins through its heyday and beyond, examining the different ways it and the pension movement it led attempted to influence old age in America. Social scientists want to do more, however, than to assess whether

this or that challenger influenced one or another social change, no matter how
important. We want to know something more general about social movements
and their impacts and to uncover what lessons a case has for other challengers
and their efforts. So I also seek to understand what it means for a social move-
ment to have an impact and why movements are sometimes influential and
sometimes not.

The Townsend Plan and the pension movement seem to fit contradictory
images of social movements in the social science literature. The old-style
view, based on movements of the 1930s, was that they make unrealistic de-
mands, attract the disengaged and credulous, and are prey to unscrupulous po-
litical leaders.[7] Having migrated to California and having recently lost his job
to the Depression, Townsend seemed to many scholars and journalists of the
day to be an embodiment of rootlessness and despair. Richard Neuberger and
Kelley Loe's book *An Army of the Aged* (1936) attributed Townsend's idea to
his unemployment-induced "disturbed state of mind" and charged that the
Townsend Plan was a racket, noting that Clements left the organization in
1936 after having made great profits. Hadley Cantril's book *The Psychology of
Social Movements* (1941) dismisses the Townsend Plan as "just another one of
a long procession of schemes" and wedges the discussion of the Townsend
Plan between accounts of lynch mobs and the Nazi Party.[8] This negative im-
age of social movements was reinforced in popular culture. In Sinclair Lewis's
best-selling *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), a demagogue modeled on Huey
Long manipulates organizations like the Townsend Plan to win the presi-
dency and implement fascism. In Frank Capra's film *Meet John Doe* (1941), a
publisher modeled partly on William Randolph Hearst and played by Edward
Arnold pursues his sinister political ambitions by inducing Gary Cooper to
create a nationwide network of "John Doe clubs." The Cooper character is as
simpleminded as he is good-hearted—just as many viewed Townsend—and
ultimately loses control of his followers. In addition, the March of Time docu-
mentary series labeled Dr. Townsend, along with Huey Long, Father Charles
Coughlin, and Gerald L. K. Smith, as leaders of a "lunatic fringe."

The currently dominant view is that social movements are rational and of-
ten highly skilled political actors. Participants in movements are seen as more
socially engaged than average, seeking to make the best of their poor access
to institutional democratic politics through protest and unorthodox political
tactics. From this point of view, usually social mobilization and protest have
some impact and sometimes work spectacularly. The aged may have joined
Townsend clubs not because they were frustrated but because they were "bio-
graphically available"—a sociological way of saying that they had free time on
their hands. Making dramatic demands like a $200 pension—which was more
than twice the median income in the Depression—may be the only way to
win followers and gain passable results.[9] This view of social movements has
been highlighted by nonfiction writing and, especially, documentary films

portraying postwar American challengers. In Henry Hampton's *Eyes on the Prize*, civil rights activists are portrayed as poor in resources but courageous, cohesive, and canny—willing to face and even elicit violent responses from their opponents in order to overturn segregated institutions. Ken Burns's *Huey Long* and Alan Brinkley's *Voices of Protest* suggest that the impact of Share Our Wealth was far from all negative, but there have been no documentaries or books that treat the Townsend Plan or the pension movement as a serious political challenge.

Challenging Issue: The Consequences of Social Movements

That the Townsend Plan evokes conflicting images may not be so damaging for my plan to make sense of why social movements have influence when and where they do. To put it in a way that social scientists can readily relate to, there is variance to be explained. Yet only recently have scholars started to address the issue of the consequences of social movements. In part this was because the older scholarship assumed that movements were ineffective, or possibly dangerous, whereas today's scholars tend to assume movements matter. Now that scholars have been examining the consequences of social movements, they have identified specific conceptual, theoretical, and methodological problems that this subject poses.[10]

The central conceptual issue falls under the heading "What Is the Meaning of Success?" The currently conventional answer, provided first by the sociologist William Gamson in his highly influential book *The Strategy of Social Protest* (1975), is that the greatest "success" means "new advantages," understood as the degree to which a challenger's program was realized.[11] But this conception of success limits thinking about the possible consequences of challenges. For instance, a challenger may not achieve its demands, and thus be deemed a "failure," but still achieve a great deal. Although Townsend's pension plan was never adopted, if the Townsendites were responsible for Social Security, the largest item in the federal budget today, the Townsend Plan would have to be counted as one of the most influential challengers in U.S. history. Also, the standard definition cannot deal with the possibility of a challenger doing something worse than failing. What if the activity of the Townsendites backfired, as Witte and some early scholarship suggest?

