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**Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy  
of Public Works, 1933-1956**

by

**Jason Scott Smith**

**A.B. (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) 1993  
M.A. (University of California, Berkeley) 1995**

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## Abstract

### Building New Deal Liberalism: The Political Economy of Public Works, 1933-1956

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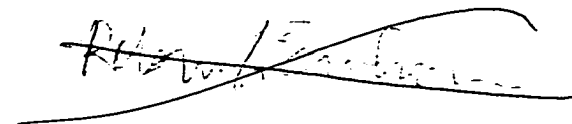
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A public works revolution transformed the American economy, landscape, and political system between 1933 and 1956. The New Deal spent over two-thirds of its money on construction programs such as the Public Works Administration (PWA), Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the Federal Works Agency (FWA). This represented a dramatic increase over pre-Great Depression spending on construction, as the federal government developed the state capacity to place public works projects in all but three of the counties in the nation. Most significantly, these programs developed the infrastructure that laid the foundations for such features of postwar economic growth as the national highways and the military-industrial complex.

This dissertation places public works programs at the center of our understanding of New Deal liberalism. This study explores the changing rationales that underwrote public works programs: from economic development (via the PWA) to social welfare (through the WPA) during the Great Depression, and back to economic development during World War II and the Cold War. Previous scholarship on New Deal public works

has missed the significance of these agencies. It has either bemoaned their failure as temporary welfare measures to end mass unemployment, focused on intriguing facets of these programs such as the New Deal's support for artists, or simply noted their role in containing class solidarities during a time of economic crisis. My dissertation, however, takes these works programs seriously and asks two straightforward questions: what did these programs accomplish, and what do their accomplishments tell us about New Deal liberalism? In so doing, this project provides the first extended treatment of the contributions made by the New Deal's public works programs to American economic development. Harry Hopkins's claim that the New Deal was a political project that could "tax and tax, spend and spend, and elect and elect" points to the qualities that made New Deal liberalism so powerful and controversial: the taxing and spending functions of the federal government could remake the political, as well as the physical, landscape of the nation.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert F. Self", written over a horizontal line.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION: RE-EVALUATING THE NEW DEAL STATE AND THE PUBLIC WORKS REVOLUTION

Historians have long debated and questioned the legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Some claim that Roosevelt's New Deal was "America's Third Revolution,"<sup>1</sup> while others argue that it is better viewed as a "halfway revolution"<sup>2</sup> that left much undone. Whether it is portrayed as a new departure in the trajectory of a reforming impulse that stretched back to William Jennings Bryan,<sup>3</sup> or as a high point in a generation's rendezvous with destiny,<sup>4</sup> the New Deal is viewed by most interpretative traditions as a fundamentally liberal and progressive political event. This reading has been qualified, however, by a variety of scholars who have--in different ways--presented the New Deal as a historical moment that bore witness to the end of reform.<sup>5</sup> Where the older work of liberal historians presents these years as the Age of Roosevelt, dominated by the dashing champion of the "forgotten man," the president who soaked the rich and mobilized the state against the economic royalists,<sup>6</sup> the work of subsequent historians is, on balance, much more skeptical. They argue, for example, that high federal income tax rates served

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Degler, Out of Our Past: The Forces that Shaped Modern America 3d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), chapter 13.

<sup>2</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 347.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hofstadter, The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R. (New York: Vintage, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> Eric F. Goldman, Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1977 [1952]). Other analyses of the links between the New Deal and earlier generations of reformers include Otis L. Graham, Jr., An Encore for Reform: The Old Progressives and the New Deal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), and, more recently, Daniel T. Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), esp. 409-84.

<sup>5</sup> Alan Brinkley, The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). Others who question the commitment of the New Deal to reform include Howard Zinn, Paul Conkin, Barton Bernstein, Ronald Radosh, Gabriel Kolko, Mark Leff, and Colin Gordon.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957-60).

as a smoke screen for revenue-generating sales taxes levied on consumers,<sup>7</sup> and that new regulations enacted by the state actually reflected the interests of business.<sup>8</sup> This division in interpretation is perhaps most vividly etched in labor histories of the period. Where earlier labor historians believed that organized labor had at last found its "Magna Charta" in New Deal labor law,<sup>9</sup> subsequent scholars have asserted that this guarantee of collective bargaining functioned merely as a "counterfeit liberty."<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, almost since Roosevelt's Hundred Days came to an end, Americans have struggled to comprehend the nature and limits of the New Deal order.<sup>11</sup> In searching for ways to understand the New Deal, some scholars have even attempted to grasp its meaning by employing a "new" institutional approach that studies the capacities of the

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<sup>7</sup> Mark H. Leff, The Limits of Symbolic Reform: The New Deal and Taxation, 1933-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Colin Gordon, New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America, 1920-1935 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

<sup>9</sup> AFL President William Green called section 7(a) the "Magna Charta of Labor of the United States." Quoted in Irving Bernstein, Turbulent Years: A History of the American Worker, 1933-1941 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), 349. For a recent analysis of New Deal labor historiography, see David Brody, Workers in Industrial America: Essays on the Twentieth Century Struggle, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), esp. 82-156. For other studies of industrial relations during the 1930s and 1940s, see the essays collected in Milton Derber and Edwin Young, eds., Labor and the New Deal (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1957), esp. Selig Perlman, "Labor and the New Deal in Historical Perspective," 361-70.

<sup>10</sup> Christopher L. Tomlins, The State and the Unions: Labor Relations, Law, and the Organized Labor Movement in America, 1880-1960 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 326-28. See also Stanley Vittoz, New Deal Labor Policy and the American Industrial Economy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987). This evolution of scholarly opinion on collective bargaining has been paralleled by the rise of the "new" labor history, which argues that the history of working people is best understood through study of workers' experience at the workplace and in the community. This scholarship has finally begun to end its bias towards 19th century community studies; examples of the NLH that cover the New Deal years include Bruce Nelson, Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Gary Gerstle, Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Elizabeth Faue, Community of Suffering and Struggle: Women, Men, and the Labor Movement in Minneapolis, 1915-1945 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> For the concept of the "New Deal order," see Steven Fraser's and Gary Gerstle's introduction in Steven Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

state to shape society.<sup>12</sup> Despite all this work, though, students of the New Deal have for too long overlooked a revolution in the priorities of the American state, a revolution that radically transformed the physical landscape, political system, and economy of the United States.

My dissertation recovers the scope of this change by looking directly at how the New Deal state spent its money.<sup>13</sup> On average, between 1933 and 1939 over two-thirds of federal emergency expenditures--over two-thirds of the New Deal's money--went toward funding public works programs.<sup>14</sup> These dollars represent an increase in federal construction spending of 1,650 percent over the four years that preceded the Depression (1925-1929), as agencies such as the Public Works Administration, and then the Works Progress Administration, sprung into action. The PWA, created in 1933, concentrated on heavy construction and large-scale building. Relying on private contractors, the PWA deployed its funds in 3,068 of the nation's 3,071 counties while helping to pay for projects such as the Tennessee Valley Authority and Boulder Dam. Created in 1935, the WPA did lighter construction work, avoided private contracting, and was primarily intended to be a vast relief effort aimed at employing the unskilled.<sup>15</sup> These programs

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Finegold and Theda Skocpol, State and Party in America's New Deal (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> In doing this, I follow the advice of economist Joseph Schumpeter. In his classic essay, "The Crisis of the Tax State," Schumpeter, borrowing the insights of sociologist Rudolf Goldscheid, declared that "The budget is the skeleton of the state, stripped of all misleading ideologies." See Joseph A. Schumpeter, "The Crisis of the Tax State," (1918), W.F. Stolper and R.A. Musgrave, trans., American Economic Papers 4 (1954): 5-38, and Rudolf Goldscheid, "A Sociological Approach to Problems of Public Finance," in Richard A. Musgrave and Alan T. Peacock, eds., Classics in the Theory of Public Finance (London: Macmillan 1964), 202-13.

<sup>14</sup> I have calculated this figure using The Budget of the United States Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1940 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), vii; The Budget of the United States Government for the Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1941 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), xxi-xxii. Between 1933 and 1939 emergency spending averaged about 50% of all federal expenditures.

<sup>15</sup> Roger Daniels, "Public Works in the 1930s: A Preliminary Reconnaissance," in The Relevancy of Public Works History: The 1930s--A Case Study (Washington, D.C.: Public Works Historical Society, 1975), 5. See also Ellis L. Armstrong, ed., History of Public Works in the United States, 1776-1976 (Chicago: American Public Works Association, 1976), 681. Throughout this study, I employ Armstrong's

were the beneficiaries of the huge percentage of federal expenditures that went to construction between 1933 and 1939. Taken together with the terrific increase over pre-Depression construction spending that this represented, the far-reaching federal efforts invested in directing this money, and the long-term impact of the infrastructure itself, the story of the New Deal appears as the story of a public works revolution.<sup>16</sup>

My dissertation reconstructs this story, placing public works programs at the center of our understanding of New Deal liberalism. I re-examine the role that these government agencies played in the creation of the modern American welfare state, breaking sharply from previous accounts that dismiss them simply as temporary efforts that failed to solve the crisis of the Depression. Instead, I look at them anew, as important, wide-ranging investments in national infrastructure, rich in significance for

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definition of public works: "The physical structures and facilities developed or acquired by public agencies to house governmental functions and provide water, waste disposal, power, transportation, and similar services to facilitate the achievement of common social and economic objectives." Armstrong, ed., History of Public Works in the United States, 1.

Although the most important recent treatment of New Deal social policy provides an excellent account of the WPA's central place within the New Deal state, it unfortunately neglects the economic and political dimensions of the actual public works produced under this program. Edwin Amenta, Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Edwin Amenta, Ellen Benoit, Chris Bonastia, Nancy K. Cauthen, and Drew Halfmann, "Bring Back the WPA: Work, Relief, and the Origins of American Social Policy in Welfare Reform." Studies in American Political Development 12 (spring 1998): 1-56.

<sup>16</sup> While economic historians have done excellent work on problems of public finance at the federal, state, and local levels during the New Deal, they generally draw a distinction--unwarranted, in my view--between spending on "public works" done by the PWA and "work relief" performed by the WPA, neglecting that both efforts in fact produced substantial infrastructure throughout the nation. For a review of the best of this literature, see John Joseph Wallis, "The Political Economy of New Deal Spending Revisited, Again: With and without Nevada," Explorations in Economic History 35 (1998): 140-70; and see also Wallis and Wallace E. Oates, "The Impact of the New Deal on American Federalism," in Michael D. Bordo, Claudia Goldin, and Eugene N. White, eds., The Defining Moment: The Great Depression and the American Economy in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 155-80; Wallis, "The Political Economy of New Deal Fiscal Federalism," Economic Inquiry 29 (July 1991): 510-24; Wallis, "The Birth of the Old Federalism: Financing the New Deal, 1932-1940," Journal of Economic History 44 (March 1984): 139-59; Wallis, "Work Relief and Unemployment in the 1930s" (Ph.D. diss., University of Washington, 1981); Gavin Wright, "The Political Economy of New Deal Spending: An Econometric Analysis," The Review of Economics and Statistics 56 (Feb. 1974): 30-38; Don C. Reading, "New Deal Activity and the States, 1933 to 1939," Journal of Economic History 33 (Dec. 1973): 792-810; Leonard J. Arrington, "The New Deal in the West: A Preliminary Statistical Inquiry," Pacific Historical Review 38 (Aug. 1969): 311-16; and, still worth reading, E. Cary Brown, "Fiscal Policy in the 'Thirties: A Reappraisal," The American Economic Review 46 (Dec. 1956): 857-79.

understanding the many changes that occurred in government policy, business interests, and organized labor during this period. Indeed, I argue that re-defining the New Deal through an examination of its expenditures--through its public works--allows for new questions to be asked, and for older questions to be asked again in new ways. How, seen through the lens of the public works programs, do we view the expansion and growth of the federal government that took place between 1933 and World War II? Despite their documented failures as unemployment relief measures, were these programs successful in laying the structural foundations for postwar economic development and prosperity? Given that New Deal spending priorities were directed towards these massive construction programs, does this clarify what one historian has recently termed "the ambiguity of New Deal economics?"<sup>17</sup> And, in light of all of this, can we better understand what "New Deal liberalism" set out to do, and evaluate its successes and failures?

The New Deal's public works programs signaled far-reaching achievements, expanding the federal government and generating construction projects across the nation. These accomplishments, however, indicate that New Deal liberalism was less a political project concerned with advancing equality, redistribution of wealth, or social democratic ideals, than a conservative effort focused on maintaining social order and administering and managing resources in order to improve the national estate. These goals were pursued with tremendous energy, but their conservative (in the sense of preserving and strengthening) character provides an insight into the oft-termed "weakness" of the welfare state as it developed in the United States. Eventually Keynesian arguments for federal spending would lead to a fiscal policy based on the manipulation of tax rates and

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<sup>17</sup> Robert M. Collins, More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-16.

automatic budgetary increases--"commercial," instead of "social" Keynesianism. A focus on what the New Deal did not do, however, has obscured what it actually accomplished.<sup>18</sup>

In studying these twentieth-century government works programs, I draw on a rich literature that clarifies the historical relationship between government and the economy<sup>19</sup> while incorporating the insights of a more recent "post-new" urban history that focuses on the contingent growth and development of structures of public finance, public works, and political economy.<sup>20</sup> This interpretive focus restores the New Deal public works programs to the broader narrative of American economic development--a narrative that acknowledges the importance of World War II government contracts to American business, and highlights the central role played by government spending in the

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Weir and Theda Skocpol, "State Structures and the Possibilities for 'Keynesian' Responses to the Great Depression in Sweden, Britain, and the United States," in Peter R. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., Bringing the State Back In (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 107-63; Herbert Stein, The Fiscal Revolution in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Sven Steinmo, Taxation and Democracy: Swedish, British, and American Approaches to Financing the Modern State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Theodore Rosenof, Economics in the Long Run: New Deal Theorists and Their Legacies, 1933-1993 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Oscar Handlin and Mary Flug Handlin, Commonwealth: A Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774-1861 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947); Louis Hartz, Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776-1860 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948); George Rogers Taylor, The Transportation Revolution, 1815-1860 (New York: Harper and Row, 1951); and James Willard Hurst, Law and the Conditions of Freedom in the Nineteenth-Century United States (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1956). For an excellent review article, see Harry N. Scheiber, "Government and the Economy: Studies of the 'Commonwealth' Policy in Nineteenth-Century America," Journal of Interdisciplinary History 3 (summer 1972): 135-51. The best study of economic thought and government policy during the New Deal remains Ellis W. Hawley, The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

<sup>20</sup> I borrow the term "post-new" from Kathleen Niels Conzen, "The New Urban History: Defining the Field," in James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams, eds., Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983), 80-81; for recent examples of this work see Jon C. Teaford, The Unheralded Triumph: City Government in America, 1870-1900 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Terrence J. McDonald, The Parameters of Urban Fiscal Policy: Socioeconomic Change and Political Culture in San Francisco, 1860-1906 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and Robin L. Einhorn, Property Rules: Political Economy in Chicago, 1833-1872 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

subsequent growth of the postwar period, but has comparatively neglected the events of the New Deal years.<sup>21</sup>

Tracing the evolution of public works as a tool of government policy making from the Great Depression to the Cold War, I explore the changing rationales that underwrote public works programs: from economic development (via the PWA) to social welfare (through the WPA) during the Depression, and back to economic development (by means of the Federal Works Agency, defense spending, and the postwar highway movement) during World War II and the Cold War. The dissertation also investigates the relationships between public works, state building, and party building at the federal, state, and local levels, between 1933 and 1956. Harry Hopkins's claim that the New Deal was a political project that could "tax and tax, spend and spend, and elect and elect" points to the qualities that made New Deal liberalism so powerful and controversial: the taxing and spending functions of government could remake the political, as well as the physical, landscape of the nation.

Ultimately, this dissertation argues for a more limited--and yet, simultaneously, a more sweeping--assessment of the New Deal in United States history. The New Deal's public works reflect more a limited ideology of economic development and less a sustained effort to end unemployment and reform the structure of the American economy. Despite these limitations, however, these projects scored a sweeping achievement, providing the infrastructure (and helping to justify the enormous role of the state) that

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., John Morton Blum, V was for Victory: Politics and Culture During World War II (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 117-46; Bruce J. Schulman, From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); David M. Kennedy, Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press: 1999); James T. Patterson, Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); related scholarship on twentieth-century government and public finance is covered in W. Elliot Brownlee, ed., Funding the Modern American State, 1941-1995: The Rise and Fall of the Era of Easy Finance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a key exception to my generalization on the history of twentieth-century economic development and the New Deal literature, see my discussion of Jordan A. Schwarz's work, below.



underwrote American success during World War II and afterwards. Before turning to these larger issues, however, let me first address a straightforward question: why have historians failed to tell the full story of the New Deal's public works?

### **Public Works in New Deal Historiography: Liberal and New Left Approaches**

Of course, to say that historians have failed to grasp the far-reaching impact of New Deal public works programs is not to indicate that they have ignored these programs. Discussions of public works find their place in the very first chronicles of the New Deal, written by the New Dealers themselves. In 1935 Harold Ickes set the tone for future liberal interpretations of federal public works in his celebratory history of the PWA, Back to Work.<sup>22</sup> The PWA was "an emergency agency born of the crisis," designed to help the nation recover from the Depression. "The government embarked on the public works program," wrote Ickes, "because of the timidity of private capital to come out from under the bed."

Something had to be done about the depression if we were ever to shake it off. And fortunately the great majority of the people wanted to do something about it. They wanted to march out and meet the enemy in hand-to-hand conflict. President Roosevelt had the same impulse, and immediately after his inauguration he set out to engage in mortal combat as insidious and as relentless a foe as a champion has ever faced.<sup>23</sup>

The enemy was unemployment; the weapon used to fight it was public works. If the overall purpose of the New Deal was to bring about relief, recovery, and reform, the public works programs were intended to address those problems associated with relief and recovery. According to the initial versions of the story, then, thanks to federally funded public works the nation was moving again, money was being pumped into the economy, and people were going back to work.

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<sup>22</sup> Harold L. Ickes, Back to Work: The Story of PWA (New York: Macmillan, 1935).

<sup>23</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 229, 233.

The creators of the New Deal primarily conceived of public works as a temporary recovery measure. The PWA, after all, was enacted as Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act, passed as part of the emergency legislation enacted during the first one hundred days of Roosevelt's first term. And this conception of the New Deal public works organizations as temporary programs, designed to relieve the short-term effects of unemployment, quickly became entrenched in histories of the New Deal. Subsequent accounts have thus viewed New Deal public works solely through the prism of the unemployment question, concluding, not surprisingly, that programs such as the PWA and the WPA were stop-gap measures to combat joblessness and help the nation recover from the Depression.

Among the most influential of these accounts are the histories of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Schlesinger's trilogy, The Age of Roosevelt, is a classic work of political history, with the interwar years's politicians, labor leaders, businessmen, and events set in relief against an interpretation of American history as cycles of conservative reaction and progressive reform.<sup>24</sup> While grounded in the sources, Schlesinger's account of the New Deal was a partisan one, and he echoed the sentiments of New Dealers such as Ickes and Hopkins in his treatment of public works.<sup>25</sup> The PWA was, for Schlesinger, "an emergency program," part of a two-pronged strategy of recovery that viewed the National Recovery Administration and the PWA working in concert.<sup>26</sup> The industrial codes of the NRA would restrict harmful competition, raising wages and reducing hours, while the PWA would inject cash into the economy. Schlesinger's treatment of the PWA and the

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<sup>24</sup> For more on the interpretive significance of Schlesinger's work, see Alan Brinkley, "Prosperity, Depression, and War, 1920-1945," in Eric Foner, ed., The New American History, rev. and enl. ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 134-37.

<sup>25</sup> For an extended and thoughtful appreciation of the intersection of Schlesinger's politics and scholarship, see the essays collected in John Patrick Diggins, ed., The Liberal Persuasion: Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and the Challenge of the American Past (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Coming of the New Deal, vol. 2 of Age of Roosevelt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 108.

