

MAY 22, 1933

HARRY HOPKINS BRINGS RELIEF

BY LINDA GORDON

HARRY HOPKINS SITS AT HIS desk in the middle of a hallway in the Federal Security Building. The day is May 22, 1933. Heating pipes are banging, paint is peeling, footsteps are echoing on the uncarpeted floors. The building smells of antiseptic soap, mildew, and stale tobacco. His feet on the old scratched-up desk, cigarette ash beginning to accumulate on the floor beneath him, Hopkins is writing a steady stream of telegrams and handing them to messengers to run to the Western Union office. He is giving away money.

When FDR arrived in Washington on March 3, the night before his first inauguration, "terror held the country in its grip," his adviser Raymond Moley wrote. Vast numbers of Americans were clinging desperately to subsistence. One-third of the population was in "dire poverty,"



reported the *New York Times*. One-quarter of the labor force was out of work entirely, and in some cities one-half was unemployed; black unemployment was 30 to 60 percent higher than white. Sixty percent of families earned less than the minimum poverty line. The suicide rate was climbing rapidly.

Existing sources of aid—or relief, as it was called at the time—had dried up after three years of depression. Private charity donations plunged just as demand soared. (In 1931, Detroit's Emergency Relief Fund aimed to collect \$3.5 million but took in only \$645,000.) The only public relief came from town, county, or state governments, whose tax income had also plummeted. (In Boston, only one in four jobless families was getting aid.) Conservatives panicked because the economic disaster was swelling a Communist movement. Liberals urged government action. From all across the political spectrum came calls for the president to assume dictatorial powers. In Germany and Italy, economic disasters had in fact led to fascist governments, and reactionary populist movements were growing in the United States.

AT LEFT: Public Works Administration employees put up the steel frame for a new state office building in Madison, Wisconsin. Construction jobs were what federal work relief mainly provided.

ABOVE: An Agriculture Department photographer recorded this farm foreclosure sale notice in 1933.

tape could be cut and billions of dollars spent without significant corruption, but we do know what happened because he did.

Many saw Hopkins as a stereotypical liberal, a sucker for the underdog, a man with a soft heart beneath a crusty exterior—a positive or negative stereotype, depending on one's perspective. But Hopkins's vision was actually more ambitious than a simple desire to feed the hungry. It constituted as well a new vision of citizenship, what Europeans came a decade later to call "social citizenship." Hopkins's ideas prefigured and tried to implement two of the Four Freedoms that President Roosevelt later conceptualized as his goals for World War II: freedom from want and freedom from fear.

THE GREAT DEPRESSION made it unambiguously clear that most unemployment and poverty arose not from personal failings but from economic dynamics far beyond the control of individuals. The old litany of blaming poverty on male irresponsibility, female immorality, and inbred "depravity" lost its hold on social policy experts. The emergency relief programs Hopkins began on May 22, 1933, shifted American political culture, transforming expectations in the direction of a welfare state, government responsibility to regulate the markets, and a positive valuation of the public sector. The political debates that surround us today at the century's turn focus to a substantial degree on whether these principles should be preserved or rejected.



Time profiled the chain-smoking WPA director in its July 18, 1938, issue.