The theoretical issues surrounding the impact of social movements can be summarized under the heading "What Else Matters?" A challenger has to make claims and mobilize people and a variety of resources in order to engage in collective action and attempt to have an impact.[12] But most scholars thus argue that mobilization is necessary, though not sufficient, to produce social change. They go beyond it, in two main directions. One is by Gamson, who wanted to know whether some goals, strategies, and forms of organization

were more productive than others. Other scholars have followed this line of thought by identifying strategies of claims making and framing as being key. The second view is that once a state-oriented challenger is mobilized, the main thing standing in the way of its having an impact is the political context or "opportunity structure."[13]

Resolving this controversy between strategy and context seems simple enough, but there are at least two obstacles to doing so. First, scholars need to specify what constitutes a favorable political context and what does not. Otherwise, it is possible merely to say retrospectively that a given context was helpful. If the mid-1930s were particularly favorable to the claims of challengers, for instance, it is important to indicate how this period differed from what went before it and came after it. The second obstacle is that the productivity of goals, strategies, and forms of challengers seems likely to vary with the contexts in which they contend. Any arguments about the effectiveness of strategies by themselves, taken out of context, might be misleading.

Making sense of the consequences of social movements faces methodological and logistical hurdles that I classify under the heading "How Can You Tell?" To determine what accounts for the consequences of challengers, it is necessary to establish first if there were any consequences—but that is easier said than done. As we have seen, scholars do not agree on whether the Townsend Plan and the old-age pension movement had an impact. The empirical challenge comes down to demonstrating that important changes would not have occurred, or not in the way they did, in the absence of the challenger or the actions it took.

Often other conditions or actors, typically more powerful than challengers, are pressing toward similar sorts of change. For that reason, other potential determinants of social change need to be taken into account in assessing the impact of challengers. When the United States adopted new programs benefiting the aged, they may have been a result not of the Townsend Plan but of the Depression itself, the rise to power of Roosevelt, a liberal Democratic president backed by an overwhelmingly Democratic Congress, or the actions of the domestic reformers within the administration, as various scholars have argued. Premature declarations of significance disregard the deflating possibility that other conditions may have induced both the challenger and what it is presumed to have influenced. The rise of the Townsend Plan may have been the result of circumstances—the economic crisis, the liberal government, favorable bureaucrats—that also caused what some may mistakenly see as the impact of this challenger.

Ascertaining the consequences of any challenger involves historical interpretation. But for radical challengers like the Townsend Plan the record is littered with more than the usual amounts of disingenuousness. After 1935, Townsend Plan leaders found themselves in an awkward position. They had every reason to claim that the organization had provoked the existing old-age

programs—in order to inspire Townsend clubbers and show potential new recruits how effective the organization was. Townsend eventually took credit for the old-age benefits promoted by the Roosevelt administration. At the same time the Townsend Plan leadership had to downplay the significance of these benefits, often dismissing programs as suitable only for "paupers," to arouse the membership to press for further gains. What is more, political leaders hoping to steal the thunder of a movement organization by proposing something new to win over its constituents rarely give the challenger much credit. Not surprisingly, political officials in the Roosevelt administration dismissed Townsend's plan as fanciful, long after it was greatly reduced in amount. In his memoir of the Social Security Act, Witte brushes off the pension proposal as fantastic, and to hear him tell it, he and his administration counterparts are all the more heroic for having overcome the meddling of the Townsendites. Then again, Roosevelt administration officials liked to invoke the Townsend Plan to try to scare conservatives into supporting the administration's more moderate old-age legislation.[14] Where the significance of the Townsend Plan is at issue, few principals are to be believed.

Demonstrating that challenges have results is also often hindered by the fact that they are usually case studies, which often have too many potential explanations chasing too few observations. There may be several explanations consistent with the basic facts. Also we scholars tend not to choose case studies randomly, but according to suspected significance. Many of us want to study the civil rights or feminist or environmental movements, but only few are eager to pursue the kind of ill-fated challengers that sometimes popped up in Gamson's randomly selected sample—such as the quixotic American Proportional Representation League and North Carolina Manumission Society.[15] However effective it may have been, the Townsend Plan had a very high public profile and its experience may have little to say about other challengers.