WPA centers around the administrative issues and personality conflicts that occupied the fiscally conservative Director of the Budget Lewis Douglas, NRA head Hugh Johnson, Ickes, Hopkins, and Roosevelt:

If to Hugh Johnson the object of public works was to stimulate the heavy industries, and if to Harry Hopkins its object was to provide relief and re-employment, to Ickes its object was to beautify the national estate through the honest building of durable public monuments. To Lewis Douglas, it had no object at all. These various conceptions clashed at the meetings of the Public Works Board during the sweltering summer of 1933, its members sitting, coats off, on leather-cushioned chairs around the polished oval table in Ickes' office.<sup>27</sup>

In Schlesinger's view, then, these New Dealers jostled for political advantage and for Roosevelt's ear, each eager to advance his vision for public works in a political climate characterized by economic crisis. Schlesinger's work is essential for understanding the political debates and personalities that surrounded the New Deal, still providing much insight into the behind-the-scenes workings of policy making. In echoing the heroic, liberal view of the New Deal that was first put forward by the New Dealers themselves, however, Schlesinger treats public works programs only as short-term relief and recovery measures, as political chips to be tossed around polished oval tables. Schlesinger and his liberal colleagues in the historical profession applauded FDR for finally "trying something," viewing the public works programs as the epitome of the spirit of pragmatic experimentation that they felt permeated the New Deal. This point of view is reflected in the storyline that invariably surrounds the public works programs in histories such as Schlesinger's: the curtain rose on a bold attempt to end widespread unemployment and place the nation on a course towards recovery; these programs did not accomplish these goals but they provided much-needed welfare for the jobless; "Dr. Win-the-War" finally

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<sup>27</sup> Schlesinger, Coming of the New Deal, 284.

arrived to end the Depression while the temporary programs of "Dr. New Deal" quietly left the stage.<sup>28</sup>

While this scholarship set the agenda for the initial wave of New Deal historiography, the work of subsequent scholars--while adding much to what we now know--has not addressed the public works programs. The slow process of historical revision, the beginnings of which we can date back to William E. Leuchtenburg's influential 1963 synthesis, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, has concentrated upon other topics. One might think, though, that the federal programs that commanded two-thirds of New Deal spending before World War II would prove a fruitful subject of investigation for scholars looking to complicate our views of received wisdom; why this was not the case is a question worth addressing via a brief examination of Leuchtenburg's work and its relationship to subsequent New Left-influenced scholarship. Indeed, in much the same way that Schlesinger's Age of Roosevelt determined the boundaries of debate for an earlier generation of historians, Leuchtenburg's Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal can be viewed as a turning point in how we have understood the legacy of the New Deal.<sup>29</sup>

Leuchtenburg, like Schlesinger, approached the New Deal from a sympathetic, liberal perspective. Departing from the untempered optimism of earlier interpretations, however, Leuchtenburg advanced what historian James T. Patterson has termed a "cautiously positive interpretation of Roosevelt," paying more attention to the limits of the New Deal, its inability to solve the puzzle of the Depression, its failure to restructure

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<sup>28</sup> The work of the two most influential biographers of FDR generally follows this interpretation. See Frank Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt, 4 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown: 1952-73); Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990); James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt: The Lion and the Fox (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1956); and Burns, Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

<sup>29</sup> Brinkley's assessment of Leuchtenburg's work is a typical one: he has termed Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal "a book that remains the most important single-volume study of the 1930s even decades later." See Brinkley, "Prosperity, Depression, and War," 143-44.

the economic order, and its mixed record on racial equality.<sup>30</sup> With respect to public works programs, Leuchtenburg does not move beyond the analyses of previous scholars. He notes that FDR was initially opposed to large amounts of federal spending on public works programs, with Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins, advisor Hopkins, and Senators Robert Wagner, Robert La Follette, Jr., and Edward P. Costigan having to convince the President to support federal public works spending in 1933.<sup>31</sup> In his treatment of the impact of public works on the economy, Leuchtenburg recapitulates the standard criticism of Ickes, that he was too slow and cautious in spending the PWA appropriations, barely holding the line in the fight against the Depression when he could have made significant strides against it. Leuchtenburg, however, does observe that even though the WPA and the PWA were unable to provide aid to everyone, when measured against pre-1932 spending, "Roosevelt's works program marked a bold departure," adding "By any standard, it was an impressive achievement."<sup>32</sup> Although after 1935 Ickes was unable to convince FDR that the PWA was more deserving of funds than Hopkins' WPA, Ickes was, in Leuchtenburg's assessment, "a builder to rival Cheops," placing bridges over rivers, roads between cities, school and hospitals in rural communities, and new ports and airports around the nation.<sup>33</sup> In his final chapter, "The Roosevelt Reconstruction: Retrospect," however, Leuchtenburg chooses not to offer any summation of the legacy of public works programs, instead concentrating his conclusion on issues such as the expansion of the American presidency, the ingenuity of the New Dealers in solving

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<sup>30</sup> James T. Patterson, "United States History since 1920," in Mary Beth Norton, ed., The American Historical Association's Guide to Historical Literature 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 2:1455; and Patterson, "Americans and the Writing of Twentieth-Century United States History," in Anthony Molho and Gordon S. Wood, eds., Imagined Histories: American Historians Interpret the Past (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 185-205. See also Brinkley, "Prosperity, Depression, and War," 143-44.

<sup>31</sup> Leuchtenburg, FDR and the New Deal, 52-53.

<sup>32</sup> Leuchtenburg, FDR and the New Deal, 129-30.

<sup>33</sup> Leuchtenburg, FDR and the New Deal, 133.

problems, and the tremendous overall growth of the federal government. Leuchtenburg concludes that

The New Deal achieved a more just society by recognizing groups which had been largely unrepresented--staple farmers, industrial workers, particular ethnic groups, and the new intellectual-administrative class. Yet this was still a halfway revolution; it swelled the ranks of the bourgeoisie but left many Americans--sharecroppers, slum dwellers, most Negroes--outside of the new equilibrium.<sup>34</sup>

While he has little to offer the student of the New Deal interested in the federal public works programs, Leuchtenburg's judicious, even-handed synthesis is still important for the way it foreshadowed the subsequent revisionist efforts of New Left scholars such as Howard Zinn, Barton Bernstein, and Ronald Radosh.<sup>35</sup> In drawing a distinction between "liberal" and "New Left" scholarship, though, I do not mean to imply that the New Leftists were the first to question the liberal interpretation of the New Deal. After all, one of the profession's leading "consensus" historians, Richard Hofstadter, published a book chapter on FDR in the late 1940s that was far from laudatory,<sup>36</sup> and subsequently produced a synthetic treatment that, in the words of one critic, emphasized the "amoral, instrumental character of New Deal reform."<sup>37</sup> While Hofstadter is perhaps best considered as *sui generis*, the harshest critiques of the New Deal (excepting those constructed by the Right<sup>38</sup>) were found not among the New Left, but rather among the Old. As Leuchtenburg himself observes,

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<sup>34</sup> Leuchtenburg, FDR and the New Deal, 347.

<sup>35</sup> For a review of the literature that suggests that the range and subtlety of Leuchtenburg's work was one of the reasons why the New Left never really developed a sustained critique of the New Deal, see Brinkley, "Prosperity, Depression, and War," 143-44.

<sup>36</sup> "Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Patrician as Opportunist," in Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1948), 409-56.

<sup>37</sup> The synthetic treatment is, of course, Age of Reform; the critic is Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," American Historical Review 99 (Oct. 1994): 1043. For a more detailed assessment of Age of Reform, see Alan Brinkley, "Richard Hofstadter's The Age of Reform: A Reconsideration," Reviews in American History 13 (Sept. 1985): 462-80.

<sup>38</sup> Conservative assessments of the New Deal are rare; for the key work, see Edgar E. Robinson, The Roosevelt Leadership, 1933-1945 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1955).

Actually, there is no basic distinction between the New Left and the Old Left in interpreting the New Deal. All of us who were raised in the Roosevelt era and lived through the intellectual arguments of the 1940s grappled with the Marxist critique of the New Deal. The attacks of Marxist critics were quite sharp; for instance [Benjamin] Stolberg and [Warren J.] Vinton commented that there was nothing that the New Deal had done in agriculture that an earthquake could not have done better. No New Left critic has damned the New Deal with more abandon than the old Marxists.<sup>39</sup>

So, while the New Leftists were not the first to unravel the New Deal, they did perform a vital task within a critical tradition that itself has a long history.<sup>40</sup> In the introductory essay to his 1966 document anthology, New Deal Thought, Howard Zinn took the first step in re-applying this critical tradition to the New Deal, responding directly to the claims of Hofstadter, Schlesinger, and Leuchtenburg.<sup>41</sup> Zinn revisited the New Deal years not to bury them, but instead to find a usable past that could speak to the concerns of intellectuals in the 1960s. The debates of the Depression, writes Zinn, were characterized by "a public discussion more intense and more sweeping than any we have had before or since."

Their thinking does not give us facile solutions, but if history has uses beyond that of reminiscence, one of them is to nourish lean ideological times with the nectars of other years. And although the present shape of the world was hardly discernible in 1939, certain crucial social issues persist in both eras. Somehow, in the interaction between the ideas of the New Dealers themselves and those of social critics who gathered in various stances and at various distances around the Roosevelt fire, we may find suggestions or approaches that are relevant today.<sup>42</sup>

Zinn begins his re-examination with the definition of New Deal ideology provided by Hofstadter in Age of Reform. Hofstadter had argued that the works of New Dealer

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<sup>39</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Great Depression and the New Deal," in William E. Leuchtenburg, The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 232.

<sup>40</sup> For an opinionated, but very useful, assessment of the connection between the Old and New Left, see John Patrick Diggins, The Rise and Fall of the American Left (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> This essay has been re-published as "The Limits of the New Deal," in Howard Zinn, The Politics of History 2d ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 118-36.

<sup>42</sup> Zinn, "Limits of the New Deal," 120.

Thurman Arnold epitomized the essence of the New Deal, for in them, Hofstadter wrote, "we find a sharp and sustained attack upon ideologies, rational principles, and moralism in politics. We find, in short, the theoretical equivalent of FDR's opportunistic virtuosity in practical politics--a theory that attacks theories."<sup>43</sup> Zinn presses this definition of New Deal ideology further than Hofstadter, however, pointing out the darker consequences of emphasizing method over substance. "As it slid to its close," Zinn writes, the New Deal "left behind a mountain of accomplishment, and ahead, mountains still unclimbed. Many millions--businessmen, professionals, unionized workingmen, commercial farmers--had been given substantial help. Many millions more--sharecroppers, slum-dwellers, Negroes of North and South, the unemployed--still awaited a genuine 'new deal.'"<sup>44</sup> While Zinn is careful to emphasize the many achievements of the New Deal, public works programs are presented as falling victim to Roosevelt's "experimental, shifting, and opportunistic" temperament.<sup>45</sup> Zinn assesses the public works programs succinctly, observing that the "TVA, a brief golden period of federal theater, a thin spread of public housing, and a public works program called into play only at times of desperation, represented the New Deal's ideological and emotional limits in the creation of public enterprise."<sup>46</sup>

Other revisionist accounts of the New Deal come to similar conclusions regarding public works, when they bother to discuss them at all. Paul Conkin, in a short yet quite thoughtful overview of the New Deal, argues that programs such as the PWA "simply expanded the even more cautious public works program of the Hoover administration," failing to have any measurable effect on the economy.<sup>47</sup> The better-funded WPA receives

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<sup>43</sup> Hofstadter, Age of Reform, 319.

<sup>44</sup> Zinn, "Limits of the New Deal," 125.

<sup>45</sup> Zinn, "Limits of the New Deal," 133.

<sup>46</sup> Zinn, "Limits of the New Deal," 134.

<sup>47</sup> Paul Conkin, The New Deal 2d ed. (Arlington Heights, Ill: Harlan Davidson, 1975 [1967]), 32.



discussion in Conkin's account as an important welfare program, but fails to receive any nuanced attention as a public works program that may have had wider significance for business, labor, or government.<sup>48</sup> This may have something to do with Conkin's overall assessment of the New Deal; he concludes that "the story of many New Deal agencies was a sad story, the ever recurring story of what might have been."<sup>49</sup> Historian Barton J. Bernstein pens a similar portrait of the public works programs; following from the assumptions that underwrite most "corporate liberal" interpretations of U.S. history,<sup>50</sup> Bernstein argues that "The liberal reforms of the New Deal did not transform the American system; they conserved and protected American capitalism, occasionally by absorbing parts of threatening programs."<sup>51</sup> Bernstein treats the public works organizations solely as welfare programs, faulting the government for spending too slowly and cautiously, tersely noting that after six years of the New Deal, "In most of America, starvation was no longer possible. Perhaps that was the most humane achievement of the New Deal."<sup>52</sup> Ultimately, then, since for Bernstein the achievements of the New Deal were so limited, people who joined the New Deal political coalition were evidence for "one of the crueler ironies of liberal politics, that the marginal men trapped in hopelessness were seduced by rhetoric, by the style and movement, by the

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<sup>48</sup> Conkin, New Deal, 56-57.

<sup>49</sup> Conkin, New Deal, 70-71.

<sup>50</sup> These assumptions can be traced through William Appleman Williams, The Contours of American History (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973 [1961]), esp. 439-69; Gabriel Kolko, The Triumph of Conservatism: A Reinterpretation of American History, 1900-1916 (New York: Free Press, 1963); James Weinstein, The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968); Gabriel Kolko, Main Currents in Modern American History (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), esp. 111-57; and Martin J. Sklar, The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also R. Jeffrey Lustig, Corporate Liberalism: The Origins of Modern American Political Theory, 1890-1920 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>51</sup> Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in Bernstein, ed., Towards a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History (New York: Vintage, 1967), 264.

<sup>52</sup> Bernstein, "The New Deal," 278.

symbolism of efforts seldom reaching beyond words."<sup>53</sup> To the extent that public works programs achieved anything, in Bernstein's view they were part of a larger enterprise that created a sort of false consciousness, able only to dupe the masses into voting for FDR.

Ronald Radosh, in his essay, "The Myth of the New Deal," provides some perspective on the efforts of his fellow New Left historians to study the New Deal while advancing similar claims.<sup>54</sup> Unlike his fellow revisionists, however, Radosh undertakes a more sustained reconsideration of the New Deal public works programs. Asserting that the NRA was "meant to be a conservative prop to the existing order," Radosh conceives of the public works programs, ironically, much in the same way as Schlesinger, basing his discussion on the assumption that the industrial codes of the NRA were originally intended to work in concert with the PWA.<sup>55</sup> Radosh argues, though, that the main role of public works programs was not just to win the direct allegiance of business interests to the idea of industrial codes, but rather "to win the allegiance...

of the "liberals"....Of all the New Deal reforms, public works seemed to most people to have the aura of "socialism" or at least of an attack on private interests. To the hungry and unemployed, it symbolized a direct concern by the government for their plight....That the New Deal's public works was of a limited nature and did not interfere with private business prerogatives went unnoticed. In the area in which public-works development was most needed, housing, the New Deal program was hardly successful and in many ways a total failure. All this was ignored. The name "public works" and the PWA itself produced a sympathetic response from the populace, the "liberal" political groups, and the organized political left.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Bernstein, "The New Deal," 281.

<sup>54</sup> Ronald Radosh, "The Myth of the New Deal," in Ronald Radosh and Murray N. Rothbard, eds., A New History of Leviathan: Essays on the Rise of the American Corporate State (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972), 146-87.

<sup>55</sup> Radosh, "Myth of the New Deal," 169.

<sup>56</sup> Radosh, "Myth of the New Deal," 170.

Radosh's analysis reflects the interest of most New Left critics in the role the New Deal played in channeling or limiting participatory democracy,<sup>57</sup> and while his eagerness to portray public works as a sop to the Left leaves no room for subtlety, Radosh does at least perform the valuable service of taking these programs seriously. Interestingly, though, despite much subsequent work by others in the corporate liberal tradition--culminating in Colin Gordon's New Deals, a bold attempt to recast the NRA, the Wagner Act, and the Social Security Act as measures that somehow reflected the interests of a disorganized, yet very powerful, business community--Radosh's exceedingly short and one-note treatment of the New Deal public works programs remains the fullest that we have from a New Left perspective. While Gordon's New Deals does survey much ground, presenting itself as "the first major reinterpretation of the New Deal in almost thirty years," the public works programs appear only in a footnote. Here, Gordon admits that in his discussion of the NRA he will "not attempt a general history of the NRA," and will "only touch upon its provisions for public works."<sup>58</sup>

Historians, I propose, ought to do more than just touch upon the public works programs when they think about the New Deal. While liberal historians presented the public works programs as well-intentioned welfare programs that failed to end unemployment, and subsequent critics dismissed them as underfunded measures that served only to prop up the existing order, blinding people to the limits of the New Deal, both sides neglect the fact that public works programs were the New Deal's central enterprise. Paying attention to this fact through the study of the concrete functions of the state, this dissertation builds upon and advances the work of the only historian to view the New Deal as "a massive governmental recapitalization for purposes of economic

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<sup>57</sup> For a more recent account that shows a similar interest in the ways that the state responded to and ultimately contained broad-based political and social movements, see Alan Dawley, Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).

<sup>58</sup> Gordon, New Deals, 166, n. 1.

development," Jordan A. Schwarz.<sup>59</sup> While Schwarz's work is unique in reflecting this perspective, he develops this approach solely through a brilliant series of personality portraits of such characters as David Lilienthal, Sam Rayburn, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Schwarz presents the New Deal as a political project that "sought to create long-term markets by building an infrastructure in undeveloped regions," but he ignores the details of how the New Deal agencies actually functioned.<sup>60</sup>

In recapturing the New Deal's focus on the construction of public works projects, this dissertation also provides important evidence supporting recent accounts that have emphasized the gendered and racial boundaries of the American welfare state. The construction industry and building trades were heavily white and male during the twentieth century, as a number of scholars have observed.<sup>61</sup> In basing their welfare state on the building of public works projects, New Dealers reinforced these boundaries, largely bypassing the "maternalist" legacies of Progressive Era social policy.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Jordan A. Schwarz, The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xi.

<sup>60</sup> Schwarz, New Dealers, xi. In Schwarz's defense, it should be noted that there are fewer remaining records of the PWA than of any other major New Deal program, due to the unauthorized destruction of many of its files in 1943. See the finding aide, "Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Public Works Administration (Record Group 135)," compiled by L. Evans Walker (Washington: National Archives, 1960).

<sup>61</sup> Michael Kazin, Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); and Robert A. Christie, Empire in Wood: A History of the Carpenter's Union (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1956) make this point effectively.

<sup>62</sup> On these legacies, see the important work of Landon R. Y. Storrs, Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Two Political Cultures in the Progressive Era: The National Consumers' League and the American Association for Labor Legislation." in Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 36-62. See also Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Linda Gordon, Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994); Suzanne Mettler, Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Nancy E. Rose, Workfare or Fair Work: Women, Welfare, and Government Work Programs (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995); and Jill Quadagno, "From Old-Age Assistance to Supplemental Security Income: The Political Economy of Relief in the South, 1935-1972," in Margaret

By exploring the workings of the federal government and its agencies, I am of course also drawing upon and contributing to the research program commonly flagged (and occasionally flogged) by the phrase "bringing the state back in."<sup>63</sup> While this program has changed over the past fifteen years, with one of its principle advocates, Theda Skocpol, recently proclaiming that she now follows a "polity-centered" approach rather than a "state-centered" one,<sup>64</sup> it has underwritten much scholarly investigation by vigorously promoting the notion that states and institutions are subjects worthy of research. This focus of "new institutionalist" scholars on the state, however, tends to discount factors such as ideology and politics, and it ignores altogether the significance of broader social forces such as urbanization and industrialization.<sup>65</sup> With the history of the American state--what Leuchtenburg has termed "our next frontier"<sup>66</sup>--now attracting much scholarly interest, political historians, in the words of one recent critic, ought not to adopt the "dense, internal analysis of state imperatives" advocated by the new

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Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, eds., The Politics of Social Policy in the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 235-63.

<sup>63</sup> Even an incomplete list of works that fit under this rubric would take up too much space; key texts include Stephen Skowronek, Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Evans, Rueschemeyer, and Skocpol, eds., Bringing the State Back In; Weir, Orloff, and Skocpol, eds., The Politics of Social Policy in the United States; and Finegold and Skocpol, State and Party in America's New Deal. See also James G. March and Johan P. Olsen, "The New Institutionalism: Organizational Factors in Political Life," American Political Science Review 78 (Sept. 1984): 734-49; and Rogers M. Smith, "Political Jurisprudence, the 'New Institutionalism,' and the Future of Public Law," APSR 82 (March 1988): 89-108.

<sup>64</sup> Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers, x.

<sup>65</sup> Compare the treatment of agricultural interests in Theda Skocpol and Kenneth Finegold, "State Capacity and Economic Intervention in the Early New Deal," Political Science Quarterly 97 (summer 1982): 255-78; with Grant McConnell's classic, The Decline of Agrarian Democracy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953). See also two useful assessments of institutionally oriented scholarship, Terrence J. McDonald, "Building the Impossible State: Toward an Institutional Analysis of Statebuilding in America, 1820-1930," in John E. Jackson, ed., Institutions in American Society: Essays in Market, Political, and Social Organizations (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 217-39; and David Brian Robertson, "The Return to History and the New Institutionalism in American Political Science," Social Science History 17 (spring 1993): 1-36.

<sup>66</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, "The Pertinence of Political History: Reflections on the Significance of the State in America," Journal of American History 73 (Dec. 1986): 589.

institutionalists "as a complete model" for their investigations.<sup>67</sup> Instead, by defining political history as a field that "deals with the development and impact of governmental institutions, along with the proximate influences on their actions," political historians have the opportunity to capitalize on a growing methodological overlap between political, social, and cultural history.<sup>68</sup> This study follows this broad-minded definition of political history, drawing upon the scholarly (re)turn to institutions in its focus on the state, yet remaining sensitive to the analytic importance of society.

Chapter One of the dissertation examines the politics of economic development and unemployment during the early New Deal, concentrating on the years 1933-1935. My focus is the New Deal's first public works program, the Public Works Administration, which conceived of public works not simply as an anti-unemployment measure, but primarily as part of a strategy of economic development and resource management, echoing the approach of Herbert Hoover's Reconstruction Finance Corporation to public works. I explore how New Dealers and other progressives conceived of the relationship between government construction, economic development, and unemployment during Roosevelt's first term.

In Chapter Two I evaluate the success of these state-building efforts using the records of the PWA's division of investigation. These extraordinarily detailed records provide an insider's account of what was at stake in the making of the New Deal state. The New Deal's own investigators created a remarkable day-by-day record of the many difficulties confronting the PWA as it transformed the physical infrastructure of the

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<sup>67</sup> Mark H. Leff, "Revisioning U.S. Political History," American Historical Review 100 (June 1995): 850.

<sup>68</sup> Leff, "Revisioning U.S. Political History," 829; for more on the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach to political history see Patrick D. Reagan, "Republicans and Realignment: The New Deal Years." RAH 24 (March 1996): 132-37, esp. 136; more generally see Rogers M. Smith, "Science, Non-Science, and Politics"; Geoff Eley, "Is All the World a Text? From Social History to the History of Society Two Decades Later"; and William H. Sewell, Jr., "Three Temporalities: Toward an Eventful Sociology," all in Terrence J. McDonald, ed., The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

nation, a record that has been ignored by historians.<sup>69</sup> In the course of their work investigators interviewed PWA staffers, private contractors, laborers, and citizens across the country. The division of investigation scrutinized and recorded the daily problems the PWA grappled with as it attempted to pacify job-seekers, congressmen, senators, state and local officials, contractors, labor unions, and civic boosters. Despite being beset by overstuffed and often incompetent divisions of engineering, finance, and legal affairs, the PWA carefully spent \$3.3 billion and generated a wealth of new infrastructure.

