jobs required considerable expenditures for tools, supplies, planning, and supervision. Low-wage employers also lobbied to keep government wages down, because they feared being unable to hire cheap farmhands and domestic servants if workers could get higher wages from the WPA. Unions, of course, insisted that public-job wages match prevailing private-sector wages, lest substandard pay in the public sector make private employers unwilling to pay a living wage.

Rocky Neck, Connecticut, *was one of many northeastern towns that suffered heavy damage during the floods of September and October 1938.*

AT THE SAME TIME, the federal administrators supervising the jobs programs were dismayed with what they learned about low standards of living, especially in the South and Southwest. Although federal wage rates varied according to geographic zones, the FERA had established a national minimum of thirty cents an hour. Administrators in Washington believed this marked a bottom subsistence level, but they discovered that many prevailing wage rates were lower still—for example, twenty cents an hour in Colorado, often as low as five cents an hour in the South. The federal goal was to rehabilitate the economy, not just provide relief, and these below-subsistence wages would do nothing to increase purchasing power. (Indeed, federal administrators were seeing in these sub-subsistence wages the long-term causes of the depression: Many workers had too little buying power.)

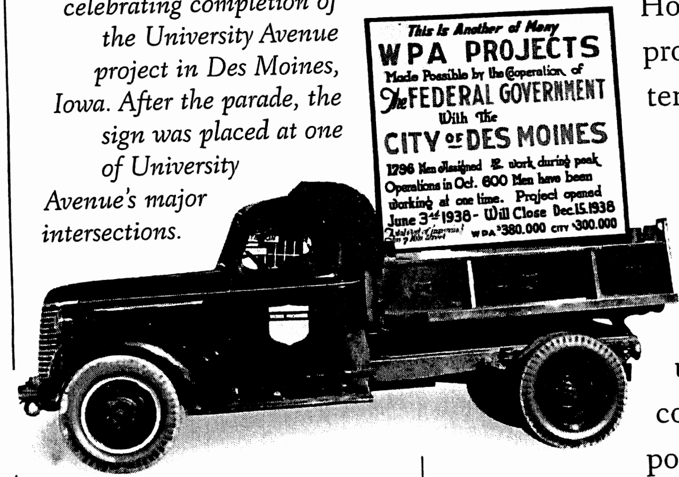
Moreover, compared to private employers, the federal government offered not only better wages but also job security, better working conditions, and less discriminatory employment practices. So public jobs increased the bargaining power of workers, who had lost, due to the depression, nearly all the gains they had made during the century's first two decades. The fact that work relief did not have the contemporary stigma of "welfare" further reduced the pressure on workers to accept any job offered, no matter how terrible the terms.

Employers of low-wage labor fought back, of course. FERA straight relief had actually been facilitating the payment of beneath-subsistence wages by providing supplementary aid to workers. Relief also allowed private employers to treat their workers like temps, laying them off in slack times and letting the FERA support them until they were rehired. FERA relief thus functioned in some industries as unemployment insurance with no cost to the employer. After 1935, employers tried to use WPA jobs in the same way. Southern planters in particular persuaded

OVERLEAF:

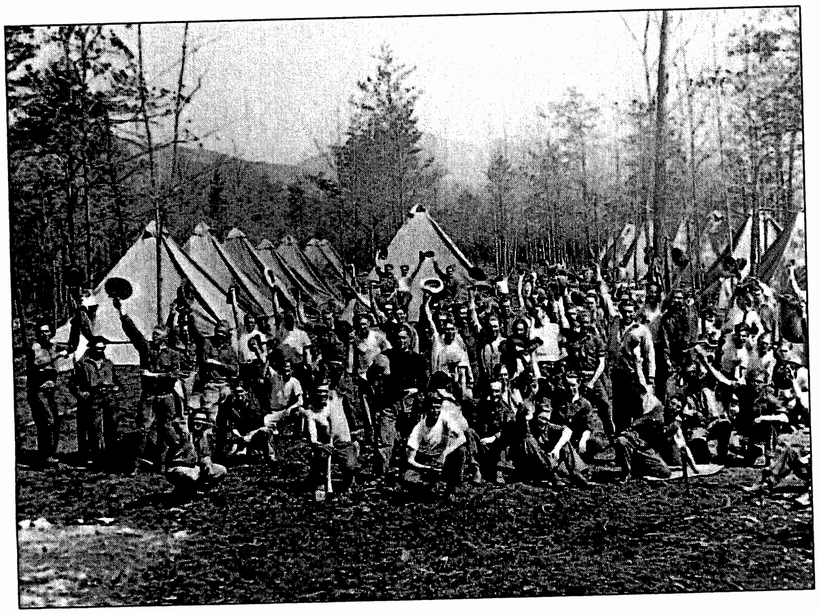
Dorothea Lange, *working as a photographer for the Farm Security Administration, recorded these Texas drought refugees in November 1936 at a migrant camp near Exeter, California.*