Consequences, Collective Benefits, and Political Mediation

Although I address conceptual, theoretical, and methodological issues in chapter 1, I hope to demonstrate briefly here that they are manageable. Conceptually speaking, I refer to the consequences or impact of social movements rather than their success and failure. I understand potential consequences in terms of collective goods—groupwise advantages or disadvantages from which nonparticipants in a challenge cannot be easily excluded. Collective goods can be material, such as categorical social spending programs, but can also be less tangible, such as new ways to refer to members of a group. Social movement organizations almost invariably claim to represent more than the leaders and adherents of the organization. To employ collective benefits as a standard is to focus on the consequences for that larger group.

This definition has the advantage of being able to address both intended and unintended consequences of challengers. A challenger may fail to achieve its stated program but still win substantial collective benefits for its constituents. It may be false, moreover, to assume that the formal discourse and plans of social movement organizations capture all their constituents' aspirations for change. A focus on collective benefits makes it possible to take these other aims into account. This way of looking at matters turns a colder eye on some actions that might be viewed as successful by others, such as parts of a challenger's program that would provide benefits only to the leaders or participants in a challenge. The collective benefits definition can extend on the negative side beyond failure, addressing the possibility that a challenger's actions may backfire. In short, examining the consequences of social movements by way of collective goods provides a more flexible way to understand the impact of a challenger.

On the theoretical side, I propose what I call a political mediation model of movement consequences. The argument is that the productivity of the collective action of state-oriented challengers is mediated by political circumstances. Political conditions influence the relationship between challengers' mobilization and collective actions, on the one hand, and policy and other outcomes, on the other. The U.S. polity in the first half of the twentieth century dampened the influence of challengers. An underdemocratized political system—with restricted voting rights and a lack of choices among parties—produces officials with little reason to aid challengers, and the U.S. polity was underdemocratized, especially in the South. The many checks and balances across the American polity—in which legislative, executive, and judicial authorities all have autonomy—also harm the prospects of challengers by making it easier for the politically powerful to veto new policies. The U.S. electoral system, with its winner-take-all elections, punishes challengers that attempt to exert influence by building new parties. Patronage-oriented political parties tend to regard challengers as menacing contenders and consider programmatic spending policies to be a threat, and patronage-oriented parties predominated in the Northeast. And the two major U.S. parties are skewed to the political right.

But medium-range and short-term political conditions also influence the prospects of challengers, and these are not always unhelpful in the U.S. setting. Two key political actors are the political regime in power and domestic bureaucrats. A political regime or government favorable to the goal or constituency of a challenger is likely to amplify the impact of its mobilization and collective action, even in a catchall party system with diminished ideological differences. Although it is has been difficult to construct U.S. governmental regimes oriented toward social policy reforms and advances, much of the Democratic Party outside the South has been pro-reform, and in some times and places this faction has held power. The missions, activities, and powers of state bureaus in

charge of domestic programs related to the challenger also matter. Bureaucrats with missions similar to those proposed by challengers may enforce laws sympathetically or propose valuable new legislation. Although the United States historically has been characterized by relatively small and inefficient domestic bureaucracies, they have grown throughout the twentieth century.

I am also arguing that the ability of a social movement to win collective benefits depends partly on conditions it can control. To get results the strategies of state-oriented challengers need to fit the political situation. Different sorts of strategies are likely to be necessary to win collective benefits in different political circumstances. The more favorable these circumstances are, the less a mobilized challenger has to do to win collective benefits; the more difficult these circumstances, the more the challenger has to do. Some strategies are more inherently suited to political contexts like the U.S. one. I also argue that strategies aimed at political institutions, which are generally treated by scholars as similarly restrained, can vary greatly in their assertiveness and in the constraints they may impose on political actors.

In situations where change is possible, challengers need to match appropriate strategies to the political situations. What this means is that less assertive strategies, such as educational efforts and publicity, are likely to work only in the most favorable circumstances. Although more assertive strategies, such as targeted electoral activity, are likely to work in many settings, they are needed in unfavorable contexts. Moreover, to effect radical change like that demanded by the Townsend Plan requires extensive organization and mobilization and the skillful use of assertive strategies, as well as a favorable context. Specifying these circumstances and strategies is key here—otherwise it would be possible merely to claim after the fact that a particular strategy did or did not fit the circumstances in a particular instance.