THE BREAD LINE

Reginald Marsh

OUT IN THE FIELD

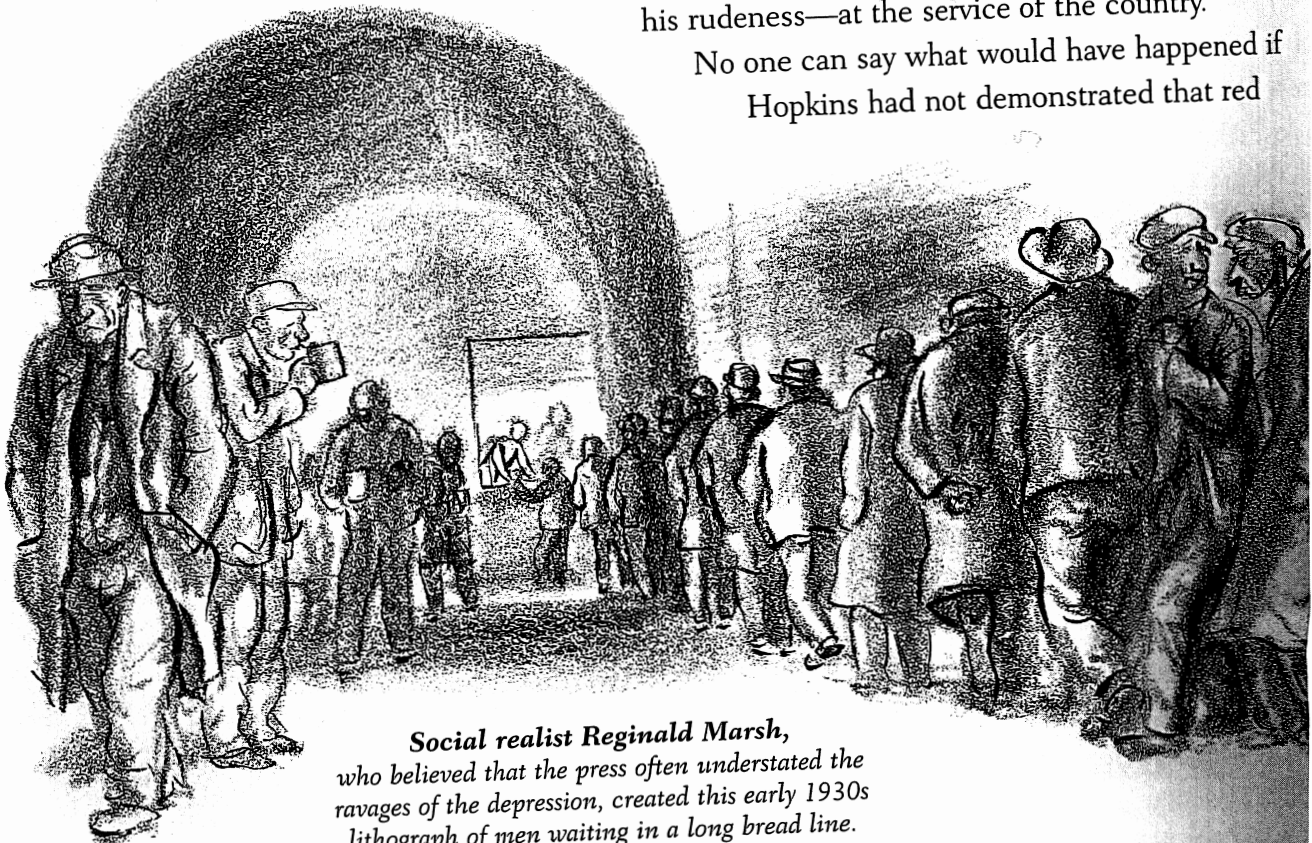
By the mid-1930s, more and more, Hopkins's field investigators were uncovering aspects of American poverty rarely seen even by social workers. One of his investigators, Lorena Hickok, concluded after a visit to Puerto Rico that no one there qualified for "emergency relief" because the traditional poverty of many Puerto Ricans was so extreme that she couldn't imagine the depression having worsened it. Other reports written by FERA and WPA investigators documented just how prevalent below-subsistence wages had been even before the Great Depression began.

that 54.2 percent of respondents believed that the WPA was doing useful work (13.5 percent didn't think so). An August 1937 poll found that 68 percent of respondents disagreed with the statement that WPA workers should be dropped after a fixed period even if they had not found private-sector jobs (46 percent believed they should be able to refuse to leave the WPA until they found jobs just as good).

EVEN SO, THOSE WHO OPPOSED public relief and jobs, particularly those who depended on low-wage labor or who resented giving up traditional political patronage, vilified Hopkins and his allies, including Secretary of Labor Perkins. In 1937, conservatives in Congress cut Hopkins's salary from twelve thousand dollars a year to ten thousand, thus expressing their fury (and compensating for their political impotence) through petty revenge. By contrast, those who supported relief tended to credit the president, not Hopkins, who never inspired mass affection.