Chapter Three turns to this infrastructure, examining the projects built by the PWA and looking at their significance for understanding the political and economic dimensions of New Deal liberalism. This construction represented an enormous leap forward in state-funded public works projects, realizing on a much larger scale the public works philosophy of the Hoover administration. It also, however, contained important implications, both for the kinds of public construction that was performed by the Works Progress Administration (addressed in Chapter Four and Five), and for the direction that public construction later took during and after World War II (covered in Chapter Six and Seven).

New Deal public works programs facilitated the twin goals of state-building and party-building. Chapter Five examines how the 1938 elections and FDR's attempt to "purge" the Democratic party of its conservative elements helped lead to the passage of the Hatch Act, restricting the role that the PWA and the WPA could play in the political process. While the WPA paid more attention to the problem of unemployment than did the PWA, by 1939 both of these programs were placed within the Federal Works Agency during the reorganization of the executive branch of the federal government. Rather than quietly accept that war and a more conservative Congress meant the curtailment of public

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<sup>69</sup> The most comprehensive study of the PWA to date, William D. Reeves, "The Politics of Public Works, 1933-1935" (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1968), does not draw on these records.

works projects, however, various New Dealers attempted--and for a time, quite successfully--to synthesize their social concerns with the emergency presented by wartime, quickly realizing that justifying expenses on public works as "necessary wartime emergency spending" provided a powerful rationale for continuing to spend money on programs that were becoming increasingly unpopular.

In fact, with World War II New Dealers no longer had to rely upon the mere "analogue" of war when building a case for further reforms. They could now point to war, itself.<sup>70</sup> While the reorganized New Deal public works programs did succeed in using the war to justify their continued existence, this victory came at certain costs, as I discuss in Chapter Six. Nowhere can these costs be better observed than by looking at the most socially progressive of the New Deal's works programs, the WPA. With the building of wartime public works the WPA increasingly discarded its principle method of construction--force account, in which the WPA put people to work directly in order to reduce unemployment--in favor of cost-plus contracting, with its emphasis on timely production and willingness to set aside the goal of reducing unemployment in order to get the job done. More notably, however, New Dealers within the WPA demonstrated the extent to which they were willing to cast aside social concerns in the name of wartime emergency when they played a crucial role in executing Executive Order 9066, interning Japanese Americans in relocation camps on the West Coast.

Chapter Seven traces the postwar legacy of New Deal public works, exploring their influence on the development of federal highway policy up to the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act. While the Federal Works Agency continued to function until 1949, at this point the federal government again reorganized its public works functions. Under the

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<sup>70</sup> For the classic account of the widespread use of wartime metaphors by New Dealers, see William Leuchtenburg's essay, "The New Deal and the Analogue of War," revised and reprinted in William E. Leuchtenburg, The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 35-75.



recommendation of a commission headed by a retired president, Herbert Hoover, the federal government folded the responsibilities of the Federal Works Agency into the General Services Administration. The creation of the GSA formalized the return of federal public works to an ideal of efficiency and economy, an ideal first epitomized by the public works promoted by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation when Hoover was president. In reconstructing these events, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how politicians such as Lyndon Johnson came to believe in exporting a Keynesian vision of economic development to Southeast Asia, calling for such projects as a Tennessee Valley Authority on the Mekong Delta. This internationalization of the New Deal can also be traced in part through the postwar activities of such construction firms as Kaiser, Bechtel, and Morrison-Knudsen.<sup>71</sup>

Ultimately, this dissertation makes the argument that New Deal public works programs are better understood not as employment measures that failed due to insufficient state capacities, but rather as an extraordinarily successful method of state-sponsored economic development. Indeed, the state capacities of such programs as the WPA were so robust that during World War II the federal government turned to what was nominally a temporary agency to play a central role in the imprisonment of 120,000 Japanese Americans. Through studying the many facets of New Deal public works programs, this dissertation aims to arrive at a more complete understanding of the building of New Deal liberalism.

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<sup>71</sup> Stephen B. Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington: The Rise of a Government Entrepreneur* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); and Schwarz, *New Dealers*, 339.

CHAPTER ONE  
THE POLITICS OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND UNEMPLOYMENT  
DURING THE EARLY NEW DEAL

Under the New Deal, a public works revolution transformed the American economy, landscape, and political system. This chapter explores the origins of this revolution, examining the politics of economic development and unemployment during the early New Deal. Concentrating on the years 1933-1935, its focus is the New Deal's first public works program, the Public Works Administration. The PWA conceived of public works not simply as an anti-unemployment measure but primarily as part of a strategy of economic development and resource management.<sup>1</sup> Supervised by a former Bull Moose Republican, Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, this program strongly echoed earlier public works programs and the approach tried under Herbert Hoover's Reconstruction Finance Corporation. I locate the PWA in this broader trajectory of public works programs, investigating how New Dealers and other progressives conceived of the relationship between government construction, economic development, and unemployment before and during Roosevelt's first term.

New Deal public works programs are better understood not as an employment measure that failed due to insufficient state capacities, but rather as an extraordinarily successful method of state-sponsored economic development. Ickes and the PWA's emphasis on the capacity of public works to provide needed municipal improvements, employment on work sites, and indirect employment in related industries drew on a generation of thinking by engineers and economists.<sup>2</sup> Chapter Two evaluates the success

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<sup>1</sup> The PWA has been neglected by historians, perhaps because there are fewer remaining records of this agency than of any other major New Deal program. Many of its files were lost due to their unauthorized destruction in 1943. See the finding aide, "Preliminary Inventory of the Records of the Public Works Administration (Record Group 135)," compiled by L. Evans Walker (Washington: National Archives, 1960).

<sup>2</sup> For the many connections between the New Deal and economic development, see Jordan A. Schwarz, The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

of these measures and examines the building of the New Deal state from within, evaluating its significance for understanding the political and economic dimensions of New Deal liberalism. The PWA's construction represented an enormous leap forward in state-funded public works projects, realizing on a much larger scale the public works philosophy of the Hoover administration. It also, however, contained important implications, both for the kinds of public construction that was later performed by the Works Progress Administration, and for the direction that public construction subsequently took during and after the Second World War.

This chapter's examination of the problems faced by the PWA and the steps it took to counter these obstacles exploits a rarely employed source, the minutes of the Special Board for Public Works. Although this policy-making body quickly became dominated by Ickes, its minutes provide an extraordinarily explicit record of the political world inhabited by reformers such as Ickes, Frances Perkins, and Rexford Tugwell during the early days of the New Deal. These New Dealers held extensive debates over such issues as how to guard against graft and waste; accommodate organized labor, contractors, and politicians all eager to receive government largess; provide useful public works projects across the nation; put people back to work; and how to do all of this as swiftly as possible while carefully spending \$3.3 billion. While this chapter relies on the minutes of the Special Board to establish what was at stake in debates over economic development and unemployment during the early New Deal, the following chapter turns to the records of investigations conducted by the PWA, itself, in order to evaluate how these debates were resolved in the building of the New Deal state.<sup>3</sup> Within the PWA,

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<sup>3</sup> Ickes himself reprinted several excerpts from the Special Board minutes in his Back to Work: The Story of PWA (New York: Macmillan, 1935); the only historian to make sustained use of this source is William D. Reeves; see his "PWA and Competitive Administration in the New Deal," Journal of American History 60 (Sept. 1973): 357-72; and "The Politics of Public Works, 1933-1935" (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1968).

New Dealers explored the possibilities for relieving unemployment and the potential for remaking the nation's landscape.

In the years before public works became the central enterprise of the New Deal, however, political, business, intellectual, and labor communities debated the proper role of public works policy in American society. A brief examination of this history helps illuminate the many different positions held by the PWA Special Board members during the early New Deal.

### **A "Prehistory" of Public Works Policy**

While the great depression and the New Deal are rightly viewed as pivotal events in United States history, too often this "big bang" in the growth of the American state has served to obscure what one historian has called the "prehistory" of public works policy before the New Deal.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the idea of using government-funded construction to counter the effects of unemployment dates as far back as the economic downturns of the 1830s, the 1850s, and the 1870s.<sup>5</sup> In 1855, for example, immigration officials in New York put the unemployed to work on the enlargement of the Erie Canal.<sup>6</sup> It was not until the financial panic of 1893, however, and the ensuing depression, that cities and smaller towns began to use public works extensively in this fashion.<sup>7</sup> These programs, however,

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<sup>4</sup> Udo Sautter, "Government and Unemployment: The Use of Public Works before the New Deal," Journal of American History 73 (June 1986): 59; for a more detailed account see Sautter, Three Cheers for the Unemployed: Government and Unemployment before the New Deal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Don D. Lescohier, "Working Conditions," in John R. Commons, et al., History of Labor in the United States, 1896-1932 (New York: Macmillan, 1918-35), 3:164-78; Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 61-2. See also Francis Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare 2d ed. (New York: Vintage, 1993 [1971]), 3-42.

<sup>6</sup> Arthur D. Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1935), 5.

<sup>7</sup> Armstrong, ed., History of Public Works in the United States, 10; Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 60.

were too scattered and too small to have any real effect. Herbert Gutman, in an important article that first directed labor historians to the impact of industrialization in smaller towns, observed that throughout the Gilded Age "Nothing better illustrated the differences between the small town and large city than attitudes toward public works for the unemployed," as urban Americans responded to the clamor for work relief with "surprise, ridicule, contempt, and genuine fear."<sup>8</sup> With the unemployment rate soaring as high as twenty percent, populist leader Jacob S. Coxey captured the nation's horrified attention in 1894 when he led a "living petition" of jobless workers--"Coxey's Army"--from Massillon, Ohio, to Washington, D.C., demanding that the government employ them on public works.<sup>9</sup>

While efforts such as General Coxey's fell short of immediate success, during the next thirty-six years a growing number of progressive intellectuals, journalists, and politicians began to consider seriously the use of public works to combat unemployment. The founding of the American Association for Labor Legislation (AALL) in 1906 marked an important watershed, as it soon became the central organization and clearing house for translating concerns over unemployment into concrete policy measures.<sup>10</sup> With funding from men such as John D. Rockefeller and Elbert H. Gary (and, it should be noted, with tepid support from organized labor), the AALL attracted progressives such as Richard T. Ely, Henry Rogers Seager, Henry Farmer, John R. Commons, John B. Andrews, Irene

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<sup>8</sup> Herbert Gutman, "The Workers' Search for Power: Labor in the Gilded Age," 86, 87, in Ira Berlin, ed., Power and Culture: Essays on the American Working Class (New York: The New Press, 1987). This essay was first published in 1963.

<sup>9</sup> Lescohier, "Working Conditions," 170.

<sup>10</sup> For a brief account of the AALL's history, see Kathryn Kish Sklar, "Two Political Cultures in the Progressive Era: The National Consumers' League and the American Association for Labor Legislation," in Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar, eds., U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 36-62; and Theda Skocpol, Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 176-204. For a more extensive treatment, see David A. Moss, Socializing Security: Progressive-Era Economists and the Origins of American Social Policy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

Osgood, Jane Addams, and Charles Henderson.<sup>11</sup> In 1914, this organization published a four-point plan intended to prevent unemployment, proposing "(1) the establishment of public employment exchanges; (2) the systematic distribution of public work; (3) the regularization of industry; and (4) unemployment insurance."<sup>12</sup>

While this plan, entitled "A Practical Program for the Prevention of Unemployment in America," attracted some attention, undergoing several printings, public works advocates achieved only occasional state-level legislative success before the 1930s. The debate over the merits of using publicly funded construction to ease mass unemployment, however, continued to grow. At the close of World War I, Congress created a new division of the Department of Labor, the Division of Public Work and Construction Development, intended to prod states and cities into conducting public works projects. AALL member Otto T. Mallery headed the Division, but his efforts--limited mostly to uplifting bulletins sent to various mayors--must be seen in the context of prevailing attitudes towards the role of government in the return to a peacetime economy. The government could not determine the shape of the reconversion, President Woodrow Wilson stated to Congress, "any better than it [the reconversion] will direct itself."<sup>13</sup> While some members of Congress--most notably, Senator William S. Kenyon of Iowa--pushed for the creation of a federal board to supervise public works

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<sup>11</sup> In 1915, Samuel Gompers resigned from the AALL and jibed that the organization ought to be named the "American Association for the Assassination of Labor Legislation." Moss, Socializing Security, 32; and see James Weinstein, The Corporate Ideal in the Liberal State: 1900-1918 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 48.

<sup>12</sup> Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 60-61; for more on the intersection of the progressive movement and the social sciences see Daniel T. Rodgers, Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 97-111; and Dorothy Ross, The Origins of American Social Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 143-300.

<sup>13</sup> Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 66.

construction--Congress as a whole essentially agreed with Wilson's assessment of the federal government's limitations and declined to act.<sup>14</sup>

Government attitudes began to shift slightly with President Warren Harding's 1921 conference on unemployment. Although Harding and Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover stressed that private charity was far more desirable than public assistance, the conference, after hearing from Mallery, recommended that the nation plan for "future cyclical periods of depression and unemployment by a system of public works," even advocating that federal loans be advanced to municipalities during periods of depression.<sup>15</sup> While this recommendation led in the short run only to several bills in the House that failed to attract enough support to pass, it did help to shape the boundaries of the debate over the use of the federal government.

Public works began to receive explicit consideration as more than an anti-unemployment measure, as policy makers called for planned public works to be put into action during periods of economic depression to stabilize the economy. Washington Senator Wesley L. Jones's 1928 proposal for a "prosperity reserve" of federal public works, for example, viewed federal construction as a macroeconomic tool.<sup>16</sup> Other students of government policy took notice of this activity, linking the concept of the "business cycle" with public works programs. They argued that government construction

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<sup>14</sup> Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression, 11; Jack P. Isakoff, The Public Works Administration (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1938), 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 67-8; Joseph Dorfman, The Economic Mind in American Civilization 5 vols. (New York: Viking Press, 1946-59), 4:35-36. On Hoover, see Joan Hoff-Wilson, Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive (New York: HarperCollins, 1975), 90-93; Ellis W. Hawley, "Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an 'Associative State,' 1921-1928," Journal of American History 61 (June 1974): 116-40; and the essays by Ellis W. Hawley, Murray N. Rothbard, Robert F. Himmelberg, and Gerald D. Nash, in J. Joseph Huthmacher and Warren I. Susman, eds., Herbert Hoover and the Crisis of American Capitalism (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1973).

<sup>16</sup> Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression, 12. For more on Jones's belief in using public works to advance economic development, see Schwarz, New Dealers, 48-49.

contained the potential to minimize the cycle's depths.<sup>17</sup> A generation of businessmen and politicians soon came to associate public works spending with economic stabilization and economic growth. Wilsonians such as William Gibbs McAdoo, Herbert Hoover, and Bernard Baruch helped combine a Southern pro-development heritage with a Western desire for infrastructure and growth. This shared view of federal construction helped the Southern and Western factions of the Democratic party unite behind a shared desire for public works.<sup>18</sup> While politicians, businessmen, and civic boosters advocated permanent improvements to public infrastructure, reform-minded organizations such as the National Unemployment League and the AALL also continued to press for nationally planned public works, making the case for their effectiveness as relief measures.<sup>19</sup>

This pressure took on fresh urgency with the stock market crash of 1929. President Hoover moved in early 1930 to increase public road building by \$75 million in order to counter the economic downturn, using planned public works to minimize this oscillation in the business cycle.<sup>20</sup> When this seemed to have little effect Hoover asked Congress to appropriate \$150 million for emergency construction projects and he created the President's Emergency Committee for Employment (PECE), naming Colonel Arthur Woods, former New York City police commissioner, chairman. The increases in federal construction, however, were not sufficient, given the enormous decline in state and local

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<sup>17</sup> Isakoff, Public Works Administration, 12-16; Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression, 7-13; Otto T. Mallery, "The Long-Range Planning of Public Works," chap. 14 in Business Cycles and Unemployment (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1923).

<sup>18</sup> Schwarz, New Dealers, 43. For an important account that establishes the political activism of farmers in the peripheral regions of the South and Midwest, and emphasizes the political legacies of agrarian populism within the Democratic party in the creation of an activist central state, see Elizabeth Sanders, Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), esp. 13-29; 148-172.

<sup>19</sup> Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 68-70.

<sup>20</sup> Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 79; Joseph Dorfman, The Economic Mind in American Civilization 5 vols. (New York: Viking Press, 1946-59), 5:616-17.



construction due to the collapse of revenue sources such as the property tax.<sup>21</sup> Woods soon overstepped his role as PECE chair, advocating more spending on construction than Hoover wanted. Woods resigned in April 1931 to voice his dissatisfaction with the administration.

Progressive senators, most notably New York's Robert Wagner, Wisconsin's Robert La Follette, Jr., and Colorado's Edward P. Costigan, along with publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, led renewed demands for increased spending on public works. In the states, governors such as Franklin D. Roosevelt in New York enacted relief programs of their own. La Follette and Wagner, in particular, were in the forefront of Senate debates over these issues, championing public works measures, employment stabilization, and increased funding for the gathering of labor statistics.<sup>22</sup>

With the creation of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the signing of the Emergency Relief and Construction Act in 1932, Hoover again seemed to be taking significant steps against the depression. In so doing, Hoover not only called on his legacy as the "great humanitarian" who directed relief to Europe after World War I, he also drew on his experience during the 1927 Mississippi River flood.<sup>23</sup> This disaster had been an important moment in Hoover's career, as he took the thankless task of coordinating the battle against the flood and turned it into a potent political platform upon which he began his run for the presidency in 1928. In 1932, however, Hoover was pushed towards embracing the RFC and the ERCA by three political realities: the extreme character of the

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<sup>21</sup> Dorfman, Economic Mind in American Civilization 5:617; Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression, 203.

<sup>22</sup> Isakoff, Public Works Administration, 13; Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression, 12-13; Jordan A. Schwarz, The Interregnum of Despair: Hoover, Congress, and the Depression (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), 23-44; Irving Bernstein, The Lean Years: A History of the American Worker, 1920-1933 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 262-68; J. Joseph Huthmacher, Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 60-63; 71-86.

<sup>23</sup> Hoff-Wilson, Herbert Hoover, 114-17; John M. Barry, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 261-89; 363-95.

depression and the collapse in local revenues, the drive in the Congress for a more activist approach to relief via public works, and the approach of the presidential election later that year.<sup>24</sup> Modeled after the War Finance Corporation of World War I, The RFC provided loans to banks and railroads. Termed a "millionaire's dole" by New York Congressman Fiorello La Guardia, the RFC was roundly criticized for its conservative and narrowly focused lending practices during the first half of 1932.<sup>25</sup>

Produced by a compromise between Hoover, Wagner, and Texas Senator (and, eventually, FDR running mate) John Nance Garner, the ERCA merits attention here not because it was a rousing success--it was not--but rather because it provided the legislative blueprint for the Public Works Administration. The ERCA broadened the powers of the RFC, with the Act's first title providing for \$300 million to be loaned to the states for direct and work relief at 3% interest, with the federal government to be repaid out of future federal allotments for highways. Title II allowed for \$1.5 billion to be loaned to the states for self-liquidating public works projects, such as dams, bridges, and roads, that had the potential to make back the costs of their construction. The third title appropriated \$322 million for national public works projects such as Hoover Dam, hospitals, military airports and bases, and other public buildings, bridges, and utilities, in order to stimulate the heavy construction industry. Although the \$300 million from Title I was distributed to the states for relief, the second title's strict self-liquidating requirement and higher interest rates resulted in only \$147 million in projects approved (and of that, only \$15.7

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<sup>24</sup> Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 82-83; Schwarz, Interregnum of Despair, 91-96; 162-78; Bernstein, Lean Years, 467-69.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Mann, La Guardia: A Fighter Against his Times, 1882-1933 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1959), 302; Howard Zinn, La Guardia in Congress (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958), 209; Schwarz, Interregnum of Despair, 91. The key historian of the RFC is James Stuart Olson; see his Herbert Hoover and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977) and Saving Capitalism: The Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the New Deal, 1933-1940 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). For a brief summary of the RFC's career, see my essay in James Ciment, ed., Encyclopedia of the Great Depression and the New Deal (New York: M.E. Sharpe, forthcoming 2001).

million spent) by the end of December 1932. Title III was even less of a success, with scarcely \$6 million spent on public works. Despite these shortcomings, however, the ERCA established an important precedent. The RFC created a new division to supervise the construction of self-liquidating public works, forging direct financial relationships between the federal government and state and local political subdivisions. The PWA would soon expand and nourish these relationships.<sup>26</sup>

### **The First Hundred Days: National Recovery and a New Deal for Public Works**

During the 1932 campaign, Franklin D. Roosevelt followed a time-honored strategy for electoral front-runners, saying as little as possible that might be construed as controversial. Thus, Roosevelt said nothing about the potential of public works to serve as a relief or recovery measure. FDR, however, did gain the support of a number of Republican senators who had actively supported the use of public works, including La Follette, Costigan, Bronson Cutting, Hiram Johnson and George Norris. In fact, Costigan and La Follette, together with Robert Wagner, were known as the "three musketeers" in the fight for public works.<sup>27</sup>

The first one hundred days of Roosevelt's first term have taken on a mythic status as one of the most creative periods of governance in United States history. The new President's brain trust of advisors hammered out fifteen legislative measures which were quickly passed by Congress. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, the Securities and Exchange Commission, banking reform and the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration were just several of the more important

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<sup>26</sup> J. Kerwin Williams, Grants-In-Aid Under the Public Works Administration: A Study in Federal-State-Local Relations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 24-31; Isakoff, Public Works Administration, 14-16; Gayer Public Works in Prosperity and Depression, 87-88; Sautter, "Government and Unemployment," 83-86.