To appraise my arguments I address whether what happened regarding old-age would have happened in the absence of the Townsend Plan and the pension movement and the lines of action they took. I employ primary sources as much as possible, taking into account the different positions of the actors. Ascertaining whether there were impacts and what they were, however, is only a first step in the process of accounting for the pattern of influence. I also seek out empirical situations in which the parts of the explanation vary—places, times, and circumstances in which political contexts were varied as well as how the Townsend Plan or other challengers approached them. I find these situations in analyses of the dynamics of the Townsend Plan and the pension movement through comparisons over time, across policies, across states of the union, and with other contemporary challengers. The story of the Townsend Plan is one of abrupt reversals, paradoxical outcomes, and unrealized possibilities that pose analytical puzzles.

The Townsend Plan provides many advantages in trying to solve these puzzles because its challenge extended over a long period, and it employed many

different strategies under varied circumstances. At the national level, the Townsend Plan engaged in strategies that ranged from writing letters to members of Congress to trying to unseat the president. There were many different campaigns and periods in which old-age policy was altered. Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) also provides a useful comparison because it was constructed similarly to Old-Age Assistance—both were grant-in-aid programs for a needy constituency that was similar in size—but had no challenger pushing for it. In addition, the Townsendites and other pension organizations contested OAA in the states, where political situations varied much more widely than they did at the national level. Finally, I also compare the impact of the Townsend Plan with other challengers seeking redistribution, such as Share Our Wealth and veterans' organizations. These challengers sought to forge more generous relationships between the state and a specific social group portrayed as deserving, but they had limited goals. They did not call for the replacement of a capitalist economic system, as did some socialist movements, the creation of an extensive regulatory bureaucracy, as environmental movements later called for, or constraints against any specific group, as workers demanded with respect to employers. By examining the dynamics of these campaigns and policy-making episodes with these comparisons, I can appraise my arguments.

The Book in Brief

One thing I find is that the Townsend Plan does not easily conform to either of the dominant images of social movements. On the one hand, the Townsend Plan was related to the economic and other frustrations of aged Americans battered by social forces and then rocked by a Depression. The pension proposal had its unrealistic aspects. Some of the Townsend Plan's leaders were corrupt, Townsend's political interventions were often blundering, and he fell briefly under the spell of the hateful demagogue Gerald L. K. Smith. On the other hand, the Townsend Plan confronted short- and long-term economic problems that were certainly real, and the program was far more credible than its opponents made it out to be. Its national focus and earmarked tax foreshadowed what Social Security was to become, its flat grants became policy elsewhere, and its gender neutrality is still ahead of its time. Something like the revolving pension proposal could easily have been converted into a usable old-age policy and almost was in 1941. Under the circumstances, what matters more than casting or recasting the image of the Townsend Plan is to assess its consequences.

You will have to read on to find out what happened, but Townsend was certainly right in saying that the Townsend Plan promoted the idea that the American aged should be aided, and in a way that was not demeaning. The plan induced the administration to propose more substantial old-age benefits

than it otherwise would have, including the program now known as Social Security. The Townsend Plan and later additions to the old-age pension movement also helped to influence augmentations in national old-age policy, as well as to promote old-age benefits across the states of the union. The Townsendites did so partly through political action and partly through rallying the aged and parts of the public behind the pension idea: that government-provided benefits to aged Americans should be a right. The Townsend clubs helped the elderly to see themselves as a national political group with legitimate needs and demands. That said, the Townsend Plan's influence was limited in ways other than that no version of pension-recovery plan ever became law. It lost all its membership and went out of existence, and even before that did not go far enough to instill political skills and identities in Townsendites. Opponents of the pension program largely discredited it to the point where the Townsend Plan is now almost forgotten. In addition, Witte was doubtless right that the Townsendites did not do as much as they might have done to advance Social Security.

As for the more general findings, the pattern of influence of the Townsend Plan is not what might be expected from standard perspectives on social movements. Many of the results are puzzling. In the heyday of the Townsend Plan, when it preempted headlines and movie screens, and hundreds of thousands surged into Townsend clubs, its impact on old-age policy was minimal. By contrast, the Townsend Plan had great influence merely by beginning to mobilize people behind the pension proposal, while abstaining from a concerted campaign of collective action. The organization's collective action often proved a waste of time and resources and sometimes seemed to backfire. Although it was mainly nationally focused, the Townsend Plan had some of its greatest effects at the state level. Also, it had little influence when the political alignment in Washington was most suited for social spending gains. Instead the Townsend Plan had its greatest influence when it was able to match its action appropriately to the political situations at hand.