BUT MORE NEEDED TO BE DONE; and despite the overwhelming endorsement of the New Deal in the 1934 elections, in which many of FDR's vociferous opponents were defeated, the Social Security Act of 1935 offered only short-term unemployment assistance. Hopkins and his allies, failing to get a permanent jobs program, once again compromised and accepted another temporary fix: the Works Progress Administration (WPA).



***This truck** took part in a December 6, 1938, parade celebrating completion of the University Avenue project in Des Moines, Iowa. After the parade, the sign was placed at one of University Avenue's major intersections.*

This time, however, the size of the fix was audaciously large. Funded in May 1935 with $4.8 billion (the largest peacetime appropriation in U.S. history to that time), the WPA proposed to employ 3.5 million people, more than one-quarter of the 11–12 million unemployed. Because most of its projects involved large constructions, the WPA became the most visible and popular New Deal program. WPA employees put up more than 40,000 buildings, including courthouses, firehouses, hospitals, and schools; they built 350 airfields, 78,000 bridges, 800 parks, 1,400 athletic fields, 1,800 public swimming pools, and 40,000 miles of roadway. Their contribution to conservation and public health included 20,000 acres reforested, 20,000,000 trees and bushes planted, 500 water treatment plants, 1,500 sewage treatment plants, and 24,000 miles of sewers. (The largest structures—such as the Golden Gate and Triborough Bridges, the Queens-Midtown Tunnel, and the Grand Coulee and Bonneville Dams—were built by the Public Works Administration under Harold Ickes.) In 1938, when disastrous floods hit the Northeast, washing out railroad bridges, highways, and power lines, Hopkins sent fifty thousand WPAers to work around the clock evacuating endangered people, diking the waters, providing temporary drinking water and power, and then cleaning up the massive expanses of mud that coated the streets and buildings—a federal helping hand never before possible.



***The Civilian Conservation Corps,** known as FDR's "forest army," was designed to employ young men in vigorous outdoor labor. This April 1933 photo shows the first group of CCC recruits outside their tents in Virginia's George Washington National Forest.*

Providing jobs, however, produced more controversy than providing straight assistance had. Despite their avowed commitment to the work ethic, conservatives tended to prefer relief, in part because it was less expensive: Providing

Besides, Hopkins and FDR believed that providing jobs was preferable to straight relief, and most relief recipients agreed. The evidence was overwhelming that, even for the same stipend, people preferred work to nonwork relief. The discrimination being practiced in dispensing relief only confirmed this: Southern officials often reserved jobs for whites and gave straight relief to blacks, and officials everywhere gave jobs to men and straight relief to women, because straight relief was cheaper and more stigmatized.

Displaying his typical resourcefulness, Hopkins got FDR to issue an executive order on November 9, 1933, establishing the Civil Works Administration (CWA) to provide public jobs. Then he got $400 million out of Congress for the program. Again he initiated it with great speed, ignoring accusations of hurried, slapdash decision making. "People don't eat in the long run," Hopkins snapped at critics, "they eat every day." Almost immediately two million FERA relief recipients became CWA wage earners. By Christmas 1933, 3.5 million were employed, 4.3 million by the program's peak in mid-January 1934. Many workers were at first skeptical of what the CWA seemed to be offering. So unprecedented was this federal aid that some employees feared that their federal paychecks would not be honored at banks. Relief was popular, but the CWA was cause for celebration among the unemployed: It eventually assisted eight million households with twenty-eight million people, or 22 percent of the population.

As part of a 1934 work relief project, *FERA employees widened Merrimon Avenue in Asheville, North Carolina.*

Only Hopkins's determination brought us the CWA. Despite the president's ability to project confidence and decisiveness, in fact he was indecisive and ambivalent about how to attack the depression. Sometimes he was persuaded by progressives like Hopkins that public spending was needed not only to help people survive and to head off right- and left-wing radicalism but also to rev up the economy; at other times, budget-balancing advisers held sway. At the end of 1933, FDR's mercurial political leanings were captured by the budget balancers, notably Lewis Douglas, the conservative director of the budget. So in

January 1934, Roosevelt announced the winding down of the CWA. Although Hopkins loyally accepted the decision, the public didn't, and there were howls of protest. More than fifty thousand letters and seven thousand telegrams protested the abolition of the CWA, but with no success. The CWA passed out of existence on May 1, 1934, and the relief burden returned to the FERA.