<sup>27</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 12; William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 12-13; Frank Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: The Triumph (Boston: Little, Brown, 1956), 323-71.

products of this effort. The centerpiece of this outpouring of legislation, however, was the National Industrial Recovery Act. Title I of the NIRA suspended antitrust laws and called for industries to draw up codes of industrial production, in order to guard against the dangers of competition. This title also provided labor with the right to organize and bargain collectively with employers. Title II of the NIRA called for the creation of a Federal Emergency Agency for Public Works, or as it soon came to be known, the PWA. Both Labor Secretary Frances Perkins and Senator Wagner supported the legislative separation of the codes from the public works program, a decision which later preserved the PWA after the Supreme Court ruled the National Recovery Administration unconstitutional. In Roosevelt's opinion, the NIRA was "the most important and far-reaching legislation ever enacted by the American Congress."<sup>28</sup>

The NRA's production codes reflected an uneasy mixture of policy ideas. As historian Ellis Hawley put it in his classic treatment, the NRA codes drew upon a conservative, "associative ideal" of a rationalized "business commonwealth," melded with a progressive, cooperative notion of a collectively planned democracy and an older conception of a "competitive ideal" of an "atomistic economy."<sup>29</sup> Hawley's assessment recalled that of New Dealer Rexford Tugwell, who argued that "There was a good deal more in the proposed National Recovery Act than met the eye," for "[c]onverging in it were several streams of thought developed by individuals or groups who hoped to serve one or another interest, not all of which were by any means public."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Frances Perkins, The Roosevelt I Knew (New York: Viking Press, 1947), 272; Reeves, "The Politics of Public Works," 9-12.; FDR quoted in Ellis W. Hawley, The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 19.

<sup>29</sup> Hawley, New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly, 35-52.

<sup>30</sup> Rexford G. Tugwell, The Democratic Roosevelt (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), 280.

Although little noticed by historians, NIRA's public works title likewise drew support from a conflicting set of interests.<sup>31</sup> From the sector hardest hit by the depression, construction, the professional building contractors welcomed a chance to go back to work on government contracts, while organized labor--especially the American Federation of Labor building trades, the "citadel" of the AFL--similarly looked forward to a return to employment.<sup>32</sup> Progressive organizations such as the National Unemployment League, the United Relief Program, the National Conference of Catholic Charities, and the Joint Committee on Unemployment, on the other hand, thought that public works would provide the broad-based relief of unemployment.<sup>33</sup> These different constituencies, each expecting something different from the PWA, planted the seeds of conflict within the organization over its goals. FDR resisted calls for a huge \$5 billion appropriation,

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<sup>31</sup> Treatments of the NIRA that ignore its provisions for public works include Hawley, *New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly*; Bernard Bellush, *The Failure of the NRA* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975); Robert F. Himmelberg, *The Origins of the National Recovery Administration: Business, Government, and the Trade Association Issue, 1921-1933* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976); Donald R. Brand, *Corporatism and the Rule of Law: A Study of the National Recovery Administration* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Colin Gordon, *New Deals: Business, Labor, and Politics in America, 1920-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 166-203; and Meg Jacobs, "The Politics of Purchasing Power: Political Economy, Consumption Politics, and State-Building, 1909-1959" (Ph.D. diss., University of Virginia, 1998), chap. 3.

<sup>32</sup> On contractors, Robert D. Kohn to Louis Howe, March 10, 1933; and Dwight L. Hoopingarner, "Memorandum on Public Works," May 9, 1933; both in "OF 140 Public Works" folder, box 1, Official File 140, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; and see Stephen B. Adams, *Mr. Kaiser Goes to Washington: The Rise of a Government Entrepreneur* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 33-62; Mark S. Foster, *Henry J. Kaiser: Builder in the Modern American West* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989); Booth Mooney, *Builders for Progress: The Story of the Associated General Contractors of America* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965); Schwarz, *New Dealers*, 300-303. On the AFL, see Mark Perlman, "Labor in Eclipse," in John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The 1920s* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 112; Christopher L. Tomlins, "AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective," *Journal of American History* 65 (March 1979): 1021-42; and William Green, "Employment is Essential for Business Recovery," *Engineering News-Record*, May 18, 1933, 611-12.

<sup>33</sup> Corrington Gill, "The Effectiveness of Public Works in Stabilizing the Construction Industry," *Proceedings of the American Statistical Association*, n.s., 28, suppl. (March 1933): 196-200; Reeves, "Politics of Public Works," 11-12.

telling the press "do not write stories about five or six billion dollars of public works. That is wild."<sup>34</sup>

Wild or not, however, conflict was present at the very drafting of the NIRA. Even the final amount appropriated by Title II, \$3.3 billion, resulted from a misunderstanding between Wagner and his aide Simon Rifkind. In the midst of a crowd while reviewing the final draft of the bill in his office, Wagner supposedly asked Rifkind, "Does the three billion for public works include the three hundred million for New York?" Rifkind replied that he had put it in, but Wagner thought he heard Rifkind say, "Put it in." Wagner struck out the \$3 billion figure from the text and replaced it with \$3.3 billion.<sup>35</sup> While both Perkins and Ickes championed the creation of the PWA, the former did so for its possibilities for relieving unemployment and the latter saw its potential for remaking the nation's landscape.

Donald Richberg, a former law partner of Ickes in Chicago who had joined the Roosevelt administration to work with Hugh Johnson in hammering out the details of the NIRA, observed that the PWA was included as part of the recovery plan as part of a broader scheme to satisfy different political constituencies, and, in Richberg's opinion, rightly so. "I think it would be at least a tactical error," Richberg wrote, "not to begin the bill with a public works program, which should include establishing an Administration of Public Works with specific duties to carry out a broadly defined program." After this program of public works was up and functioning, the NRA's production codes "can follow as a further stimulation and stabilization of industry." In Richberg's view, "If this is not done the reaction of the host of people expecting, advocating and convinced of the value of public works, will be antagonistic to the general program--which is far more

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<sup>34</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938), 2:140-41.

<sup>35</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 14.

controversial than public works." Indeed, he continued, "If industrial control leads off, with public works as a secondary, incidental part of the program, it will be difficult to avoid violent opposition from those now clamoring for public works who might swallow a somewhat 'fascist' proposal to get their 'democratic' measure of relief." Richberg used these terms "to indicate the character of opposition that it would be well to reckon with in advance."<sup>36</sup> While the titles of the legislation were in fact eventually reversed, with the sweet syrup of public works (Title II) following the bitter pill of industrial codes (Title I), Richberg was correct to sense the many different political trajectories that ran through the public works program of the early New Deal. These concerns persisted, and were taken up by the Special Board for Public Works, headed by Ickes and composed of temporary administrator Donald Sawyer, and a number of cabinet officers (the Attorney General, Secretaries of War, Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, and the Director of the Budget).<sup>37</sup>

**Initial Concerns of the Special Board for Public Works: Projects, Probity, Structure, and Allocation**

While the PWA's Special Board for Public Works soon became a body dominated by Harold Ickes, the records of its early meetings provide a valuable and often explicit record of early New Deal attitudes towards public works. From their initial meetings, members of the Special Board were acutely aware of how their decisions would be received by the public. Although they drew on the personnel and public works plans of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation's division for self-liquidating public works, they had to build a new organization from scratch, determine their priorities, and overcome such obstacles to spending and loaning their appropriation as city charter and state

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<sup>36</sup> Undated memorandum, "1933, Undated" folder, box 1, Donald R. Richberg Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. For more on the linkage between titles I and II of the NIRA, see Raymond Moley, After Seven Years (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939), 172-75.

<sup>37</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 20-21.

constitutional provisions against carrying excessive debt. In order to do this quickly, the PWA, like other New Deal public works programs, relied more on civil and military engineers (often Republicans) than on social workers.<sup>38</sup> Ickes summed up the enormity of the task of disposing of \$3.3 billion dollars, writing, "It helped me to estimate [the appropriation's] size by figuring that if we had it all in currency and should load it into trucks we could set out with it from Washington for the Pacific Coast, shovel off one million dollars at every milepost and still have enough left to build a fleet of battleships."<sup>39</sup>

From the beginning, Ickes and the members of the Special Board anticipated that it would be crucial to craft a positive impression of the PWA. Attorney General Homer Cummings, after studying a list of possible projects, remarked, "If I study that list I want to know what our general policy is going to be--what kind of project we favor; why we favor it; what kind of public improvements will be most appealing to the general run of people; what would be most attractive; what would make our program most popular and would be palatable to the public." Cummings quite correctly sensed that a lot was at stake. "There are millions of dollars" appropriated for the PWA, he noted. "We have got to defend ourselves from innumerable attacks. They will say: 'Why in hell do you do that? that is a crazy project'. It is easy enough to sit down and spend money by allocating; unless we have got some well-defined principles by which we are going to proceed, we are going to be in trouble."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Harry Hopkins's Civil Works Administration relied on a similar mix of engineering experts for its administrative personnel. See Bonnie Fox Schwartz, The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934: The Business of Emergency Employment in the New Deal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 39-71.

<sup>39</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 56.

<sup>40</sup> Minutes of the Meetings of the Special Board for Public Works, 1933-1935, 1:22-23, June 19, 1933, entry 1, "Minutes of Meetings of the Special Board for Public Works, 1933-1935," Records of the Public Works Administration, Record Group 135, National Archives. (Each day's minutes were individually paginated.)



Secretary of Commerce Dan Roper concurred with Cummings, but with a caveat: "Do not let us fool ourselves that we are going to solve the conditions in this country by dishing out money. We can not keep that up for long." Roper wanted the Special Board to develop a policy that would look beyond the immediate emergency. "What are the projects for instance" he asked, "what are the endeavors that we should attempt here, that look toward putting this country in a position that will safeguard the project in a few months, after we have exhausted the folks' money after this fashion? What are we looking forward to as a permanent highway for the American people? If you will let that be known then you will give to the taxpayers of this country a hope of relief." In other words, Roper said, the PWA had to grasp the importance of "knowing how to sell to the American people the wisdom of our procedure."<sup>41</sup>

In addition to developing a coherent policy that looked beyond the current emergency, and crafting a political justification for this policy, the Special Board grappled with the closely related issue of government openness and honesty in executing the PWA's mandate. "Now the question of graft," Roper said, "is constantly coming up." Roper advised that "There ought to be some way worked out by which every man, for the purpose of psychology.... who allocates money should be bonded, and it should be said so to the American people." Intimately related to questions of graft was what Roper delicately termed "the question of preferential treatment." "What I refer to," Roper clarified, "is the fellow that ordinarily is called a lobbyist." Roper recommended that "we ought to send him where he belongs, and not let the American people think that they can send some man--don't let the fellow who wants a contract think he can send some one down to Washington who is a Democrat who has all influence here and who can take somebody out to lunch and fix him." Drawing on his own experience, Roper complained that "I am constantly asked by people wiring me, 'Can't you lunch with me?'" adding, "I

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<sup>41</sup> Special Board Minutes, 1:23-24, June 19, 1933, RG 135, NA.

am now set off from even lunching with my friends" and concluding that "the best thing that we can do to give this thing a send-off is to very carefully plan your first impression on the people."<sup>42</sup>

While the members of the Special Board shared Roper's concerns, Secretary of War George Dern drew their attention to the inherently misleading nature of the PWA appropriation. "We ought to recognize the fact," Dern said, "that this program contains a lot of camouflage. This is not \$3,500,000,000 for new works." Rather, Dern argued, "Part of this is simply transferring things that are normally appropriated for to those departments to another place." Indeed, Dern forthrightly acknowledged, "We are trying to fool the American people with a program of \$3,500,000,000 when we haven't got it." The PWA's seemingly straightforward policy benefited the armed forces, particularly the Navy, which was due \$238 million allocated for shipbuilding by FDR from PWA funds.<sup>43</sup> Dern had put his finger on a larger problem, though. At FDR's Hyde Park residence on August 27, 1933, the president listed for Ickes a number of items that the government would fund via the PWA appropriation: \$400 million for highways, \$260 million for naval vessels, \$100 million to administer the Agricultural Adjustment Act, \$50 million for public domain highways, \$50 million for the Tennessee Valley Authority, and \$25 million for the new subsistence homesteads program.<sup>44</sup> The question of transferring portions of the PWA's funds to other government departments--what one student of the PWA termed "budget substitution"--would continue to bedevil the PWA throughout its existence.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Special Board Minutes, 1:23-26, June 19, 1933, RG 135, NA. For Ickes's recollection of this meeting, see Ickes, Back to Work, 37-38.

<sup>43</sup> Special Board Minutes, 1:26-27, June 19, 1933, RG 135, NA; Ickes, Back to Work, 20-21.

<sup>44</sup> "August 27, 1933, at Hyde Park, Franklin D. Roosevelt-HLI," Aug. 27, 1933, attached to Ickes to Waite, Sept. 3, 1933, "Public Works 2) 1933 September 1-15" folder, box 248, Harold L. Ickes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>45</sup> Reeves, "PWA and Competitive Administration," and "Politics of Public Works."

As they first met, the central question for the Special Board was, of course, how to spend the PWA's money. Should they allocate money to established federal departments such as the Army and the Navy, or should they attempt to fund non-federal projects, as they were called in PWA parlance. Frances Perkins was a consistent backer of non-federal projects, holding the opinion that it was local projects that really generated benefits. Solicitor General James C. Biggs, however, reported that "I have taken it [this issue] up with three or four departments, and they have the idea that this is an opportunity to do things for the department--the Army and Navy and other departments--that they have not been able to get the money from Congress for, and now they have a chance to get the money."<sup>46</sup> This money, further, would not only serve to replenish ordinary budget appropriations. "I talked with a Navy man last night," Biggs offered. "I said 'I thought when you got the \$238,000,000 you would be satisfied.' He said 'That was not for us. That is for ships. We need things in the Navy.'" In addition, the Army was lobbying for \$500 million from the PWA to spend on river and harbor improvements. "It seems to me," Perkins reflected, "those things do not create any wealth, beyond the wages that go to the wage earners' pockets. You do not get any permanent improvement" in the American economy.<sup>47</sup>

The Special Board began its work with a substantial amount of the PWA's \$3.3 billion appropriation already allocated: \$400 million was earmarked for highways, \$50 million for national forest highways and related public works, \$238 million for Navy construction, and \$382 million set aside to assure sufficient funding for other Federal projects.<sup>48</sup> To Ickes and the Special Board, it seemed only logical that states would be able to spend money on roads quickly, and, similarly, that departments of the federal

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<sup>46</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:52, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>47</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:52, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>48</sup> Special Board Minutes, 1:50, June 21, 1933, RG 135, NA; Isakoff, Public Works Administration, 18.

government would be able to get projects underway in a timely fashion.<sup>49</sup> But how would the PWA distribute these and other public works across the nation? Lawrence W. Robert, Jr., the Assistant Treasury Secretary in charge of public buildings, spoke for many on the Special Board when he commented, "Ultimately, what we want is quick action. Major projects are impossible to get under way and complete quickly. If big flood control projects or big irrigation projects, like Boulder Dam, are to be taken into consideration, we are spending a vast amount of money. It goes too slowly, and if we do not have recovery before that finishes, it is just too bad." However, Robert continued, "What we want is to have, as near as possible, small projects spread over the country, just exactly like we are doing on this highway work. We want to try to work in 75 percent of all counties and all states. That should be our object."<sup>50</sup> Donald Sawyer, the temporary administrator of the PWA, followed up on this point, noting that regardless of where the work was located, increases in construction would stimulate several different states. While not all states would benefit equally, Sawyer predicted that California, Illinois, Indiana, New York, Ohio, and Pennsylvania would do well. He observed that "All the way through we have made an endeavor to recognize that generally an undue amount of money is spent south and west--not an undue amount, but that is where a lot of this construction money goes. So far as we have had discretion we have emphasized certain projects, but regardless of that there is 60 percent that flows back to the industries of the United States."<sup>51</sup>

Following closely on the heels of this discussion of PWA policy and project distribution, the Special Board tried to clarify three related issues: first, the assembly of state advisory boards; second, the organization of the nation's public works, by region;

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<sup>49</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 24-25.

<sup>50</sup> Special Board Minutes, 1:53, June 21, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>51</sup> Special Board Minutes, 1:61, June 21, 1933, RG 135, NA.

and third, the prioritizing of the allocation of funds. With respect to the state advisory boards, Robert observed that each state ought to have a full-time state administrator, an advisory board of three to be appointed by the President, and a chief technical officer "who will be the buffer to the local board and administrator." Once these people were named, Robert argued, they should be brought to Washington. "That is what we are going to do with engineers," he said. "Each one of these engineers is going to be told that we are depending on him to weed out the bad projects and only send the good ones up here."<sup>52</sup>

Turning to the issue of organizing the nation's PWA projects, the Special Board provisionally agreed, without any debate, to adapt a thirty-year old system used by the Treasury Department, dividing the country into seven zones.<sup>53</sup> In the following days, however, the Special Board did consider whether or not the PWA should adopt an organization based on the federal reserve districts. The advantage to this approach would be that it would make it easier for the PWA to gather information and organize it in a way that was compatible with other governmental agencies and bodies.<sup>54</sup> This issue was debated and then left unresolved.

Finally, the Special Board read a memorandum from their Subcommittee on Policy regarding how the PWA would choose projects for financing. "It would appear," the Subcommittee reported, "that in any allocation of funds, two major considerations should be taken into account: 1. The power of the project to relieve unemployment without delay; 2. The social usefulness of the project from a long-time point of view." While this ruling seemingly put people above projects, in reality, the Special Board, Ickes, and FDR--during his weekly meeting with Ickes to review PWA allotments--did

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<sup>52</sup> Special Board Minutes, 1:72, 73, June 21, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>53</sup> Special Board Minutes, 1:85-86, June 21, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>54</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:45, June 28, 1933, RG 135, NA.

not hesitate to ignore this guideline when they chose. These meetings with FDR provided Ickes with a terrific opportunity to lobby the president on a variety of issues, an arrangement that Ickes's successor termed "a good one, especially for the Administrator" of the PWA.<sup>55</sup> Having dealt with such matters as organization and funding policy in its first days of existence, the Special Board turned to the specifics of putting men to work.

### **Spending Money: Federal Departments, or States and Localities?**

Despite the questions raised over the merits of spending through federal departments, the PWA quickly began to do just that. Indeed, one week into the Special Board's existence, the PWA had concentrated overwhelmingly on working through existing federal departments. Sawyer reported to the Special Board that \$1.25 billion of the \$3.3 billion had already been allocated, some of this explicitly allocated by the text of Title II of the NIRA. About \$400 million was awarded to the Bureau of Public Roads; \$238 million to the construction of naval vessels; \$50 million to "public roads in the national domain"; and \$15 million "which I think," Sawyer commented, "we can contemplate for airplane equipment of the naval ships." Outside of the \$450 million for roads and the \$238 million for ships for the navy, an additional \$350 million was earmarked for federal construction to be conducted by the Army, the Navy, and about eighty other government departments, including \$50 million for the newly established Tennessee Valley Authority and \$25 million for subsistence homesteads.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> John M. Carmody to Colette and Nell Cummiskey, Dec. 5, 1962, "PWA Catherine" folder, box 261, John M. Carmody Papers, FDRL; T.H. Watkins, Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 370.

<sup>56</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:54, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA; and see the text of Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act, in Principal Acts and Executive Orders Pertaining to Public Works Administration, compiled by Minnie Wiener (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938), no folder, box 14, entry 49, "Records of the Projects Control Division, Research Materials, 1935-1940," RG 135, NA; and in Ickes, Back to Work, 235-55.

The Construction League of the United States had also submitted a \$2 billion list of various projects to be considered by the Special Board. However, "Half" of that list, Assistant Treasury Secretary Robert commented, "is just 'bunk.'" In light of these proposed projects, though, Frances Perkins was moved to ask "Has any serious effort been made, other than to receive suggestions that come spontaneously, many of which are, of course, without merit--has any serious effort been made to find, independently for ourselves, appropriate opportunities for local public works?"<sup>57</sup>

Perkins, no doubt thinking of putting people to work, wanted to steer projects away from federal departments and towards the localities. Municipalities, Perkins thought, were "where you get closest to the life of the people. The place where you can accomplish things that directly improve living for the people is in the smaller local units. The States themselves have lots of public buildings they would like to build, instead of putting their money in projects that would improve the living of the people."<sup>58</sup>

Perkins was also deeply concerned about the response of organized labor to the public works program, and raised the question of creating a labor advisory committee that could report to Ickes or to the Special Board. Perkins thought that before important decisions were made, "a labor advisory committee ought to be in existence and ought to be heard." If not, the Labor Secretary observed, "We will certainly have trouble.... They [organized labor] are pretty restive."<sup>59</sup> If the PWA created a "business advisory committee" to give the appearance of balance, Perkins said, she would have no problem with that.<sup>60</sup> The development that most concerned organized labor, Perkins reported, was the creation of a government-run employment service. "Having read that that had been

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<sup>57</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:58, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>58</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:59, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>59</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:79, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>60</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:80, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

proposed," Perkins said organized labor was "alarmed for fear that in the employment of skilled men, the United States Public Employment Service would supplant the Union headquarters."<sup>61</sup> While this was not what Perkins intended, she made it clear that private acknowledgment of labor's concerns would not suffice. "If we do it behind closed doors," she said, "even if we do it to their satisfaction, they will not be satisfied."<sup>62</sup>

This reasoning persuaded Ickes, and Perkins's assistant, economist Isador Lubin, was put in charge of the PWA's labor advisory board, eventually forging a compromise on hiring policy with Building Trades leaders such as the plumbers's John Coefield, the bricklayers's Richard J. Gray, the carpenters's George H. Lakey, the electricians's Charles L. Read, and the head of the AFL's Building Trades, Michael J. McDonough. They agreed that union hiring halls would have 48 hours to provide skilled labor requested by a contractor; after that the revived USES (United States Employment Service) would fill the request from its rolls. USES would also provide all non-union labor to project sites.<sup>63</sup>

### **Workers, Contractors, and Cement: The Hazards of "Force Account" Construction**

After workers were hired, the next question was how many hours they could work. While this was a seemingly straightforward matter, the Special Board's debates over this issue speak directly to the tension between economic development and unemployment that ran through public works during the early New Deal. Committed to executing public works via private contracting, Special Board members nevertheless expressed their ambivalence towards the construction industry, and towards private contracting in general. Initially, the Special Board considered allowing PWA workers to labor eight hours a day, six days a week. This would allow contractors on rural road

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<sup>61</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:82, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>62</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:83, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>63</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 32-33.



projects to build smaller camps at their work sites, since they were operating with a small number of laborers who worked a greater number of hours. The Special Board, however, soon arrived at a consensus to keep the PWA at the maximum of thirty hours a week allowed under the National Recovery Act, a provision championed by Alabama Senator Hugo Black. As the Special Board discussed this topic, James C. Biggs, the solicitor general, noted as an aside that at one point "I asked Senator Black why he ever got the idea of thirty hours a week? He said he used that as a trading point [in drafting the legislation]. He expected forty hours, but used that thirty hours as a trading point."<sup>64</sup> Rexford Tugwell, attending the Special Board meeting in place of Agriculture Secretary Henry Wallace, observed that "There is a social reason" for permitting rural road laborers to work a higher number of hours, or so Thomas H. MacDonald, head of the Bureau of Public Roads, had told him. Robert clarified MacDonald's position for the Special Board, remarking that "If you have a bunch of Negroes working thirty hours a week up in a mountain camp, and there are a number of women around there, with all that time left for leaving there will be a real social problem."<sup>65</sup> While both Ickes and Tugwell, most notably, were progressives on racial issues, it is a testament to their grasp of political realities and the limits of their racial progressivism that Robert's remark was made without any further comment. Ickes, however, did champion the inclusion of African-Americans in the PWA, instituting hiring quotas to insure that they benefited from public works construction.<sup>66</sup> Rather than dwell on this issue, then, the Special Board turned to two subjects dear to Ickes's heart, those of graft and waste.