But those are stories for later chapters. In chapter 1, I address ways of understanding the consequences of social movements and set forth the collective benefits criteria by which I gauge them. From there I address prominent explanations of the consequences of challengers, as well as my own political mediation arguments concerning the influence of social movements. Also, I set out my methodological strategies, in which I compare several sequences of collective action taken by the Townsend Plan and some other challengers. This is both to portray the dynamics of these contentious episodes and to provide comparative and sequential evidence for my claims. The Townsend Plan went through four phases, which I address chronologically in the book.

In chapter 2, I introduce Dr. Townsend and his plan, Earl Clements, the cofounder and organizational marvel responsible for the Townsend Plan's innovative recruitment strategies, and the Townsend clubs. The Townsend

TABLE I.2.
The Townsend Plan and the Impact of the Old-Age Pension Movement in Four Phases

Period	Era	Mobilization	Influence
1934–Summer 1935	Getting off the ground: reacting to the Social Security Act.	Forming an innovative organization, thrust onto the national stage.	Influence over the administration's old-age security proposals and support for them.
Fall 1935–37	Heyday and investigation: a national challenger implodes.	Peaking in Townsend clubs, fall from grace, as Townsend takes helm.	Influence over the administration of OAA and state-level OAA programs.
1938–41	Revival and a pension movement: remaking old-age policy.	Townsend Planredux, with state-level challengers.	Remaking old-age policy at the national level, nearly creating universal pensions for senior citizens.
1942–50	The war and postwar periods: rethinking the fundamentals.	Old age off the national agenda, and the ascendance of old-age insurance.	Influencing state OAA programs, trying and failing to regain influence in the postwar era.

Plan went from a letter to the editor to a significant political force in one year—largely on the strength of a new approach to politics and political organizing. Chapter 3 situates these developments in their historical and political context and addresses why the Townsend Plan arose in the first place, as well as its impact on the proposals in the administration's security bill in 1934. Chapter 4 considers the debate over old-age policy during the Great Depression and the initial battles surrounding the old-age components of the Social Security Act. The episode suggests that through its presence and mere mobilization of people behind the idea, the Townsend Plan upped the old-age benefits in the Roosevelt administration's security proposal, but the organization did not have the political strength or know-how to influence Congress, even though the opportunity was there. This chapter also compares the consequences of Share Our Wealth, as well as some other social spending militants of the era.

Chapter 5 addresses the heyday of the Townsend Plan in late 1935 and early 1936, when it reached its peak of mobilization, spreading across the country, gaining congressional followers, and winning tremendous national press coverage. I address why the Townsend Plan took off and where all these new Townsendites and Townsend clubs came from. Despite all this activity, very

little happened in old-age policy at the national level. I compare the more productive activities of World War I veterans' organizations to gain the early payment of bonuses and whose strategies were at first imitated by the Townsend Plan. The following chapter addresses these issues as well as the shake-up in leadership and the decline of Townsend Plan in the wake of a congressional investigation, with Dr. Townsend taking the helm of the organization and flirting with presidential politics.

In chapter 7, I address the Townsend Plan's return to health in 1938, accompanied by a nationwide pension movement that sought to turn OAA programs into generous and liberally provided senior citizens' pensions. The chapter also addresses the impact of the Townsend Plan and the wider pension movement on the proposals in 1938 to amend the Social Security Act. The following chapter addresses the congressional debate over these proposals as well as over a new Townsend Plan bill. This episode resulted in a transformation of American old age policy—over which the Townsend Plan had a key influence. The Social Security Act Amendments of 1939 converted the administration's annuity program into a real social insurance program, while paying dividends to a lucky group on the verge of retirement and upgrading Old-Age Assistance. In 1941, moreover, the Townsend Plan brought the administration and Congress to the verge of altering old-age policy to create universal senior citizens' pensions. But before this could happen the nation was at war, and the Townsend Plan was unable to gain much influence at the national level. Instead it pressed for "Sixty-at-Sixty" pensions in individual states. Chapter 9 takes up this story. None of these state-level campaigns succeeded, but gains were registered in a relatively hostile political climate for old-age policy. This chapter concludes with the story of the Townsend Plan's loss of influence after the war. When the Social Security Act was amended again in 1950, creating the basis for Social Security as we know it today, the Townsend Plan had little to say about it. Yet the pension movement had an influence over the triumph of Social Security all the same. The conclusion summarizes my arguments and the evidence for them and discusses the legacy of the Townsend Plan and the old-age pension movement.