Yet it was Hopkins who deserved much of the credit for this innovative extension of government responsibility. True, during a crisis as severe as the depression of the 1930s, in an advanced industrial economy, greater government regulation of the economy and the provision of social welfare were likely in any event, and had Hopkins not led the way, someone else probably would have. But Hopkins put his singular energy, determination, selflessness, and combativeness—even his rudeness—at the service of the country.

No one can say what would have happened if Hopkins had not demonstrated that red



Social realist Reginald Marsh, who believed that the press often understated the ravages of the depression, created this early 1930s lithograph of men waiting in a long bread line.

NEVERTHELESS, RELIEF RECEIVED some bad press. Accusations of favoritism were widespread, and some were true because Hopkins's administration had been able only to begin the task of removing government spending programs from local politicians' patronage. By contrast, accusations of corruption or fraud were rare in proportion to the size of the programs or in comparison to the stigmatizing of welfare that began in the 1960s. The most common complaints were against "boondoggling" workers—one popular wisecrack was that WPA stood for "We Poke Along"—but most of these charges, even when investigated by anti-Roosevelt officials, proved to be unfounded. The director of public relief in Virginia, a state government hostile to the New Deal, claimed that the real problem was that WPA workers were "too darned efficient" and completed work so quickly that they worked themselves out of jobs.

The occasional bad press, though, had little effect on the popularity of federal relief. We know this from two measures: White House correspondence with the public and public opinion polls. President Roosevelt invited and received an unprecedented quantity of mail—450,000 letters in the first week of his presidency and an average of 8,000 a day after that (compared to Herbert Hoover's average of 600 a day). Some were appeals for individual help, but more contained proposals for ambitious programs from citizens who took their citizenly responsibilities seriously and who did not think government should be left to professional politicians. Among these proposals, the single most common was for a relief program. (Others expressed, in descending frequency, demands for inflation and hostility to "money interests," monopolies, and "big boys.")

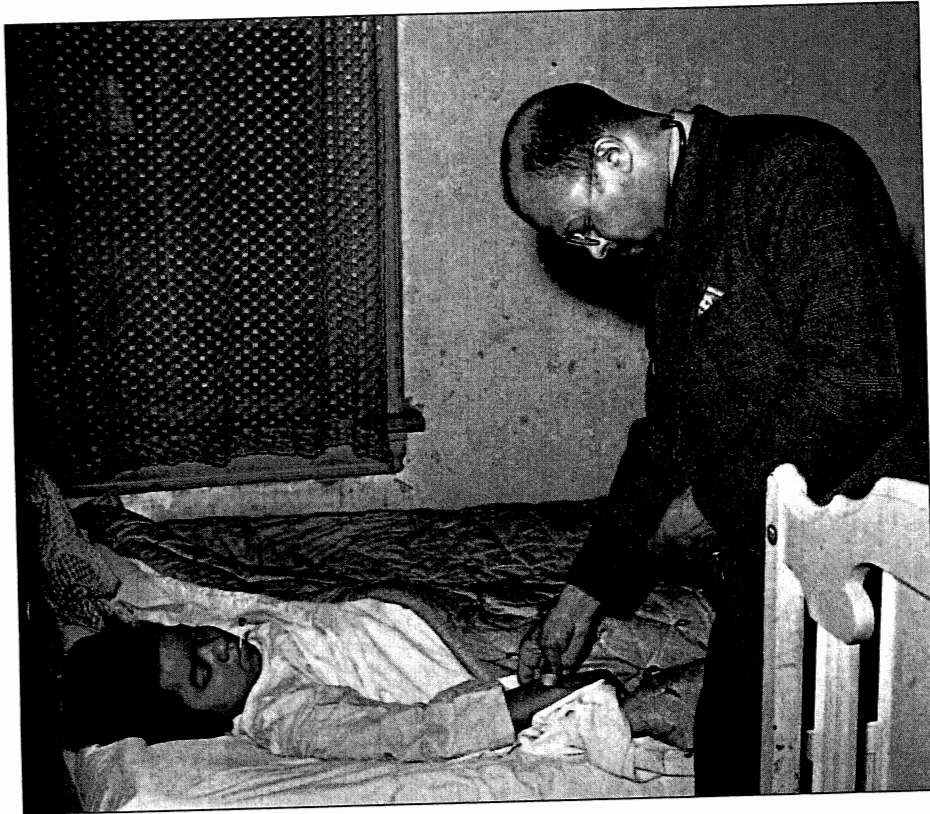
Modern public opinion polling did not develop until 1935, but the data collected thereafter demonstrated widespread public approval for government aid to the victims of economic downturn. A July 1935 poll showed that 76.8 percent of respondents believed government should see that every man had a job. An October 1936 poll showed