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<sup>64</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:84-85, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>65</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:84, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>66</sup> The PWA did have difficulty enforcing these quotas in the South. See Mark W. Kruman, "Quotas for Blacks: The PWA and the Black Construction Worker," Labor History 16 (winter 1975): 37-51; and Harvard Sitkoff, A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue--The Depression Decade (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 68-69.

Ickes was particularly concerned with limiting the amount of PWA work (particularly road construction) that was supervised by the government directly, an arrangement termed "force account" construction. At the same time, though, Ickes was not enamored with the alternative, working through private contractors. "[T]hat force account proposition is a very dangerous thing," Robert argued. "I do not know how they work it, but there is a big graft in all road contracts and all railroad contracts. They bid on a piece of work and then they get in there and they hire a foreman and find they have to do a lot of work by force account. They hire the foreman and common labor, and keep an account of it, and they do all that on a percentage basis."<sup>67</sup> Tugwell distrusted road contractors, asserting that "It is common knowledge, for instance, that in some States contractors have to add at least 20 per cent to costs for graft."<sup>68</sup> Although the PWA was committed to carrying out its mandate through private contracting, this did not stop Ickes from speculating, "If the roads should be built by direct labor, would that graft be cut out or minimized?" Tugwell, puzzled, asked, "By direct labor you mean the Government doing it itself?" "Yes," Ickes clarified, "employing its own labor." In that case, responded Tugwell, "A good share of it would be eliminated by that means."

"Of course, there is a justification for that," Ickes replied. "You have a great deal more money to spend" on other public works projects. "You can employ more labor and buy more material. Why do we have to do it through these contractors?" Tugwell agreed, stating that "I have always wondered about it." Indeed, Ickes observed, relying on contractors had implications that stretched beyond the economic arena and into the political realm. "I know in every municipal campaign in Chicago," Ickes offered, "the backbone of the enormous campaign funds that were raised came from the contractors."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:90, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>68</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:91, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>69</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:93-94, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

Direct employment of workers by the government, Ickes recalled, was discussed in building Hoover--or as Ickes, no fan of Hoover, called it, Boulder--Dam. "There was a strong sentiment for doing that by direct labor," Ickes remembered, "and Hoover insisted on having it done under contract." Tugwell agreed with Ickes, remarking "That is well known." "You can see," Ickes continued, "the big bonuses these contractors are going to make." Robert, however, was not convinced. "I can tell you one reason why you could not possibly do it," he said. "It would be humanly impossible to set up the machinery in any reasonable time, to employ the supervision and hire the direct labor to do it. The only way you can do it is through contract, with every possible safeguard."<sup>70</sup>

As a possible alternative to carrying out their public works program through private contract the Special Board debated the idea of letting the PWA conduct just one project as the direct employer of labor, as a test of a different approach. Robert, however, interjected, "Gentlemen, the very people you would employ to do it would have to be experienced people in building, and they would necessarily be the men who had experience. They would be contractors to start with. It is a monumental proposition."<sup>71</sup> The next best thing, the Special Board speculated, would be for the PWA to handle all the purchasing of the raw materials necessary for its projects while the contractors bid to carry out the actual construction. "I think it would be a distinct public service to show these burglars up," Ickes said of the contractors. Solicitor General Biggs, however, hastened to point out that "We are not trying to save money now, though," to which Ickes rejoined, "We are trying to save the graft.... We are willing to spend the money for labor and materials, but not for graft."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:94, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>71</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:95, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>72</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:97, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

In raising the possibility of federal purchasing of construction materials, Ickes was drawing on his recent experience with the cement industry. "I had an interesting experience in connection with the cement contract for Boulder Dam," Ickes recalled. "The trade papers all through the country pounded me, telling me what kind of a fool I was, but after rejecting the bids twice they did come down, with the result that we saved \$52,000 on 400,000 barrels."

In the meantime proposition after proposition came in here from private capital to build plants on the basis of a contract price which would allow them to amortize and supply all our needs at prices considerably under the prices we were paying with these more favorable bids. With this purchasing power I think we could accomplish a great deal. We need three and a half million barrels of cement a year for Boulder Dam. In Illinois they have not been able to build any roads at all because of the price. Take these State and Federal projects. We could make it worthwhile to build a dozen cement plants in different parts of the country, at a price which would amortize them and at the same time give us prices way under what we would have to pay otherwise. Frankly, I had intended to take the first opportunity that presented itself to talk that matter over with the President and see if we could not embark on something of that sort.<sup>73</sup>

Robert quickly concurred, asserting that "It is a well-known fact that the cement industry is one of the biggest combines or trusts in the world." Tugwell also agreed with this sentiment, stating that "The cement industry is looking forward to the industrial recovery act as an excellent vehicle for raising prices." Indeed, Ickes replied, "That is the basis on which they attacked me. They said 'Here, we are trying to raise the price, and you are insisting on a lower price.'"<sup>74</sup>

Tugwell went further than this, observing that "Practically all industries seem to have gotten the notion that what we are trying to do is to raise prices." Ickes's opinion, that industrial companies simply "are trying to raise their profits," fit with Tugwell's assessment, that "The kind of economics preached by the cement industry is what brought

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<sup>73</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:99-100, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>74</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:100-101, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

on the depression."<sup>75</sup> While this debate over government purchasing was more an extended debate over possibilities than it was the hammering out of PWA policy, it indicates the misgivings that Ickes and other Special Board members had about private contracting and the construction industry.

This ambivalence was more than evident when Ickes contemplated addressing the Associated General Contractors of America in February 1934. Ickes, in a section of his diary he later withheld from publication, recorded that his planned speech to the contractors "is a pretty stiff dose and I may decide not to accept the invitation," adding, "One thing is certain. If I do accept the invitation I am going to talk cold turkey to them."<sup>76</sup> Ickes did speak to the AGC, talking frankly about the dangers posed to the public trust by collusive bidding by contractors, by "skimping" on building materials, and by extorting kick-backs in wages from their workers. "You contractors," said Ickes, "associated together as you are in voluntary organizations, national, State and local, have the solution of this matter in your own hands."

You owe it to yourselves not to permit any unscrupulous contractor to cast a stigma upon your group. Just as lawyers as a body are responsible for the ambulance chaser, the shyster and the crooked lawyer who suborns juries and bribes witnesses; just as the doctors are responsible for men in their profession who through negligence, incompetence or worse bring suffering and even death to their patients, just so you contractors as a body are responsible for your own ethical standards. You owe a duty to yourselves to expose any man who skimps on his contract, who uses inferior materials, who resorts to bribery and corruption, unless you are willing to suffer in public esteem along with such a man.

And of course, if voluntary peer pressure would not suffice, Ickes intimated that "the great force of inspectors and investigators that we are building up in connection with our Public Works Administration" would be on watch against corruption. "This is what 'The New Deal' means to me," Ickes said: "an era of acute social consciousness and realization

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<sup>75</sup> Special Board Minutes, 2:101-102, June 22, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>76</sup> Harold L. Ickes Diary, 414, Jan. 15, 1934, "Diary Nov. 1, 1933--Feb. 28, 1934. Pp. 350-452" folder, box 1, Ickes Papers, LC.

of mutual responsibility, a time of reciprocal helpfulness, of greater understanding and willingness to work together for the good of all." This New Deal, Ickes continued, "is already being translated into reality" through the allocation and spending of PWA funds.<sup>77</sup> Several years later, Ickes noted that he had essentially "told them that many contractors were crooks and chiselers and that we were not going to permit them to get away with that sort of thing in carrying out the PWA program."<sup>78</sup>

### **Expertise Politicized: The Bacon in the Frying Pan**

While Ickes continued to be concerned about the honesty of private contractors, as the Special Board set up the PWA's organizational structure he was struck by the violent response of other political interests. In order to appoint an advisory committee of three people in each state, for instance, Ickes sent out letters to each state's governor, senator, and chamber of commerce to solicit suggestions. This elicited quite a reaction--as Ickes put it, "Hell is popping all over the place." Indeed, Ickes continued, "Senators have written in, in high dudgeon. One, for instance, said he did not care to join in round robin recommending a man from his State. Another Senator has written in that his colleague did not feel at all flattered that anyone except Senators in his State should be consulted, and so forth. Then, a Senator will visit me and tell me what a rapscalion his Democratic governor is, and he will give you every reason in the world why his governor should not be considered." Overall, Ickes concluded, "There is pulling and hauling, and a lot of people are smelling the frying bacon, and want to get in with their plates and get theirs."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Jan. 31, 1934, speech of Harold L. Ickes to the Associated General Contractors of America, in The Public Speeches and Statements of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, volume 1, box 1, entry 26. "Public Speeches and Statements of Harold L. Ickes, 1934-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>78</sup> Harold L. Ickes, The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes: The Inside Struggle, 1936-1939 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), 2:78.

<sup>79</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:44, June 28, 1933, RG 135, NA.

Soon, however, the Special Board agreed that the governor and senators should recommend one man each--not each one suggesting their own group of three. "That would be all right," Solicitor General Biggs commented, "except in States where they have two Republican Senators and one Republican Governor." Assistant Treasury Secretary Robert, however, argued that "If you have a State of that kind, where you have a strictly hide-bound Republican administration that is against this administration, it is perfectly proper, for the sake of harmony, and for the sake of the people of that State that have elected that man, to ask him to suggest someone." In any event, Robert said, "If he suggests a man who is not considered exactly fit by our President, he can ask him for another suggestion. I do not think it would be very difficult to get three men that would pretty well represent the State." Biggs interjected that he thought that Roosevelt "probably would not appoint three Republicans in one State," to which Robert agreed "I do not think so, but I am thinking of what should be done for the sake of harmony. This is a big proposition, and it ought to move from the start if it is going to be successful. I am only suggesting that within the walls of this room."<sup>80</sup>

"If that is done," Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins observed, "I think that the nominations ought to be made public before the President appoints them. Today I must have had ten or fifteen telegrams from different parts of the country, from labor people, with regard to a man whose name, apparently, has been suggested by their governor or Senator, or somebody." While Perkins had never heard of this character, her sources, she reported, "wire me that he is an anti-labor man, and that he is a contractor who has always 'gypped' his people." If these state advisory board appointments were publicized in advance, Perkins argued, "you will draw all that fire and you will be able to determine whether it is the kind of fire you ought to pay attention to or not. The President might be in the position of appointing a man who turned out to be a man who had taken active

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<sup>80</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:30-31, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

opposition to labor, and he would find himself very much embarrassed."<sup>81</sup> In any event, Perkins concluded, the PWA should cover a reasonable expense allowance for state advisory board members. "They will have correspondence and telephoning, and so on," Perkins said. "No man in public life can live on less than \$20 a day and do any moving around at all."<sup>82</sup>

Robert, then, outlined four different structures for the Special Board to consider: First, operating with a state administrator and no board of advisors; second, adopting a set-up with a state administrator and three advisors; third, Robert proposed having ten district administrators and state advisory boards; and fourth, going with state advisory boards and no state administrators whatsoever.<sup>83</sup>

By July 8, 1933, the PWA had still not settled on a plan of organization. FDR had decided that the PWA would be a regional--rather than state--organization, and that each state would have an advisory committee of three, to be appointed by the President. Roosevelt was rumored to be leaning towards going with a set-up based on the ten-region federal reserve system.<sup>84</sup> This approach, though, did not result in keeping the organization apolitical. About three months after this decision, Ickes told the U.S. Conference of Mayors, "We wanted to keep these [state advisory committees and regional advisor positions] out of politics," but "This was not an easy task." Ickes observed, "The pressure to appoint men for partisan reasons or for sinister purposes can be imagined." While Ickes tried to claim that these positions "were generally acclaimed throughout the country as appointments of a high order," this caveat was no doubt offered

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<sup>81</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:32, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>82</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:36, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>83</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:38, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>84</sup> Special Board Minutes, 5:6, July 8, 1933, RG 135, NA.



for public consumption.<sup>85</sup> In fact, several advisory boards were probably appointed only to satisfy the Senators and Governor from their states, as they complained that they were subsequently ignored entirely by the PWA's Washington headquarters.<sup>86</sup>

Assistant Secretary of Labor Turner Battle argued that the PWA's technical advisers and engineers should come from outside the state in which they were to work, drawing the Special Board's attention to the potential embarrassment that their connections to contractors and others in their home state might cause. Others, however, argued that there were similar dangers inherent in selecting technical advisers that were unfamiliar with the laws and conditions of the particular region they were to supervise. Robert, however, said that it was his understanding that FDR "thought it an excellent idea" that engineers and other technical advisers come from outside the state, in order to minimize the appearance of impropriety.<sup>87</sup>

The establishment of a reliable employment service was crucial for the PWA to bring workers to contractors. George Dern, the Secretary of War, was skeptical of this effort, saying that "It seems to me you are building up a tremendous lot of overhead here and just throwing money away." Tugwell, however, pointed out that "We are requiring the contractors to function through the employment offices, and if the employment offices are not there they cannot function."<sup>88</sup> Sawyer's assistant, Colonel George R. Spalding, noted that the PWA system would be essential in northern cities in order to

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<sup>85</sup> Sept. 23, 1933, speech of Harold L. Ickes to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, in The Public Speeches and Statements of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, volume 1, box 1, entry 26, "Public Speeches and Statements of Harold L. Ickes, 1934-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>86</sup> "Report of Regional Conference Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works called by Colonel H.M. Waite, Deputy Administrator," Feb. 14-March 1, 1934, in "Feb. 14-Mar. 1, 1934" folder, box 1, entry 23, "Minutes and Reports of Conferences of the PWA, 1934-1941," RG 135, NA. This report summarizes the proceedings of PWA conferences held in New York, Boston, Detroit, St. Paul, Atlanta, Portland, Los Angeles, Little Rock, and Fort Worth.

<sup>87</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:3-4, Aug. 3, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>88</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:8, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

make certain public works employment was not restricted to established ethnic networks. "There was one point that came up in Pittsburgh in some of our work last year, and it comes up in some of our highly industrialized sections where the labor is to a large extent foreign, where the padrone system exists."

That is, an Italian of some standing will open an employment office, or practically that, and charge the men a dollar, or two dollars, or three dollars for getting them a job, and require them practically to subsist themselves with him during the period of that eligibility, and the contractors go to him to get their men. It is a bad situation. I investigated it myself, and we broke it up. But I think there is a little effort on the part of the employment service to establish a real United States Employment Service in those centers, so that the people can go to them, instead of going to these unofficial agencies.<sup>89</sup>

### **Recovery versus Economy: PWA Loans and the Bureau of the Budget**

The tension that ran through many of the policy debates of the early New Deal over the question of whether recovery would be caused by increases or reductions in spending was present in the debates of the Special Board as well.<sup>90</sup> There, the Special Board members argued about what interest rate to set on its loans. While each project would be funded with a grant of 30% of the project's cost, the rest would be covered by a loan from the PWA.<sup>91</sup> Rexford Tugwell suggested starting with an interest rate of 3.5%, and as recovery got moving, adjusting this rate as high as 5%.<sup>92</sup> Budget Director Lewis Douglas, perhaps the strongest voice for economy in the administration, strenuously objected. "I feel that apparently the spiral of deflation has come to an end," Douglas said in a July 1, 1933, meeting, "and the direction of events has turned, and that the necessity

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<sup>89</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:9, June 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>90</sup> Julian E. Zelizer, "The Forgotten Legacy of the New Deal: Fiscal Conservatism and the Roosevelt Administration, 1933-1938," Presidential Studies Quarterly 30 (June 2000): 331-361.

<sup>91</sup> Williams, Grants-in-Aid under the Public Works Administration, 104-108; 119-22; Isakoff, Public Works Administration, 20-21.

<sup>92</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:1-7, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA. (Volumes three and four were bound out of chronological order.)

for injecting an artificial factor into the situation no longer exists to the same extent to which it existed in March or April, and that therefore we should put on the brakes, deter municipalities, counties and States from borrowing money, increasing their own indebtedness, and that one of the most effective ways of doing that is by increasing the interest rate." Douglas was concerned about estimates that put county and municipal debt over the following year at approximately \$6 million. "I think it is very questionable as to whether or not the credit of the United States Government will stand it," Douglas worried. "It is the largest peace-time deficit the country has ever had, twice as large as any during the previous administration, and almost as large as one of our peak war time deficits, which of course was incurred at a time when the credit of the United States, by reason of the extraordinary prosperity, was untouchable."<sup>93</sup> Or, as Douglas put it in a memo to FDR, when public works "are continued over a long period of time they cease to become primers of the pump, and to the extent to which they pile up expenditures beyond the borrowing capacity of the government to meet, they cause infinitely more harm through the consequent paper inflation than any amount of good which might flow from them."<sup>94</sup> To avoid this deficit nightmare, Douglas argued that the PWA should loan its money at 4.5%.

Tugwell respectfully voiced his disagreement. "Of course, Mr. Douglas' suggestion is that we should not spend what is provided for in the bill," Tugwell said, "and his reason for not doing it is that recovery has already come or will come if we do not do this. That seems to me to be possible, but I do not think it is probable yet, and I do not think that we ought to frame a program based on that assumption." Tugwell countered Douglas's fear of deficits by pointing out that the infrastructure built by the

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<sup>93</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:7-8, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>94</sup> Lewis Douglas to FDR, Dec. 30, 1933, "Bureau of the Budget 1933-34" folder, OF 79, FDR Papers, FDRL.

PWA would count as "assets written up on our books against that."<sup>95</sup> Douglas, however, argued

since the United States Government is becoming the capitalist for the States, counties and municipalities, and is doing more than that, is making an outright grant of 30 percent, that the least that we can ask the municipalities and the counties and the States to do is to pay a rate of interest sufficiently high to permit the United States, having incurred the obligation in behalf of the counties, States, and municipalities, to liquidate those obligations for its own benefit to reduce its debt which it has incurred for them.<sup>96</sup>

Attorney General Cummings tried to mediate between these two positions, favoring 3.75% as a compromise between 3.5% and 4%. The overriding concern, Cummings argued, regardless of what interest rate the PWA charged, was that "We must get this money out. We must carry out the [National Recovery] Act in good faith. And at the same time, the considerations that Mr. Douglas submits are very potent. Of course, we have a check on all this, right here in our own Board. We can stop lending money, I suppose, whenever we want to. If we watch the projects, why, we can prevent any undue expenditure of money by our own act."<sup>97</sup>

Tugwell attempted to map out an agreement, reading a proposal that "notice be given to all prospective borrowers, states, counties, cities, and local units, that they will be required to show evidence of a sincere effort to put themselves in proper financial and budgetary position before their application for a loan can be approved."<sup>98</sup> This proposal, hammered out by the Special Board's subcommittee on financial policy (composed of Tugwell, Ickes, Robert, and Douglas), was, Tugwell, said, "the result of the clear statements in the law which indicate that these loans are to be made only to local

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<sup>95</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:9, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>96</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:16, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>97</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:18, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>98</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:38, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA.

governmental bodies which have given evidence of at least an attempt to put their financial houses in order." Tugwell, however, dissented from this proposal to point out "another point of view which came out in the discussion [of the subcommittee] yesterday. I don't need to say, perhaps, that I brought it out. Which is that it seems to me that this is not the fundamental intent of the law, to clean up local financial situations. The fundamental intent of the law, it seems to me, is to promote recovery."<sup>99</sup> Ickes later noted that the Special Board chose to compromise between Tugwell, his subcommittee, and Douglas, by setting the interest rate for loans at 4%, feeling that "this charge would not be low enough to attract cities with good financial standing, who could borrow from the usual sources at a lower rate" and that it "would not be so high as to deter borrowers and still assure the Federal Government a fair return on its investment."<sup>100</sup>

This debate over interest rates led the Special Board to address the task of defining its fundamental approach to funding public works. The Special Board considered a resolution to determine "the basic purposes of Title II of the Industry Recovery Act, which are:"

1. To employ the unemployed
2. To prime the pump of business revival.
3. Running through all of this and in considering every project, there should be kept in the forefront of our minds the necessity of approving only those projects which will be of lasting benefit to the communities in which they are to be constructed, which will likely be regenerative and fit into sound plans for the future development of the communities and thus be of lasting benefit.
4. We should use very watchful care to so arrange projects as to supplement existing industrial endeavors at recover and not supplant or otherwise discourage local business efforts to this end.<sup>101</sup>

The resolution continued:

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<sup>99</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:38, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>100</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 27.

<sup>101</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:54, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA.

Having all of these considerations in mind, care should be taken to give special consideration to those projects located in or very near to centers of unemployment where the social and economic effects of the depression have been most seriously felt and where there is, therefore, the greatest need for immediate relief. If this is one, it also will have another favorable result in that it will tend much earlier to reduce the outright grants for relief to the unemployed. It is suggested that this policy be carefully coordinated with the work of Mr. Harry L. Hopkins in localities where public work is planned.<sup>102</sup>

The Special Board decided, however, to let the resolution 'sit on the table' until the next meeting so each member could review the text.