THE STUBBORN BUT FLEXIBLE HOPKINS, still convinced that jobs were superior to straight relief, responded by creating jobs within the FERA. By the end of 1934, approximately 5 million people were on the FERA rolls, of whom 2.3 million were receiving "work relief." Unlike contemporary "workfare," FERA work relief offered jobs that paid prevailing wages for work on public projects.

In fact, FERA leaders wanted to promote jobs in preference to relief *permanently.* They wanted to install such a policy not only on an emergency basis during this depression but also in the future to *prevent* further depressions or recessions. Along with the policy planners already at work on Social Security in 1934, Hopkins advocated an unemployment system that primed the economic pump by creating government employment whenever private-sector unemployment rose above a set figure. Emergency relief, in this view, merely treated symptoms; a permanent jobs program could *prevent* impoverishment.

Hopkins's preference for public employment to fight the depression contained, of course, limitations and biases. It discriminated against women, who were not then considered entitled to jobs in the way that men were, and ignored the many mothers and children who did not have a man to "depend" on. Besides, many women already had a job—child raising and husband tending and housekeeping—and although this "job" drew no wages, it made it harder for women to take on paying employment. Furthermore, a policy of aid through work would certainly have favored whites, who were widely preferred over people of color in hiring for the better jobs. Nevertheless, the federal injection of money and useful work into the economy boosted incomes and spending and buoyed people's spirits in a way that did help people of color and white women, if not as much as white men.

"WITH THE SLOW MENACE OF A GLACIER, DEPRESSION CAME ON. NO ONE HAD ANY MEASURE OF ITS PROGRESS; NO ONE HAD ANY PLAN FOR STOPPING IT. EVERYONE TRIED TO GET OUT OF ITS WAY."

—

Frances Perkins, People at Work, *1934*

By September 1938, *Hopkins and FDR had become much more close. As a result, Hopkins often accompanied the president on personal trips such as this one to the Mayo Clinic, where Roosevelt's son James had recently undergone surgery.*

HELPING THE IMPOVERISHED to cope was nothing new to social worker Harry Hopkins. A man in a female-dominated profession, he had formed strong alliances with pioneering women advocates of government aid to the poor. His network included Lillian Wald, Sophie Loeb, Mary Van Kleeck, Mary Dreier, and Frances Perkins, and he had learned to respect women's commitment, activism, and intelligence. (These women reformers were glad to have male support, although they might be forgiven some resentment that, typically, more junior and less experienced men were promoted over senior women.) In 1930, as head of the New York Tuberculosis and Health Association, Hopkins joined others in raising $30 million for an Emergency Work Bureau to help the growing numbers of the unemployed. Although the bureau's funds were never adequate, the experience convinced Hopkins that government should create public jobs to counter economic depressions.

In 1931, Franklin Roosevelt, then governor of New York, hired Hopkins to run the state's emergency relief and public jobs program. Immediately after FDR's election as president in 1932, Hopkins began to lobby for a similar post at the federal level. But getting Roosevelt's attention proved difficult. For the first two months after the inauguration, banking, agriculture, and a special session of Congress occupied the president. On March 5, he declared a four-day national bank holiday, suspending all transactions. Four days later, he forced through Congress the Emergency Banking Relief Act, which gave him emergency powers and allowed solvent banks to reopen. A week after that, he sent to Congress the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which paid farmers to restrict the crops they raised. Direct aid to the impoverished was not at the top of FDR's agenda, but at least one cabinet member was trying to put it there.

This red-paint graffiti *appeared on a church wall in New York City in October 1930, just a few weeks before the midterm congressional elections. Until the Great Depression, the Communist Party USA had been a tiny, isolated sect. During the 1930s, though, it gained popularity advocating unemployment relief and labor organization.*

Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, repeating for the federal government the job she had done for New York State, had two thousand proposed relief plans on her desk—some crackpot, some impractical, some sound. Americans of all sorts were trying to think of solutions. She was used to citizens' pressure because she had been a reform activist outside of government most of her career. Since 1904 she had worked for one or another advocacy organization, most recently the National Consumers' League, on whose behalf she had become a skilled lobbyist. Now she was the first woman cabinet member, a position in which her responsibility extended not only to labor relations but also to the welfare of women, children, and the poor in general.