FRANCES PERKINS

1882 – 1965

After her graduation from Mount Holyoke in 1902, Frances Perkins taught school and performed some church-related social work before earning in 1910 a master's degree from Columbia University in social economics. Because she was regarded as a social reformer (and probably also because she was a woman), both business and union groups responded to Roosevelt's appointment of Perkins as his labor secretary rather coolly. During her twelve years in office, however, she effectively pushed for Social Security and for minimum-wage and maximum-workweek legislation, as well as for limits on the employment of children under sixteen. Perkins is shown here with a foreman and a riveter surveying construction of the north tower of the Golden Gate Bridge in March 1935.





Emergency relief offered medical care to those who might otherwise not have been able to afford it. This Farm Security Administration photograph records a black physician making a house call in Chicago.

FURTHER READING

★ Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (1994)

★ June Hopkins, *Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer* (1999)

employed 3.2 million people and produced 2 percent of the gross national product. This was more than the wage forces of American Telephone & Telegraph, General Electric, and Westinghouse; U.S., Bethlehem, and Republic Steel; and the Baltimore & Ohio, New York Central, Pennsylvania, and Union Pacific Railroads combined. By the WPA's end in 1943, over eight million Americans had been on its payroll at least once. Average weekly earnings were double the weekly FERA stipends. A large minority of WPA workers received higher wages than they had ever previously earned. In fact, one of the most under-recognized aspects of New Deal emergency aid was the way in which it lifted predepression standards of living among those at the very bottom. This effect was strongest among rural workers, especially in the South. A Hopkins investigator reported that the coal-mining people of Scott's Run, West Virginia, were "doing immeasurably better": Children who had never before had milk or adequate food, clothing, or shoes were now well nourished and well clad. Retail stores there were also doing better than ever.

Even in northern industrial cities, relief raised predepression standards of living among the poor. In New York City, a Visiting Housekeepers Project, initiated by the Urban League under the CWA, offered to many women the best-paying jobs they had ever had; the project was so successful that it was used later by the WPA in numerous towns and cities. In Boston, families that never had what investigators called a "decent standard," possibly one-eighth of all the cases, gained from even the least federal offerings. In Michigan, New York, and New Jersey, medical care became better than ever thanks to FERA provision. In Harlem, nine of ten relief clients gained access to clinical services never before available to them. In Providence, children's deaths from tuberculosis dropped from thirty to three per year, an improvement that the local TB society attributed to better diet and weight gain as a result of New Deal welfare programs.

artists (government subsidization of the arts was common in Europe but previously unknown in the United States), and the WPA continued the practice, paying unemployed arts workers not only to produce art but also to teach. In new community art centers and settlement houses, an estimated eight million people received free or low-cost art lessons. The WPA hired Nelson Algren, John Cheever, Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Rexroth, Muriel Rukeyser, Studs Terkel, and hundreds of other writers. It gave a substantial boost to African-American artists, hiring, for example, writers Arna Bontemps, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Margaret Walker, and Richard Wright; artist Jacob Lawrence; dancer Katherine Dunham; and scholars Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake.