Ickes, however, in an interview broadcast on NBC radio on July 2, 1933, echoed much of the substance of this resolution. The PWA, he said, "is much like priming an old-fashioned pump. In cold weather you can work the pump handle up and down until you are tired and still not a drop of water will come. But if you will pour warm water down that pump then you can get all the water you want." The PWA, Ickes argued, "will have this same effect. By pouring money down the pump to prime it we will start the returning flow which will mean better times and greater prosperity." To safeguard labor, Ickes declared "we will do everything possible to hold contractors down to a legitimate profit," adding, "We will seek to safeguard all public works undertaken by us from corruption or graft. We will see to it that works are carefully inspected during their progress so that the taxpayers of the United States who are so generously contributing this vast fund for the common good may be assured that every dollar spent represents a dollar of value."<sup>103</sup> Speaking over the phone, Ickes stressed to an Indianapolis audience that these projects were a wise use of money. "Public works represent capital investments," Ickes said. "They include buildings, bridges, schools, sewage disposal plants, water works, municipal electric light plants, reclamation projects, flood control,

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<sup>102</sup> Special Board Minutes, 3:54-55, July 1, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>103</sup> July 2, 1933, Harold L. Ickes interview on NBC radio, in The Public Speeches and Statements of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, volume 1, box 1, entry 26, "Public Speeches and Statements of Harold L. Ickes, 1934-1939," RG 135, NA.

river and harbor work, shipbuilding, road building and a great variety of other enterprises."<sup>104</sup>

While fiscally conservative budget director Lewis Douglas did not entirely triumph in this debate over interest rates, he would continually prove a roadblock for the Special Board and Ickes. Daniel Roper, exasperated, tried to explain to the Special Board how it came to pass that Douglas acquired a de facto veto on PWA spending. "The Director of the Budget went up before the Appropriations Committee," Roper said, "and this matter came up--namely, the allocation of money in large amounts to the Departments employing their forces--and the suggestion, as I now recall, was made to the Director of the Budget that it might be well to have some of these bureaus run during the next year on these allocations f[ro]m Public Works." When word of this came back to the PWA, Roper reported that "I said to the President that it was impossible, of course, for us to use money for that purpose in the ordinary operations of a bureau of the Government. Then the alternative, as they thought it, was to cancel the appropriation for the so-called Public Works Division. Now, there has been a misconception evidently there, because I regard this as one of the most important pieces of work being done by the Government." The upshot of all of this was that the PWA soon learned that it had to cope with Douglas as it tried to define and carry out its mission. This soon was a moot point, of sorts, as by January 2, 1934, the Special Board had accounted for all \$3.3 billion in its allotments.<sup>105</sup> Douglas, however, had not stopped keeping a close eye on the PWA.

Ickes and the Special Board were incensed when Douglas went to Roosevelt to secure two executive orders; one stopping the PWA from entering into contracts, the other ordering an audit of emergency agencies. Robert, incredulous, remarked "We must

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<sup>104</sup> Aug. 21, 1933, Harold L. Ickes telephone speech, in The Public Speeches and Statements of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, volume 1, box 1, entry 26, "Public Speeches and Statements of Harold L. Ickes, 1934-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>105</sup> Special Board Minutes, 16:9-10, Jan. 2, 1934, RG 135, NA.

misunderstand this." Ickes, however, said tightly "I don't misunderstand the fact that in a matter vitally affecting the functions of the Public Works Administration we didn't know the Director of the Budget was going to submit such an order. I resent that more strenuously than anything else." If the PWA could only sit idly by until Congress appropriated more money, Ickes concluded, "I suppose we might as well adjourn."<sup>106</sup> Speaking over NBC radio three days later, Ickes summed up the efforts of the PWA to date. "We have undoubtedly made mistakes," Ickes acknowledged. "There have been errors of judgment, unavoidably so. But by and large I am prepared to assert and to prove that the Public Works Administration has written a new page in civil administration." While the PWA would continue to supervise the expenditure of the \$3.3 billion it had allotted, Ickes sadly noted that "There are many hundreds of worthy projects still pending with no money to be allotted to them unless Congress should make a further appropriation."<sup>107</sup>

"We were nicked for a lot [by other government departments], you know," Ickes told Tugwell. Congress, Ickes declared, "gave us this money for Public Works; not to be shuffled back into the Departments to take the place of amounts eliminated by the Budget."<sup>108</sup> Ickes was particularly irked by Lewis Douglas's practice of manipulating the PWA's appropriation in this way, at one point drawing on a discussion he had with FDR about the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Ickes observed, "Do you know what the President said to me the other day in connection with my entrance to the Blackfeet Tribe by the name of Big Bear? He said, 'That is the wrong name. I think you should be called

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<sup>106</sup> Special Board Minutes, 16:13, Jan. 5, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>107</sup> Jan. 8, 1934, speech of Harold L. Ickes over NBC radio, in The Public Speeches and Statements of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, volume 1, box 1, entry 26, "Public Speeches and Statements of Harold L. Ickes, 1934-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>108</sup> Special Board Minutes, 18:6-7, Feb. 14, 1934, RG 135, NA.



"Kitty" because everyone comes to you for money'."<sup>109</sup> Douglas, however, held firm against Ickes's complaints, agreeing only to provide him with a written list of the instances where he had used PWA funds in place of regular operating appropriations for other government departments.<sup>110</sup> Ickes, however, was encouraged when Roosevelt assured him that the PWA had a secure place in his administration. "I think the President has a different notion about Public Works now," Ickes told the Special Board, "not going on such a scale as we have been, but having a permanent Public Works Bureau. I do not think it is more than a very indefinite idea now. He has announced it as a definite policy."<sup>111</sup> The Special Board agreed that they could safely assume that the Congress would appropriate more money for PWA, and it was thus worth their time to continue reviewing projects and provisionally earmarking funds for them.

Ickes, though, perhaps sensing Roosevelt's interest shifting towards a Hopkins-directed works program, spoke to the nation's most important social work organization, Survey Associates, on February 9, 1934. Addressing directly the question of whether or not the Congress would continue to fund the PWA, Ickes set out to justify the PWA's mission. This time, however, he did not use a language centered around infrastructure or economic development, as he had in speaking to the Conference of Mayors. "In carrying out this Public Works program," Ickes said, "the Government is once more acting as a social agency and not merely as a tax-collector, a policeman, or an arbitrator. People were out of work; they were cold; they were hungry; they were rapidly losing their morale." The government "lost no time in quibbling over technicalities or worrying about precedents."

An acute problem had to be solved. A social crisis must be met. President Roosevelt, recognizing his grave responsibility, met this crisis. Later, with winter

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<sup>109</sup> Special Board Minutes, 37:3, Aug. 29, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>110</sup> Special Board Minutes, 18:14, Feb. 14, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>111</sup> Special Board Minutes, 16:6, Jan. 9, 1934, RG 135, NA.

approaching and millions of men still out of work, in spite of the desperate effort that had been made to start the Public Works program at top speed, the President turned over hundreds of millions of dollars to the brilliant and able Federal Relief Administrator, Harry L. Hopkins, with instructions to put men back to work over the winter instead of carry them on relief rolls. The effect of this bold stroke on the morale of the country has been marvelous. Thanks to the fine and humane work of Mr. Hopkins, we are coming through the winter of 1933-34 as a people in the best physical and spiritual condition since the crash that brought us to our knees in September of 1929.<sup>112</sup>

In one rhetorical stroke, Ickes tried to justify PWA as a social welfare program and attempted to subsume the achievements of Hopkins's Civil Works Administration under the umbrella of PWA sponsorship. While the PWA had provided the \$400 million spent by CWA, thus requiring the CWA to adhere to PWA standards regarding wages and hours, Hopkins was in charge of the CWA's operating details. Interestingly, though, neither Ickes nor Hopkins won more than lukewarm support from the professional social work community. Both the CWA and PWA relied more on civil and military engineering experts (who were often Republicans) for administrative personnel and planning than they did on the expertise of social workers.<sup>113</sup>

### **The Limitations of Local Finances: Debt Limits and the PWA**

A key obstacle for the PWA was the fragile condition of state and local finances throughout the nation. The Special Board was eager to fund worthy public improvements and speed recovery; yet at the same time, as was seen in the debate over interest rates, they wanted to insure that states and localities would be able to repay their PWA loans. This led to many states convening special sessions in order to rescind constitutionally

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<sup>112</sup> Feb. 9, 1934, speech of Harold L. Ickes to Survey Associates, in The Public Speeches and Statements of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, volume 1, box 1, entry 26, "Public Speeches and Statements of Harold L. Ickes, 1934-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>113</sup> For a discussion of the CWA's administrative personnel, see Schwartz, Civil Works Administration, 39-71.

imposed debt limits and the like. Indeed, some governors, such as Utah's Henry H. Blood, did not hesitate to consult Ickes directly about this issue. Blood wired Ickes,

Utah legislature will convene in special session July tenth. Please advise what requirements will probably be made on our state and its counties and cities in preparation to borrow funds under provisions industrial recovery act. We have many essential projects building waterworks sewers and others in cities towns or counties where legal borrowing limit has about or fully been reached. State also may wish avail itself of funds beyond legal bond limit. Advise if probably regulations will be liberal enough to enable such borrowing without special state legislation and if legislation is required in about what form also about extent of possible borrowing on such projects. All details possible will be appreciated as will also prompt wire reply.<sup>114</sup>

The Special Board was not certain how it should handle the question of state debt limits, particularly in light of different readings of Title II of the National Recovery Act.

"[T]here is a provision in the law," asked George Spalding, "in this connection, which I confess I have not understood thoroughly. In section 203-D it says: 'The President, in his discretion, and under such terms as he may prescribe, may extend any of the benefits of this title to any State, county, or municipality notwithstanding any constitutional or legal restriction or limitation on the right or power of such State, county, or municipality to borrow money or incur indebtedness.'"

"That was pointed out to me this morning," Dern replied. "What does it mean?" Robert remarked that 203(d) "was specifically put in there to meet the situation of about thirty States in the Union that are in the same position as Utah. That was specifically put in by our Senator from Georgia [Democrat Richard Russell], who knew that condition existed." Robert interpreted this clause to mean that FDR, "In his good judgment," could "grant anything he wants to" to any state that could not borrow any more.<sup>115</sup> Indeed, Russell, in presenting 203(d) to the Senate, argued that "My amendment will enable a

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<sup>114</sup> Henry H. Blood to Harold L. Ickes, July 2, 1933, in Special Board Minutes, 5:25-26, July 6, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>115</sup> Special Board Minutes, 5:29, July 6, 1933, RG 135, NA.

considerable number of political subdivisions to obtain very necessary assistance in addition to the highway funds, and create work for the unemployed."<sup>116</sup>

However, "There is this difficulty about it," noted John Dickinson, the assistant secretary of Commerce. "If the act only gives [FDR] authority to loan money, he cannot go ahead and loan money if these people cannot borrow any money. They cannot give him any obligation for the money. The United States cannot loan the money," unless the states or localities that wanted to borrow held a special election to vote on the issue.<sup>117</sup> Robert, however, argued that the NRA legislation "is not interested in whether they have to go to the people or not, or whether they have to have a bond issue, or anything of that kind. The purpose of the act is to relieve unemployment, and that is why this machinery is set up. The President can grant this [request for funds], and defer an election for two or three years, in his discretion."<sup>118</sup>

While Dern suggested the option of organizing private corporations to borrow on behalf of indebted states and localities, Robert felt that FDR needed to take the initiative in order to get funds out of Washington and into the nation. "[Y]ou will find," he told the Special Board, "in many of these communities, gentlemen, that a bond issue will not pass. They will be more interested in knowing that the graft is cut out of local government, and that is the one hammer the President has in this instance. That is the one place where I agree 100 percent with Director Douglas. Now is the time to see that money is available to the ones in shape to take it."<sup>119</sup>

"We are trying to define," Robert stated, "between actually giving away \$500,000,000 in emergency relief on the one hand and, on the other hand, trying to find a

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<sup>116</sup> Russell quoted in Williams, Grants-in-Aid under the Public Works Administration, 229.

<sup>117</sup> Special Board Minutes, 5:30, July 6, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>118</sup> Special Board Minutes, 5:31, July 6, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>119</sup> Special Board Minutes, 5:35, July 6, 1933, RG 135, NA; Ickes, Back to Work, 41-45.

reasonable excuse to say that we are lending it to the community. We are not looking for an iron-bound, RFC. self-liquidating loan by any means. If we were, we might just as well quit operating now and just devote ourselves to Federal projects and let these others alone." What the PWA ought to do, Robert argued, is "to be in the position of looking for a means, rather than making the other fellow come to us, except to the extent of keeping his house in order. It seems to me it is the one opportunity for the President to say 'If you get your machinery down to where it is economical we will do business with you.' It is just like a bank. When you go to a bank the banker will finance you if he knows that you have cut your overhead and done certain things. This is the same sort of a proposition."<sup>120</sup>

However, speaking two weeks later over NBC radio, Ickes declared that "the Government does not propose to hand out money freely to States and municipalities without hope of return."

We intend to be as careful and businesslike as possible, considering the economic situation in which we find ourselves. We will exercise the right to look into the past financial history of any community asking for financial aid. We will not hesitate to study the fiscal policies and scrutinize the bookkeeping system of any such municipality. We would be failing in our duty to the people of the Nation as a whole if we should not insist, where necessary, upon a prudent and businesslike management of the affairs of any applicant for a loan.

Ickes underscored this point, stating, "Our heads are not buried in the sand. We know that in all too many communities of these United States the building of even necessary and desirable public works is often attended by major scandals."

Money has been wasted; graft has been exacted and paid; political go-betweens have had to have their cuts; work has been skimped under the unseeing eyes of so-called "inspectors." I want to assure the people that it will be the policy of the Federal Government, so far as it is humanly possible, to prevent graft and

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<sup>120</sup> Special Board Minutes, 5:33-34, July 6, 1933, RG 135, NA.

crookedness and waste. We will try to see to it that every dollar is honestly spent.<sup>121</sup>

By October 1933 the PWA's assistant counsel, E.H. Foley, Jr., announced that in cases where state constitutions restricted debt and borrowing, "the Public Works Administration is helpless because the much discussed Section 203 (d) does not give the President blanket power to override state constitutions, nor does it authorize the Public Works Administration to make loans on inadequate security or to make any grants in excess of thirty percent of the cost of the labor and material on a given project."<sup>122</sup> While Section 203 (d) presented the potential for the PWA to provide funds to debt-strapped states and communities, the decision to interpret this clause narrowly added to the difficulties confronting the PWA.

### **The PWA and the Building Trades**

As the PWA began allocating money and making decisions, Secretary of Labor Perkins conferred with a delegation of AFL building trades unionists, reporting back to Ickes and the Special Board on the attitude of organized labor toward the PWA. This group was led by AFL Building Trades President Michael J. McDonough, and included the heads of electrical, plumbers and steamfitters, bridge and iron workers, bricklayers and plasterers, and carpenters and joiners unions. Perkins announced in a press release that she "told the labor representatives, who are asking that \$1,000,000,000 be allocated for building construction projects, that she knew the high percentage of unemployment in the more skilled building works trades and that she was in sympathy with their aims to get workers back on the job speedily." The labor leaders, for their part, "said that money

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<sup>121</sup> July 18, 1933, speech of Harold L. Ickes over NBC radio, in The Public Speeches and Statements of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, volume 1, box 1, entry 26, "Public Speeches and Statements of Harold L. Ickes, 1934-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>122</sup> Oct. 19, 1933, PWA Press Release, volume 4, box 1, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939." RG 135, NA.

spent in building construction, which will help to raise the standard of living and make living conditions better, is money well spent," and advocated the construction of schools, hospitals, community centers, and other municipal, state, and federal projects.<sup>123</sup> That this improvement in the nation's infrastructure would also benefit the skilled building trades workers was scarcely lost on these union officers.

Isador Lubin informed the Special Board of the efforts of the PWA's Labor Advisory Board, in discussions with the AFL, to devise a stabilized wage scale.<sup>124</sup> On August 15, 1933, Henry Waite submitted a formal report to the Special Board. The agreement rested upon Lubin's proposal to address wage disparities between various regions and urban and rural locations, dividing the nation into three zones. The agreement also fixed different rates for skilled and unskilled labor, in order to reassure the building trades unions that their members, while not receiving union rates, would at least be better paid than the unskilled. The text of the resolution specified the wage zones as follows:

SOUTHERN ZONE: South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arizona, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico.

CENTRAL ZONE: Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, Colorado, Utah, California, North Carolina, West Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, Kansas, Nevada, District of Columbia.

NORTHERN ZONE: Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Indiana, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, Wyoming, Oregon, South Dakota, Idaho, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, North Dakota, Montana, Washington.<sup>125</sup>

The wage rates were set at the following minimums:

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<sup>123</sup> July 15, 1933, Department of Labor Press Release, in Special Board Minutes, 5:7-9, July 17, 1933. RG 135, NA.

<sup>124</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:2, Aug. 10, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>125</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:8-10, Aug. 15, 1933, RG 135, NA.

SOUTHERN ZONE: Skilled labor \$1.00  
Unskilled Labor .40

CENTRAL ZONE: Skilled labor \$1.10  
Unskilled labor .45

NORTHERN ZONE Skilled labor \$1.20  
Unskilled labor .50<sup>126</sup>

The resolution also called for the creation of a PWA Board of Labor Review, which would review any grievances that came up under contracts financed by PWA funds. This Board was to be composed of three members appointed by the President; one for labor, one for contractors, and one for the PWA. Labor leaders, including Michael J. McDonough, the president of the AFL Building Trades, and Henry W. Blumenberg of the Carpenters and Joiners, signed on to this resolution.<sup>127</sup> While it is difficult to glean much from the surviving records of the Board of Labor Review, one contemporary student of the PWA, J. Kerwin Williams, argued that "The Board undoubtedly helped to obviate the need for resort to the courts, but it was never called upon to play an important direct role." After speaking with several AFL officials in Washington, D.C., Williams concluded that "While there has been some criticism from organized labor that the PWA mediator has in some instances weakened labor's side in a dispute by dealing with the particular small union directly concerned rather than with the stronger national and international unions, it is safe to say that grave injustice has been avoided."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:8-10, Aug. 15, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>127</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:8-10, Aug. 15, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>128</sup> Williams, Grants-in-Aid under the Public Works Administration, 209, n. 87, 214; the extant Board of Labor Review records can be found in box 1, entry 22, "Decisions Rendered by the Board of Labor Review, 1934-1936," RG 135, NA. See also Lindsay Rogers, "The Independent Regulatory Commissions," Political Science Quarterly 52 (March 1937): 1-17.



### **Unemployment or Development? The PWA's Power Projects and the West**

Although the PWA's concern with labor issues did lead to the creation of the Board of Labor Review, the "labor question" often was overshadowed by the PWA's commitment to large-scale heavy public works construction. The hydroelectric projects funded by the PWA epitomized the organization's difficulty in reconciling Ickes's desire to develop national resources and build lasting infrastructure with the need to alleviate unemployment. These projects were also of particular interest to FDR, as he checked regularly with Ickes for detailed updates on the Casper-Alcova Project in Wyoming, Montana's Fort Peck Project, the Kaw River Project, the Upper Mississippi River Project, and the Columbia River Project.<sup>129</sup> The tension between relieving unemployment and fostering economic development was pointed out by Turner Battle during the Special Board's discussion of the Casper-Alcova project. Battle noted that while the purpose of the PWA "is primarily to relieve [the] unemployed," Wyoming, the location of the Casper-Alcova project, "has 10,000 out of 10 million unemployed," nationally. In Battle's opinion, "Regardless of the worthiness of the project, the primary objective of the spending of this money today is to relieve unemployed. I think we should not forget that, regardless of the worthiness of any project."<sup>130</sup> However, Elwood Mead, the head of the Bureau of Reclamation, argued that "If we build this project I would say that the unemployed of two-thirds of the States of the Union will be benefited. Now, take Boulder Dam. It is out there in a State that has got a still less population." Battle and Robert took immediate offense to Mead's point, with Battle remarking, "Yes, and it has not relieved unemployed like people contemplated it would" and Robert agreeing, "No; it is not going

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<sup>129</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:6, July 24, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>130</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:7, July 24, 1933, RG 135, NA.

to relieve them any." Indeed, Battle continued, Boulder Dam "has been a disappointment about the expenditure of money."<sup>131</sup>

Mead countered Battle and Robert, though. "Let me tell you a story about that," Mead said, of Boulder Dam. "That is a misconception, that it has not relieved unemployment.