HARRY HOPKINS

1890 – 1946

Harry Hopkins was not your typical social worker. A thin and unhealthy-looking man, he chain-smoked cigarettes (leaving him with perpetually stained fingers) and chain-drank cups of black coffee. Both habits no doubt sustained his innate drive but also contributed to the stomach cancer diagnosed in 1939. Nor was Hopkins your typical politician. He had no interest in money and was paid just a pittance—only eight thousand dollars a year, or half of what he'd been earning at the TB association and four thousand dollars less than New York State had been paying him. Hopkins also had no regard for status—refusing, for example, to have his office carpeted. His only ambition was to end the depression the only way possible: through massive federal intervention.

as governor—and arrived in Washington on May 21. The next day, after spending just five minutes with the president, he launched a bold pioneering program.

Harry Hopkins was not charming: He was unkempt, sarcastic, and foulmouthed, and Secretary Perkins was not alone in considering him arrogant and self-centered. However, she had seen his single-minded commitment to helping the poor and his energy at work. Equally important, FDR knew that Hopkins was invulnerable to corruption, invincible to opposition, and unwaveringly loyal. At the beginning of 1933 no one outside New York State and the profession of social work had heard of him, but by the end of the year he was a recognized power in Washington.

IN HIS FIRST TWO HOURS on the job, he spent $5.3 million ($65 million in 2001 dollars). By the time he left work that night, he had hired a staff, instructed forty-eight governors what they needed to do to get emergency relief, and sent out relief checks to Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas. Next morning, the *Washington Post* headlined, MONEY FLIES.

The press, unaccustomed to such governmental activism, immediately began to badger Hopkins, searching for corruption and/or boondoggling. Hopkins snarled back, "I'm not going to last six months here, so I'll do as I please." In fact, Hopkins's own operation was run on the smallest possible budget. At year's end, when $1.5 billion had been distributed to 17 million people, the FERA's 121-person payroll was still just $22,000 a month.

Of the FERA's initial $500 million, half was set aside to match state contributions and half to be given outright to states on the basis of need. Hopkins disliked having to rely on state and local governments for distribution of the aid, but he saw no other option because the federal government lacked the administrative capacity to initiate a relief program speedily. So he fretted constantly about the bias, fraud, and corruption that were almost inevitable when funds were dispensed by local politicians.

Despite the best efforts of Hopkins and his staff, race and sex prejudice permeated the distribution of FERA aid. Direct grants went disproportionately to southern and western states, because they were poorer but also because they were more tightfisted than midwestern and northeastern states when it came to helping the poor. (Some, like Virginia, never contributed a single dollar to relief programs.) These states regularly excluded or shortchanged people of color, principally African Americans, Mexican Americans, American Indians, and Asian Americans.

Anxious depositors *mill about outside during this March 1933 run on a bank.*

KNOWING THAT PERKINS was a crucial ally, Hopkins sought her out immediately after the inauguration to pitch his ideas. Unable to get an appointment, he managed to corner her at the Women's University Club, where she lived, and persuaded her to take his ambitious plan for universal relief to Roosevelt. At her urging, FDR agreed to see Hopkins and Hopkins's ally, William Hodson of the Russell Sage Foundation. Although the president remained extremely reluctant to engage in deficit spending, Hopkins doggedly nudged him closer to accepting the necessity of emergency measures. FDR then wanted to substitute for Hopkins's plan his own pet idea—rural conservation projects that would employ about 250,000 men. Perkins and Hopkins knew, however, that they needed help for millions of men and women.

So Perkins ambushed FDR by recruiting three powerful senators—Robert Wagner of New York (Democrat), "Fighting Bob" LaFollette of Wisconsin (Republican/Progressive), and Edward Costigan of Colorado (Democrat)—to turn the Hopkins plan into a bill, the $500-million Federal Emergency Relief Act. It passed on May 12, and on May 19, FDR sent for Hopkins to run the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Confirmed by the Senate without debate on May 20, Hopkins quit his job running emergency relief for the state of New York on one day's notice—infuriating Herbert Lehman, Roosevelt's successor

THE BANKING CRISIS

On March 4, 1933, the day that Franklin Roosevelt took office, the U.S. financial system was on the verge of collapse. Because nervous depositors around the country were increasingly liquidating their accounts, governors had closed banks in thirty-eight states, and even in the remaining ten, financial institutions were operating on a limited basis. During the national bank holiday, however, FDR sent in teams of federal auditors to look over banks' records and assess the solvency of each. The public confidence generated by this review helped prevent further runs.