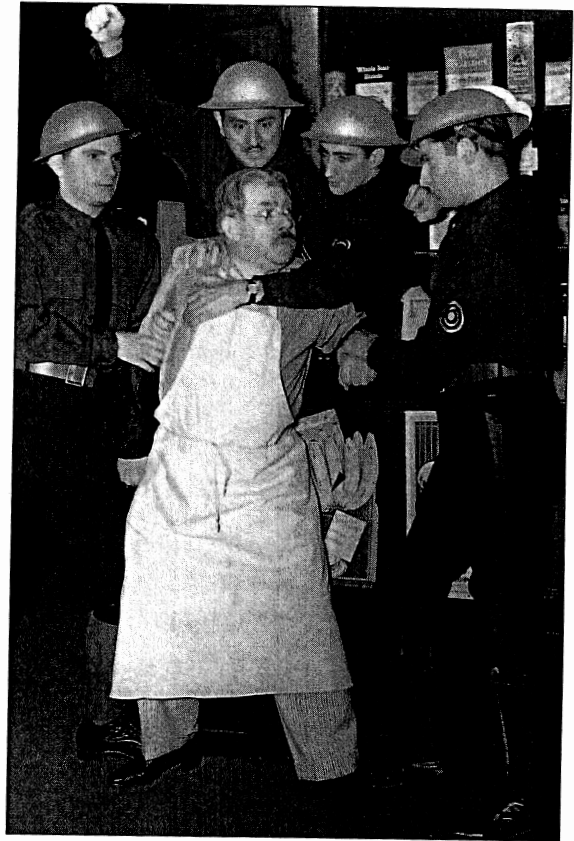
The most successful attacks on New Deal relief called on anti-Communism, and the arts programs were favorite targets. Along with light operas, puppet shows, and foreign-language plays, federal theater projects in several large cities produced controversial and explicitly left-wing drama. Sinclair Lewis's antifascist novel *It Can't Happen Here* was dramatized and presented in eighteen cities in 1936. Congressional committees

“NOT ONLY OUR FUTURE ECONOMIC SOUNDNESS BUT THE VERY SOUNDNESS OF OUR DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS DEPENDS ON THE DETERMINATION OF OUR GOVERNMENT TO GIVE EMPLOYMENT TO IDLE MEN.”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, fireside chat, April 1938—

investigating “un-American activities” (the House Un-American Activities Committee was not formed until 1938) charged that these theater groups were dominated by Communists. The charge had a grain of truth, but it was a truth that should have made no difference in evaluating the worthiness of the projects. Nevertheless, in 1939 Congress prohibited further federal expenditure on theater.

Notwithstanding the inevitable political attacks and in spite of discriminatory administration, the positive impact of public jobs and relief was undeniable. At its peak in November 1938, the WPA



A scene from a 1936 Federal Theater Project performance of It Can't Happen Here, staged in New York City. Sinclair Lewis's novel tells the story of a president-turned-dictator who takes over the over the country (including Congress and the Supreme Court) through use of force.



This poster from the late 1930s was created by the Federal Arts Project, itself a WPA program.

animals." Throughout the life of the WPA, Hopkins and other public works and relief administrators found themselves constantly calculating whether it was best to resist, dodge, compromise with, or capitulate to these complaints.



One WPA program for African-American women in the South was the Savannah Spanish moss mattress project. The women shown here are taking the moss out of the cooking chamber (where it has been steamed to kill the plant life) and hanging it on lines to dry in the sun.

local relief administrators to lay off workers during planting or harvest or other times of peak labor demand. Throughout the South but also in some northern locations, it became standard practice to fire women from WPA jobs so they would be forced to accept domestic service or seasonal agricultural jobs paying less than half as much.

Sometimes relief administrators refused such employers' requests—just often enough to enrage them further, as when a 1935 NAACP protest stopped the WPA from closing several projects in order to increase the supply of cotton pickers. But employer pressure, notably southern, did force the "feds" to rescind the thirty-cents-an-hour minimum wage, a move that the Urban League denounced as a capitulation "to those whose conception of decent living standards for Negro workers is little above that of lower

CRITICISMS CAME ALSO from those who saw WPA employment of professionals, human service workers, and artists as frivolous. In 1934, for example, one-quarter of New York City's relief jobs went to white-collar or service workers: They cataloged in libraries, inventoried historical records, produced historical roadside markers, promoted public health, supervised playgrounds, helped teachers by working with special-needs children. In fact, had there been a higher proportion of such jobs and less emphasis on construction, discrimination against women would have been reduced. The CWA had initiated the first programs to employ