In the first place, you are speaking about not having fulfilled expectations. The original idea was that there would be relief for nearly 5,000 with their families directly employed there. But that is a very small part of the contribution that development has made to the need of the unemployed. We entered into a contract there for a half million dollars last year. The gentleman that is the head of the firm that took that contract said, 'You don't know what that means to us. It means that in our factory where we are having to feed men on a dole for the last six months we have got labor and wages for those men for another six months.' Now that was 500 miles away. We have contracts today in Pittsburgh and Detroit, in Wilmington; 40 percent of the money that is being spent out there is being spent east of the Mississippi River and is being spent to keep factories open that would otherwise be closed.<sup>132</sup>

Mead continued making his case, "Then you take this project," he said, speaking of Casper-Alcova. "[T]hat labor work on there from where labor is seeking employment, it will not be just Wyoming's labor. You take Boulder Canyon--two-thirds of those, nearly all of them, from other States besides Nevada, because they do not have them [similar PWA projects] there." Battle objected to this argument--if you build it, the workers will come--for locating public works projects. "The Department of Labor," Battle noted icily, "does not sponsor programs of migration of labor. The Secretary has expressed herself very forcefully on that point."<sup>133</sup>

As the Special Board reviewed its allotments, though, it became clear that certain states were benefiting more than others. Solicitor General Biggs pointedly asked, "Is

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<sup>131</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:7-8, July 24, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>132</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:8, July 24, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>133</sup> Special Board Minutes, 6:9, July 24, 1933, RG 135, NA.

there any limit to the amount we give to California?" Ickes, however, argued that "California is way behind a lot of the other States," naming Washington, Idaho, Arizona, and New Mexico, to name but several. "It is way behind Utah," interjected Tugwell. This debate was prompted in part by a lengthy article from the Chicago Tribune, reprinted in that Sunday's Washington Star, which reported that California and New York were receiving 25% of all federal funds.<sup>134</sup> Indeed, Assistant Labor Secretary Battle made a habit of objecting to the approval of so many California projects. At one point Battle sent a private memorandum to FDR's press secretary, Marvin McIntyre, informing him that "I was disgracefully defeated" after unsuccessfully "protesting the enormous allocations to California."<sup>135</sup> Battle was so committed to protesting the large number of California projects that on one occasion the Special Board burst into laughter when he finally found some projects he approved of and remarked, "I would like to be recorded as not objecting to the California projects."<sup>136</sup>

At the end of November 1933, the Special Board took stock of the progress of the PWA. Thirty-four states were under their quota for PWA funding, a figure determined by 25% unemployment and 75% population. Many of these below-quota states had legal and financial conditions which "prevented approval of non-Federal allocations and has delayed submission of those which have been approved."<sup>137</sup> In light of the central role the PWA was intended to play in FDR's New Deal, and in view of what Congress might do during the coming session, Turner Battle, Oscar Chapman, and Carey Brown, the

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<sup>134</sup> Special Board Minutes, 10:26-27, Oct. 19, 1933, RG 135, NA. The scholarly consensus on the regional distribution of New Deal funds is that Western states received more than Southern states because they were potential electoral swing states. Wallis, "Political Economy of New Deal Spending Revisited."

<sup>135</sup> Turner Battle to Marvin McIntyre, Dec. 28, 1933, "OF 466b PWA Oct-Dec 1933" folder, box 13, OF 466b, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>136</sup> Special Board Minutes, 17:5, Jan. 11, 1934, RG 135, NA. Emphasis in original.

<sup>137</sup> Special Board Minutes, 14:59, Nov. 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

assistant to Lewis Douglas, asked the Special Board to consider three factors relating to the distribution of funds:

- (1) The unequal distribution in accordance with population;
- (2) Amount of Federal taxes paid by various manufacturing centers which will influence Congress when considering cancellation of loans if majority of country will profit from such a move; and
- (3) In view of primary objective of relieving unemployment in 48 States equally, we should have good reason for not approving projects authorized by Congress in the various States.<sup>138</sup>

The Special Board had good cause to be concerned about Congress; at a December 7, 1933, meeting of the Special Board, Turner Battle reported that the Labor Department had met with the House Appropriations Committee and "during the meeting a definite protest was filed by Representatives of Congress against action of the Board in refusing to allocate projects already appropriated by Congress, stating that the protest included a statement that no more money would be appropriated to Public Works unless it is earmarked more specifically than it was the last time."<sup>139</sup> While the Special Board continued to argue over the merits of its approach, it was becoming clear that a public works policy that favored development over unemployment did not benefit just hydroelectric projects. The big winner in such a policy was national defense.

### **Bullets or Buildings? The Military and Public Works**

Agriculture, Commerce, Interior, Justice, Labor, Post Office, State, Treasury, and other federal departments and agencies were slow in getting their PWA spending underway.<sup>140</sup> By October 1933 they had a total of about \$83 million worth of projects

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<sup>138</sup> Special Board Minutes, 14:62, Nov. 29, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>139</sup> Special Board Minutes, 15:10, Dec. 7, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>140</sup> Ickes urged FDR to send letters to each member of the Cabinet, asking them to use their PWA money "in getting men to work at the earliest possible moment." Ickes to FDR, Sept. 25, 1933, "OF 466b PWA Aug-Sept" folder, box 13, OF 466b, FDR Papers, FDRL.

started, out of roughly \$660 million allotted. It was a different matter, however, in the War and Navy Departments. By October the Navy Department had already spent \$188 million out of its \$256 million PWA allotment, while the War Department had spent \$51 million out of a \$259 million PWA allotment--a total of \$239 million in spending, dwarfing the \$83 million spent by non-military departments of the federal government.<sup>141</sup> Between 1933 and 1935, in fact, the Army and Navy received over 45% of the PWA money spent on federal projects. This amount was larger than the total amount of money spent on non-federal PWA projects, sponsored by states, municipalities, and other public bodies.<sup>142</sup> While this spending would seemingly indicate a windfall of sorts for workers employed on military projects, this was not the case.

In April 1934 Turner Battle told the Special Board of a recent meeting he had with the PWA's Labor Advisory Board. "The head of the electrical workers," Battle reported, "makes a complaint which I think to a large extent is entirely justified, that the Federal Departments of the Government are among the most flagrant violators in the paying of Public Works scale of wages." Battle thought that "not only the Navy, with which I used to be associated, but the Army, are two of the biggest violators" of PWA wage regulations. The Army and Navy "have felt that you can hire men for thirty dollars a month, and can't see any reason for paying any scale of wages outlined in Public Works, and have fought it in every way possible, and we have some specific examples, and I think there should be some checking up as to the paying of proper wages as outlined by Public Works."<sup>143</sup> These cases included a naval hospital in Philadelphia, army construction at West Point, and a number of airfields throughout the rest of the nation.

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<sup>141</sup> Special Board Minutes, 8:2-3, Oct. 5, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>142</sup> Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression, 102; Samuel Grafton, "The New Deal Woos the Army," American Mercury 33 (Dec. 1934): 436-43.

<sup>143</sup> Special Board Minutes, 22:9, April 4, 1934, RG 135, NA.

By July 1934 Ickes was moved to observe that "The Navy has more Public Works money tied up than any one else," adding, "There isn't enough money in the United States Treasury to satisfy the Navy."<sup>144</sup>

By late August Secretary of War George Dern told the Special Board that his War Department was making swift progress spending PWA funds, having invested \$6 million in fortifications for Hawaii and Panama, \$6 million for ammunition, and \$7 million for military-related flood control on the lower Mississippi River, along with increased spending on army housing, motorization of antiaircraft artillery, and mechanization and modernization of various equipment. Dern argued, "The projects for motorization, mechanization and aircraft would furnish employment to factories located in the great centers of unemployment and will keep men employed during the winter months when outdoor work must be suspended and when unemployment is usually at its peak."

The projects for Rivers and Harbors and for Flood Control are of the highest permanent social value, work thereon can be initiated promptly and will be widely distributed, because there are projects all along the Atlantic Coast, the Gulf of Mexico, the Pacific Coast, the Great Lakes, and on the Rivers. In view of these features attending the War Department's requests, I felt that we were submitting a program that contained all the factors requisite in a Public Work program for National Recovery. They certainly fitted into my conception of the primary purpose of the Public Works program, which is to put men to work promptly for the purpose of creating mass producing [purchasing] power.<sup>145</sup>

While the PWA's military spending was creating difficulty for the organization, spending on another key component of the PWA, road building, was also generating similar complaints and problems. Thomas H. MacDonald, head of the Bureau of Public roads, observed that in the coming months, "I think we are going to be confronted with a good many requests to go ahead on force account basis; in fact I know we are. You see, these are the months preceding the Fall elections and I don't know that that needs to go

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<sup>144</sup> Special Board Minutes, 31:9, July 5, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>145</sup> Special Board Minutes, 7:6-7, Aug. 24, 1933, RG 135, NA. (The correction from "producing" to "purchasing" was made in the next meeting's minutes.)

into the record. It is a serious question now that we have to handle promptly." Indeed, Ickes observed, "Congress is fairly convinced, I think, that the quickest way of getting money into use through construction is public roads. I had that theory too, for some time, but when you take into account the fact that that was a going engineering concern, I am frank to say results have been exceedingly disappointing." Given the current state of economic distress, Ickes continued, "you should go ahead as fast as you can. You will want to use up the money as expeditiously as you ought to."

I saw a clipping today, an editorial from a Philadelphia paper, making the definite statement that the Administrator of Public Works, (mentioning me by name), when it came to expending money, was a Tory, and that ten million unemployed people in the United States had me to thank for the fact that they were unemployed, which, of course, is perfectly absurd. But from any point of view, if we could put all of this money to work immediately, there would never have been ten million, but the delay has not been in the Administrative end of this Administration. We have gotten the money out fast on projects and we don't get results. A lot of it is tied up on Navy. The allocation we made to the Navy last year, that won't be spent, under the best of circumstances, until January 1, 1936, in spite of which, although the Secretary of the Navy said that every shipyard is busy and every man employed--every possible man--they have to have forty million dollars more, which conceivably they cannot expend before 1936 or 1937, and they call it an 'Emergency Public Works Program', and criticize the Administration because the men are not at work. They are tied up in all our Departments, Interior included, because of some of these long-range programs; tied up in Army and Public Roads.<sup>146</sup>

While Admiral Christian Peoples argued that the thirty-six month timetable for ship construction could not be accelerated, Ickes retorted "We know that, but we also know the amount of money allocated to the Navy makes it impossible for us to do construction work that could be done."<sup>147</sup>

Ickes voiced his concerns about the Navy's use of PWA funds to FDR himself, but his complaints had little impact on the former Assistant Secretary of the Navy.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Special Board Minutes, 31:13-14, July 5, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>147</sup> Special Board Minutes, 31:14, July 5, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>148</sup> Memo of Ickes phone call, Aug. 24, 1933, "OF 466b PWA Aug-Sept" folder, box 13, OF 466b, FDR Papers, FDRL.

Indicative of the military's hunger for PWA funds were the gales of laughter that Ickes elicited from the Special Board members when he confided in them, "Just between us, if we gave the Navy and the Army all they asked for--" and left his punch line unspoken yet clear to all.<sup>149</sup> Peoples tried to defend the spending practices of the Navy, however, offering, "I think if it is looked upon in a very broad way, it is distinctly to the advantage of the national defense of the country to build up reserve stocks of ammunition." Ickes, though, again drew chuckles from the Special Board when he replied, "I move you convince the building trades on that score," adding, "I do not know how permanent ammunition is, but I do know that public buildings have at least an equal claim to permanency."<sup>150</sup>

### **Employment versus Development: Criticism of the PWA**

Ickes was perplexed when criticisms of the PWA began to appear in the press as early as late August and early September 1933. He spoke to the Special Board, observing that the bulk of the criticism focused on the fact that men were not being put back to work quickly enough. Ickes, however, was at a loss for what the Special Board could do to alleviate unemployment once they had allotted PWA funds to a project, and he was of the opinion that PWA allocations "had been done regularly and as expeditiously as possible." Ickes placed responsibilities for delays on state and municipal bodies: they were just too slow in sending projects to the PWA for consideration.<sup>151</sup>

Two weeks later, after reading an article by John T. Flynn in The New Republic, however, Ickes and Commerce Secretary Daniel Roper both called for the PWA to

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<sup>149</sup> Special Board Minutes, 39:6, Sept. 12, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>150</sup> Special Board Minutes, 39:7, Sept. 12, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>151</sup> Special Board Minutes, 7:1-2, Sept. 5, 1933, RG 135, NA.



engage in "interpretative publicity" on behalf of the organization.<sup>152</sup> Flynn's article posed the question, "Who's Holding Back Public Works?"<sup>153</sup> He answered his query by placing blame on Roosevelt for failing to push the works program forward quickly enough. Flynn, though, also pointed to Lewis Douglas's influence in convincing FDR to halt all other government construction while the PWA was getting underway. In so doing, the government, Flynn wrote, "not only did nothing, but undid all that the Democratic House of Representatives had forced from the unwilling Hoover."<sup>154</sup>

Benjamin Cohen agreed with Flynn's analysis, writing to his teacher Felix Frankfurter that "John Flynn certainly was on strong ground in indicating the failure of the program as presently contrived to help throughout the winter. On the other hand, I do not think the alternative to the present program is--or was, because passing time makes the alternative policies difficult of accomplishment--the doling out of funds indiscriminately to states and municipalities for worthless projects based upon obligations the enforcement of which any taxpayer may enjoy." Cohen expressed "considerable sympathy with Lewis Mumford's letter in the current number of the *New Republic*, which points the dangers of a permanent Public Works program being irreparably damaged if our first venture results in the dotting of the country from coast to coast with monstrous and ill-planned monuments." In any event, Cohen concluded, there was little he could do: "At Public Works I am, as you know, without any real influence on fundamental policies and I have no hankering for the general run of administrative work, however important it may be in itself."<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Special Board Minutes, 8:6, Sept. 19, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>153</sup> John T. Flynn, "Who's Holding Back Public Works?," *The New Republic*, Sept. 20, 1933, 145-48.

<sup>154</sup> Flynn, "Who's Holding Back Public Works?," 146.

<sup>155</sup> Benjamin V. Cohen to Felix Frankfurter, Oct. 9, 1933, "Special Correspondence. Oxford Correspondence. Cohen, Ben V. 1933-34 & undated" folder, reel 70, Felix Frankfurter Papers. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Delays in the PWA road construction program were so severe that Ickes submitted a resolution to the Special Board on September 28, 1933:

It appearing that a number of States have not yet started construction on roads under the \$440,000,000 allotment made to them on June 22, 1933, notwithstanding that road projects in those States have been approved by District Engineers of the United States Bureau of Public Roads, Resolved, That the General Counsel of the Public Works Administration be instructed to advise this Board whether the allotments made to the foregoing States and so far lying unused may be withdrawn under the law, Resolved, further, That this board in considering application for money for further projects by any States which have been dilatory in putting to work money allotted will take this fact into account in considering such future applications.<sup>156</sup>

While this threat was sent to states that were tardy in putting the PWA's money to work, it should not imply that things were going smoothly in states where the money was being spent. The entire Colorado Association of Highway Contractors sent Ickes a telegram, for example, protesting that PWA funds were being spent on "day labor" road construction. This method, the highway contractors complained, was "Contrary to Recovery Act policy of restoring industry," and, further, was a "wasteful procedure which results in county political machines at the sacrifice of good highways." More to the point, however, was the fact that day labor put a lot of unskilled people to work, while "Majority of contractors and three millions in equipment [sat] idle." "Please insist," the highway contractors asked, "on contract method which results in immediate employment and recovery of industry and satisfactory construction and honest values."<sup>157</sup>

Contractors were not the only people to criticize Ickes, however. After speaking before the House appropriations committee, Ickes told the Special Board that in the Congress "I found there was a good deal of [negative] feeling, due to the fact that we had made such large appropriations for Federal projects out of the first appropriation." The

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<sup>156</sup> Special Board Minutes, 8:10, Sept. 28, 1933, RG 135, NA.

<sup>157</sup> Colorado Association of Highway Contractors to Oscar L. Chapman, Oct. 2, 1933, in Special Board Minutes, 8:5-6, Oct. 3, 1933, RG 135, NA.

appropriations committee, Ickes said, "questioned me rather closely on that and I assured them that as far as possible this [new] money would be devoted to non-Federal projects." To avoid antagonizing Congress in the future, Ickes felt that "there is one rule we ought to establish, that is, we do not appropriate any money for any Federal projects which has been submitted to Congress and in respect to which Congress has refused an appropriation."<sup>158</sup>

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Ickes and the Special Board confronted a number of obstacles in putting together the PWA. They had to come up with plans for projects; guard against graft and waste; and decide whether to spend money through the states and municipalities, or through the federal departments. They had to hire non-partisan personnel; overcome the fiscal collapse in cities and states; work with organized labor; and deal with the growing impression that PWA's money was going exclusively to Western hydroelectric projects and various military endeavors. While the PWA was not entirely successful on all of these fronts, it was successful in building projects throughout the United States, eventually spending money in all but three of the nation's counties. During the early years of the New Deal, however, the PWA was slow to get underway. While the Special Board for Public Works had allocated \$3.3 billion by January 1934, by this point only about \$2 billion of this amount had been spent.<sup>159</sup>

Within the PWA, New Dealers explored the potential for remaking the nation's landscape through government construction. Not only did this New Deal construction represent an enormous leap forward in publicly funded public works projects, realizing on a much larger scale the public works philosophy of the Hoover Administration, it also set an important precedent for the public construction that was later undertaken during the

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<sup>158</sup> Special Board Minutes, 29:13-14, June 20, 1934, RG 135, NA.

<sup>159</sup> Special Board Minutes, 16:9, Jan. 2, 1934; and Table A-50, Nov. 17, 1937, "Aug 31, 1937" folder, box 11, entry 61, "Statistical Materials Relating to PWA Projects, 1934-1942," both in RG 135, NA.

**Second World War.** This emphasis on infrastructure had certain costs, however. Most notably, an emergency organization that was part of a series of acts designed to fight an economic depression was spending money through the military and for giant cement dams in the South- and Northwest. The PWA faced a choice between projects and people; a choice that held important implications for how New Dealers would conceive of the relationship between "public works" and "work relief" in the years to come.

CHAPTER TWO  
MAKING A NEW DEAL STATE: PATRONAGE AND THE  
PUBLIC WORKS ADMINISTRATION

As Harold Ickes, Rexford Tugwell, Frances Perkins, and the other members of the Special Board for Public Works discussed the problems of putting a national public works program into action, throughout its organization the PWA confronted a common problem. To build public works projects in practically every county in the nation, the PWA had to figure out how to assemble and supervise a new bureaucracy. Lawyers, accountants, engineers, inspectors, and investigators had to be trained and instructed in the ways of government service. In addition to finding qualified personnel, the PWA had to reckon with the desire of the Democratic party to fill many of these new government positions, created outside of the civil service structure, with patronage appointments. The public pronouncements of the New Dealers themselves have often shaped the history of this aspect of the New Deal. "To undertake this gigantic task we had no machinery at hand and no precedent to guide us," Ickes wrote in his celebratory history of the PWA, Back to Work. "The seas were uncharted. If there was any works plan in existence anywhere, we were not informed of it. We had to find projects upon which we could expend public funds within the limitations imposed by Congress, and we had to develop an administrative technique that could effectuate the object we had in view."<sup>1</sup>

The reality of developing this "administrative technique," however, was much messier than the partial account New Dealers such as Ickes provided to their public and to historians. While scholars such as Lizabeth Cohen have emphasized the importance of looking beyond the nation's capital to understand the making of the New Deal, this chapter argues that the consequences of the most dramatic expansion of government in

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<sup>1</sup> Harold L. Ickes, Back to Work: The Story of PWA (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 51.

U.S. history before 1940 can be better understood by examining the government itself.<sup>2</sup> In making this argument, this chapter draws on the most valuable of the remaining records of the PWA, the files of its division of investigation. These extraordinarily detailed reports provide an insider's account of what was at stake in the making of the New Deal state. The New Deal's own investigators created a remarkable day-by-day record of the many difficulties confronting the PWA as it transformed the physical infrastructure of the nation, a record that has been ignored by historians.<sup>3</sup> In the course of their work investigators interviewed PWA staffers, private contractors, laborers, and citizens across the country. The division of investigation scrutinized and recorded the daily problems the PWA grappled with as it attempted to pacify job-seekers, congressmen, senators, state and local officials, contractors, labor unions, and civic boosters. Despite being beset by overstuffed and often incompetent divisions of engineering, finance, and legal affairs, the PWA constructed the foundations of the New Deal's state structure, carefully spending \$3.3 billion and generating a wealth of new infrastructure.

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The PWA's division of investigation was one of the first parts of the new bureaucracy constructed by Harold Ickes. Ickes took considerable satisfaction and pride in its work and in the judgment of its director, Louis Glavis. Felix Frankfurter and Nathan Margold had first recommended Glavis to Ickes in March 1933 as Ickes looked for someone to investigate the relationship between the Army Corps of Engineers and private power companies at Muscle Shoals.<sup>4</sup> The development of the PWA's

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<sup>2</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> The most comprehensive study of the PWA to date, William D. Reeves, "The Politics of Public Works, 1933-1935" (Ph.D. diss., Tulane University, 1968), does not draw on these records.

<sup>4</sup> Ickes to Felix Frankfurter, March 25, 1933; Nathan Margold telegram to Frankfurter, March 27, 1933; both in "Subject File. Interior Department. 1933-38. Ickes, Harold L. Margold, Nathan R.," folder, reel

investigation division ranks as a key element in the history of New Deal public works programs, as it not only scrutinized the Public Works Administration and Harry Hopkins's Civil Works Administration, but also provided the precedent for the Works Progress Administration's own investigation division.<sup>5</sup>

Ickes was pleased by Glavis's work at Muscle Shoals and saw a chance to correct what he saw as a long-standing injustice. Glavis had been dismissed from the Department of Interior's General Land Office by President Taft in 1909, a casualty of the celebrated Ballinger-Pinchot controversy. During the following years, Glavis served on California Conservation and Water Power Commission, was chief investigator for the Senate Indian Affairs Committee, and was an author and investigator for William Randolph Hearst's publications.<sup>6</sup> With his reinstatement into government service on April 27, 1933, Ickes wrote, Glavis and his staff were "entrusted the duty of protecting the vast system of public works from the grafter, the exploiter, the chiseler, the cheating contractor, and the crooked politician." While their work sometimes drew "a howl of surprise and anguish from some political or business crook, accustomed to the easy pickings of past public works programs," the public generally "applaud[ed] our relentless war on graft and corruption."<sup>7</sup> Restoring Glavis to his civil-service status in government meshed perfectly with Ickes's view of his job as a historic opportunity to reverse the scandal-ridden heritage of the Interior Department.<sup>8</sup> Rexford Tugwell agreed with Ickes

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94, Felix Frankfurter Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Ickes, The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953), 1:550.

<sup>5</sup> For the CWA's dependence on the PWA's division of investigation, see PWA Press Release #474, volume 11, box 3, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," Records of the Public Works Administration, Record Group 135, National Archives.

<sup>6</sup> Information drawn from "Louis R. Glavis," Feb. 1, 1937, "Departmental File Interior: 1936-39" folder, box 54, President's Secretary's File, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

<sup>7</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 60, 78.

<sup>8</sup> T.H. Watkins, Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 332-33.

on the need for constant and thorough investigation of the PWA, telling him "I would rather expend any amount of money on this than to have a \$10 scandal anywhere."<sup>9</sup>

Glavis divided the nation into ten regions, placing a special agent in charge of each region and selecting an investigating staff. The agents's background varied, but generally engineers with construction experience, legal investigators, and accountants were chosen to work for the division of investigation.<sup>10</sup> In the division's first internal circular, Glavis's agents were given frank instructions:

The majority of you are entering into an entirely new field of endeavor. This field requires engineering training and experience, but success in your undertaking will require, in addition, judgment, watchfulness, and courage to state the truth as you see it.

Public Works, by their very nature, open the door to every type of political favor and graft, and, in the past, as you know, they have often resulted in no end of scandals. By vigorous contact with all projects in your region before the contracts actually go into effect, you will unearth and prevent many loose and dishonest methods and serve notice on the parties involved that you not only know your business as well as your specific duty, but that you mean to enforce rugged honesty in their relations with the Government.

The Director of Investigations assumed, in appointing you, that your engineering training and experience were such as to qualify you for your present position. Do not burden this office with lengthy discussions; but give us the facts completely, tersely and to the point, together with your specific recommendations. There is no room for pussyfooting in this work. State your convictions clearly and get them to us at once. You may rest assured that if you are right, you may strike hard and often, no matter what influence the wrong-doer may claim to have.

Set your mind in the direction that these public works funds are partially your funds and guard the expenditures even more conscientiously than if they were your own. The man who succeeds in this work has got to have sufficient backbone to weather criticism, as the greater his success the more he will be criticized.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Special Board Minutes, 4:46, June 29, 1933, entry 1, "Minutes of Meetings of the Special Board for Public Works, 1933-1935," RG 135, NA.

<sup>10</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 77.

<sup>11</sup> PWA Division of Investigations Circular No. 1, Aug. 1, 1933, "PWA-Miscellaneous. Division of Investigations releases" folder, box 1, entry 103, "Miscellaneous Issuances, 1933-1938," RG 135, NA.



Ickes echoed this internal circular in his own public pronouncements, declaring that Glavis's investigators "are veterans, picked for personal probity, as well as for ability," and that their "surveillance" of the public works program "is necessary only because there are traitors in even the finest army."<sup>12</sup> Initially Glavis employed 150 men as investigating agents, but this number grew to 225 by May 1936, and eventually reached about 400.<sup>13</sup> Glavis had sole authority in selecting his staff and told Ickes that he planned "to use as far as possible the services, by detail from the Navy Department," choosing his investigators from the officers and civilians who "were members of the cost inspection and accounting forces of the Navy Department" during World War I.<sup>14</sup> At least one Democrat complained, however, that the people Glavis was recruiting were "red hot Republican Old Liners."<sup>15</sup>

Glavis and his force of investigators did a great deal of work attempting to keep the PWA free of graft and corruption and provided Ickes with an extensive record of bureaucratic problems within the PWA itself. In August 1935 Glavis reported to Ickes that the amount of investigative reports produced by his division during the first half of

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<sup>12</sup> Harold L. Ickes, "Spending Three Billions of Your Money!" clipping from The American Magazine, Oct. 1933, "Articles 'Spending Three Billions of Your Money' Oct. 1933 [corres. Aug.-Oct. 1933]" folder, box 170, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>13</sup> For the figure of 225 investigators, see "Accomplishments of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, from July 8, 1933 to May 18, 1936," "Public Works Administration Miscellaneous" folder, box 1, entry 51, "Miscellaneous Publications, 1936-1941. Projects Control Division," RG 135, NA. For the figure of 400 investigators, see Jack Alexander, "Reformer in the Promised Land," Saturday Evening Post, July 22, 1939.

<sup>14</sup> Glavis to Ickes, July 7, 1933, no folder, box 11, entry 766, "Records of Interior Department Officials. Records of Secretary Harold L. Ickes. General Subject File, 1933-42," RG 48, NA--College Park. For Glavis's authority in building the division of investigation, see the testimony of E.K. Burlew in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Public Lands and Surveys, Hearings on the Nomination of Ebert K. Burlew to be First Assistant Secretary of the Interior, 75th Cong., 3d sess., Part I (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938), 18.

<sup>15</sup> L.E. Bottom to James A. Farley, Oct. 23, 1933, "Patronage Matters, Misc." folder, box 96, Emil E. Hurja Papers, FDRL.

1935 had gone up 132%, compared to the same period in 1934.<sup>16</sup> The division of investigation categorized its reports into administrative, project, bid opening, and criminal reports, labeling each one as "favorable" or "adverse." To be labeled "adverse," agents were instructed, a report must show "a violation of law or applicable regulations"; conclude with a recommendation for administrative action or, in the case of personnel investigations, that personnel not be appointed, be terminated, or be transferred or reprimanded; or demonstrate that a project has defects in construction or has departed from previously approved specifications. Otherwise, a report was to be labeled "favorable."<sup>17</sup> While the remaining records of the PWA are incomplete, in 1934 the PWA finished the year with 164 special agents employed. It had spent \$628,000 on salaries, transportation, automobile purchases and maintenance, office supplies and upkeep. Out of 9,361 cases closed, 6,780 were classified as favorable and 2,581 as adverse, while 400 cases were pending. The PWA referred 300 cases to the Department of Justice for prosecution, with 40 prosecuted by the year's close.<sup>18</sup>

In late 1939 the PWA reported that its investigations had secured refunds of \$797,535 in "kick-backed" wages to labor, and 295 cases turned over to federal or state authorities. Out of this number, 110 were closed, 15 were pending, and 170 were presented to grand juries for consideration. Out of 112 indictments that were handed down, 60 convictions were secured, 8 cases were acquitted, 30 were dismissed, and 14 were still pending.<sup>19</sup> From late 1935 until January 1941, the division of investigation

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<sup>16</sup> Glavis to Ickes, Aug. 2, 1935, in "AF 341" folder, box 10, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>17</sup> "Public Works Administration. Division of Investigations. Manual of Instructions," Feb. 1, 1936, entry 95, "Records of Projects. Records of the Division of Investigation. Manual of Instructions, 1936," box 1. RG 135, NA.

<sup>18</sup> Glavis to Ickes, Jan. 28, 1935, "AF 221" folder, box 7, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>19</sup> Federal Works Agency, PWA Press Release #8 [undated, but between Aug. 23 and Sept. 6, 1939]. "Public Works Administration" folder, box 3, entry 746, "Division of Information. Publications of the

presented a total of 369 cases to federal or state officials. From this total, 133 were closed and 232 were presented to a grand jury. Out of 165 indictments that were handed down, 74 guilty and 18 nolo contendere pleas were obtained and 33 indictments were dismissed. While 11 cases still awaited trial, of the 29 that had been tried 16 convictions and 13 acquittals were obtained. A total of \$126,333.45 in fines had been levied.<sup>20</sup>

Although prosecutions and convictions came out of the division of investigation's scrutiny of the PWA, more significant for historians is the record these investigations left behind. They provide a detailed portrait of the political maneuvering that drove the many functions involved in constructing public works.

### **Making a New Deal: The Politics of State Capacity**

In constructing a new agency, the PWA drew upon the staff of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation's self-liquidating public works division. The PWA hired a number of people directly from the RFC and turned to the RFC's files of public works plans to find projects worth constructing. Ickes also looked to the nation's cities as progressive laboratories for public works, drawing particularly on Cincinnati's civil servants, thanks to the recommendations of such reformers as Charles Merriam and Louis Brownlow. The PWA's chief legal counsel, Henry T. Hunt, had served as Cincinnati's mayor in 1911, presiding over an impressive program of municipal public works. Hunt's chief engineer in Cincinnati, Colonel Henry M. Waite, subsequently became the PWA's deputy administrator.<sup>21</sup>

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Federal Works Agency and Subordinate Agencies, 1936-1942," Records of the Works Progress Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives.

<sup>20</sup> Unlabeled table, Jan. 10, 1941, "Criminal Correspondence--No. 2" folder, box 1, entry 91, "Correspondence Relating to Criminal Indictments, 1935-1942," RG 135, NA.

<sup>21</sup> PWA Press Release #12 [undated, but between July 14 and July 18, 1933], volume 1, box 1, entry 24. "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA; Ickes, Back to Work, 17-18; and see the discussion of Cincinnati's public works construction in Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression, 178-82.

While the PWA grappled with the difficulties in assembling a staff, from its very beginning the New Deal had to reckon with all of the Democratic office seekers who had descended upon Washington after so many years of exile from the executive branch of government.<sup>22</sup> James Farley, the chair of the Democratic party's National Committee and the new Postmaster General, exercised his control over patronage in the new administration. As Ickes began to build the PWA, Farley anxiously asked FDR's press secretary Stephen Early to tell FDR "that he was 'not sold'" on what the administration was "trying to do on public works," requesting that FDR "not make any definite decisions on public works" until talking with Farley.<sup>23</sup> Farley passed approved lists of office seekers along to FDR adviser Louis Howe, and wrote to New Dealers such as Ickes and Harry Hopkins to insure their cooperation in making politically sensitive appointments. For appointments made from or in Vice President John Garner's home state of Texas, for example, Farley asked that they first secure Garner's approval.<sup>24</sup>

With the PWA in charge of \$3.3 billion, state congressional delegations made it a point to stop by the PWA's offices. For example, Colonel Henry M. Waite, the PWA deputy director, reported to Ickes that Utah's delegation, "in full force, sat in my office this morning and went over the same old arguments for the same old projects in the same old interminable way." Exasperated, Waite asked Ickes to "please take up this Utah situation with me and see if we can't permit these gentlemen to camp on someone else's doorstep for awhile." North Dakota Senator Gerald Nye also implored Ickes to meet with twenty prominent North Dakotans, including Democratic National Committeemen and

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, James A. Farley, Behind the Ballots (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 223-38.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen Early to FDR, confidential memo, June 29, 1933, "Post Office Dept. 1933" folder, box 1, Official File 19, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

<sup>24</sup> James A. Farley to Louis Howe, June 17, 1933; and Farley to Harold L. Ickes, June 22, 1933; both in "Harold L. Ickes Secretary of Interior File, Political, 2) 1933 June-July" folder, box 227, Harold L. Ickes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; Farley to Harry L. Hopkins, June 22, 1933, "Farley, James A." folder, box 37, Harry L. Hopkins Papers, FDRL.

women, regarding PWA spending in their state. A Louisiana congressman pressed for information regarding flood control work on the Mississippi River; the Secretary of the Navy inquired about a Marine Hospital in Philadelphia; Texas Senators urged FDR to approve Post Offices to be constructed at San Antonio, Waco, and Austin, and asked about improvements of the Corpus Christi harbor.<sup>25</sup>

While the PWA struggled to address the concerns of political officials, one of its biggest obstacles was a shortage of qualified lawyers to review public works contracts. One of the first things Interior Department solicitor Nathan Margold did was to consult with his mentor, Felix Frankfurter, for recommendations. "You know the type of men I want," Margold wrote Frankfurter. "I need only add that it is important that most of them be from the western and southwestern states," referring to the conventional wisdom that, historically, these regions were important constituencies for the Interior Department. Margold asked Frankfurter to sound out law school deans in the west and southwest for suggestions, and for his advice about what members of Congress he could deal with "in the hope of getting the right type of men."<sup>26</sup> Frankfurter recommended Margold contact the law school deans at the universities of Wisconsin, Colorado, and California; and thought that senators Costigan, La Follette, Cutting, Norris, Borah, Wheeler, and Hiram Johnson "ought to understand the rigorous necessity for high professional standards in the enforcement of social aims of the administration." Frankfurter also praised Harry

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<sup>25</sup> Henry M. Waite to Ickes, Oct. 28, 1933; and Gerald Nye to Ickes, Oct. 30, 1933; both in "Harold L. Ickes Secretary of Interior File, Political, 2) 1933 June-July" folder, box 227, Ickes Papers, LC; Ickes to Waite, Aug. 23, 1933; and FDR to Ickes, Aug. 19, 1933; both in no folder, box 11, entry 766, "Records of Interior Department Officials. Records of Secretary Harold L. Ickes. General Subject File, 1933-42," Records of the Department of the Interior, Record Group 48, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>26</sup> Nathan Margold to Felix Frankfurter, March 27, 1933, "Subject File. Interior Department. 1933-38. Ickes, Harold L. Margold, Nathan R." folder, reel 94, Felix Frankfurter Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Slattery, Gardner Jackson, and Alger Hiss as worth employing in the Interior Department.<sup>27</sup>

As the PWA began to take shape, PWA counsel Henry T. Hunt also contacted Frankfurter for assistance, asking for lawyers who were "somewhat specialized in legality bond issues." Hunt wanted men with "liberal views" who were "capable of providing solutions rather than obstacles."<sup>28</sup>

Ickes complained to one Illinois PWA advisor about "our inability to build up a sufficient staff of competent lawyers. We have some 85 here now with more coming in every day, and contracts are now beginning to move out rather rapidly, but they are still altogether too slow to suit me."

It may be that our legal and financial departments are too technical. I have been hammering at the legal department for some time telling them that they must not be technical. I am going to try to loosen up the financial experts too. I think they are now more technical than the lawyers. But there is another side in this picture. If we should let a lot of projects go through here in a slipshod manner, the very people who now blame us for delay would blame us for wasting money.<sup>29</sup>

Thanks in part to the shortage of lawyers, Ickes argued, the PWA was "literally working day and night here." But even with such high unemployment throughout the nation, he noted, "you can't go out on the streets and pick up qualified men to do technical work."<sup>30</sup>

One obstacle to getting this work done--even after obtaining qualified personnel--was pressure from Congress. Ickes complained

You can't imagine the precious hours that we have to give clamorous members of Congress who come singly, in pairs, in trios and in droves, dinning the same

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<sup>27</sup> Frankfurter to Margold, March 30, 1933, in *ibid.* For more on the Margold-Frankfurter relationship, see Peter H. Irons, *The New Deal Lawyers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 60-68.

<sup>28</sup> Henry T. Hunt to Frankfurter, June 10, 1933, "Subject File. National Recovery Act. 1933-36" folder, reel 102, Frankfurter Papers, LC.

<sup>29</sup> Ickes to Lawrence Houghteling, Oct. 28, 1933, "Harold L. Ickes Secretary of Interior File, Political, 2) 1933 June-July" folder, box 227, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

speeches into your ears and demanding that their projects be approved whether they are meritorious or not, and not only approved, but they they [sic] be given preference over everyone's else [sic] projects. Sometimes it is like a mad house here, and I have come to the conclusion that there is only one thing that I can be sure of and that is that it just isn't humanly possible to suit anyone. Every project is the most important project in the whole country. Every project is meritorious. Every project must be given the right-of-way. The local people can delay all they please but they count the hours from the time the project is deposited in the mail, and if it isn't approved and the contract sent out by return of mail, then it is because of red tape here.<sup>31</sup>

The PWA, Ickes asserted, "have to take a national point of view."<sup>32</sup> Despite Ickes's desire, however, the PWA's lawyers quickly got the reputation of slow-moving fact checkers, derisively labeled "semi-colon boys" by New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia.<sup>33</sup>

The tension between the need to quickly approve necessary public works projects and put people back to work, on the one hand, and Ickes's desire to run a non-political, graft-free operation, on the other, reached deep into the organization of PWA. Ickes put the PWA's investigation division to work checking up on his staff, at one point having 150 agents spend the night going through desks in the PWA offices to check for irregularities. After finding drawers filled with unanswered correspondence Ickes fired off a memo, ordering that every letter must be acknowledged within twenty-four hours of receipt, and for good measure instructing PWA employees not to use the telephone for personal use.<sup>34</sup> Ickes reprimanded the PWA housing division for taking long lunches and

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Kessner, Fiorello H. La Guardia and the Making of Modern New York (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1989), 300; for the PWA's response, see PWA Press Release #1746 [undated], volume 40, box 8, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>34</sup> Raymond Clapper diary, March 2, 1934, "Diaries Jan-May, 1934" folder, box 8, Raymond Clapper Papers, LC. Ickes was also known for taking the doors off the stalls in the men's room to cut down on newspaper reading, and for locking the doors to the Interior Department building shortly after the workday began to encourage promptness. See Katie Louchheim, ed., The Making of the New Deal: The Insiders Speak (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 248-49.

over-socializing among the staff.<sup>35</sup> In the finance division, however, Ickes approved a rather confused division of personnel: a South Carolinian supervised the Dakotas and the Northwest, while a Northerner who had never been south of Washington, D.C., handled Virginia and the Carolinas. While this division of labor stands as a nice example of Ickes's inability to see the big picture due to his preoccupation with details, it also indicates Ickes's desire to insure neutrality in the administration of PWA.<sup>36</sup>

This desire, though, was tempered by an awareness of political realities. In fact, when the Special Board for Public Works debated this issue, Ickes initially favored a flexible policy that allowed for administrative discretion in permitting technical advisors to work on the state they came from. With fellow board members Rexford Tugwell, Commerce Secretary Daniel Roper, and Assistant Secretary of Labor Turner Battle, Ickes argued that in certain cases familiarity with a particular state's laws and conditions could be an asset that outweighed the potential "embarrassment," as Battle put it, of connections to state contractors and special interests.<sup>37</sup> This need for expert knowledge often did, in practice, override concerns over impartiality. In Ohio, for example, despite accusations that L.A. Boulay, the PWA state engineer, was favoring his brother-in-law's equipment company in purchasing equipment for PWA projects, Boulay's background in the construction industry did not result in his removal from his PWA position.<sup>38</sup> In general, though, Ickes hewed to the position he articulated to FDR: "it is frequently of

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<sup>35</sup> Division of Investigation report, May 28, 1934, "AF 6" folder, box 1, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>36</sup> Raymond Clapper diary, March 2, 1934, "Diaries Jan-May, 1934" folder, box 8, Clapper Papers, LC.

<sup>37</sup> Minutes of the Meetings of the Special Board for Public Works, 1933-1935, 6:3-4, Aug. 3, 1933, entry 1, "Minutes of Meetings of the Special Board for Public Works, 1933-1935," RG 135, NA.

<sup>38</sup> Glavis to E.K. Burlew, July 26, 1934, "AF 93" folder, box 4, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA. Boulay later became PWA state director in Ohio: for his vita see Ickes to FDR, March 30, 1936, "OF 466b PWA Jan-Mar 1936" folder, Official File 466b, FDR Papers, FDRL.



great benefit to the public service to have some one from outside the state rather than to have to take some one from within the state."<sup>39</sup>

Concerns over impartiality, however, too often took priority over the need to start construction on projects. Charles Merriam, the University of Chicago political science professor and member of the newly created National Planning Board (NPB), noted in June 1933 that this tension could prove problematic. "It would be easy," Merriam wrote to his long-time friend, "to make a mess of the expenditure of the vast sum of money contemplated--a scandal which would rock the party, the nation and in fact the whole world."<sup>40</sup> Ickes, in reply, cited the need for caution, complaining that "It has been a delicate matter trying to unravel the mixup caused by General [Hugh] Johnson when he impetuously proceeded to set up an organization under his own authority to administer the public works."<sup>41</sup>

By October 1933, however, Merriam and fellow National Planning Board member Franklin Delano each wrote to Ickes to express their distress over the way PWA was proceeding. Merriam tried to point out to Honest Harold the costs of his cautious approach. "I have talked with a good many people in the last two weeks," Merriam wrote, "and believe there is a grave danger that the coming session of Congress will not only prevent the development of the program, but sweep away what there is now; that the whole idea may be discredited in a panicky impulse such as may readily sweep over us in a period of discontent such as this." Merriam urged Ickes to take dramatic measures to

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<sup>39</sup> Ickes to FDR, April 22, 1933, Official File 2, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>40</sup> Charles E. Merriam to Ickes, June 24, 1933, "Interior File Public Works 1) 1933 June-August" folder, box 248, Ickes Papers. For more on Ickes and Merriam's friendship and experience in Chicago progressive politics, see Watkins *Righteous Pilgrim*, 90-94; 103-109; and Barry D. Karl, *Charles E. Merriam and the Study of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 226-59; for the planning board see Patrick D. Reagan, *Designing a New America: The Origins of New Deal Planning, 1890-1943* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); and Marion Clawson, *New Deal Planning: The National Resources Planning Board* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981).

<sup>41</sup> Ickes to Merriam, June 27, 1933, "Interior File Public Works 1) 1933 June-August" folder, box 248, Ickes Papers, LC.

speed up the public works program. He recommended the creation of a new official, an "Accelerator," to "check up on the actual progress" of federal and non-federal projects funded by PWA, granted strong authority by PWA and President Roosevelt. Merriam also suggested Ickes simply accept the recommendations of state boards on projects under \$100,000 as final (thus eliminating a time-consuming review process), bring in his NPB colleague Louis Brownlow to consult on improving administrative organization, and that he increase legal advice to state boards and reduce the "too heavy emphasis on legal technicalities" that was only adding to delays. Most importantly, Merriam thought the PWA had to eliminate delay between allocation of funds and the actual signing of contracts to begin construction. "The details of these projects, such as most personnel, small expenditures and sundry, like matters should not be loaded on you or come over your desk, but be left to your subordinates," he advised Ickes, adding, "I am afraid you are dealing with altogether too many minor questions." Merriam delivered a frank warning: "If you cannot let go of some of these details, it seems to me that you are likely to collapse and the plan with you." Summing up his critique, Merriam argued that "My whole proposition comes down to this. Spending more funds for overhead administration. Reorganization in such a way as to remove detail from the Secretary [of Interior]. Speeding up the whole tempo of the organization. Getting actual 'work hours.'"<sup>42</sup> PWA state engineers echoed and reiterated these complaints over delays, repeatedly telling Washington that appointments of such personnel as project inspectors were taking far too long. Furthermore, when these appointments were finally made, these personnel would often start work without even reporting to the office of the state engineer, or familiarizing themselves with their job duties.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Merriam to Ickes, Oct. 2, 1933, "Interior File, Friends, Charles Merriam, 1933-45" folder, box 162, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>43</sup> "Report of Regional Conference Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works called by Colonel H.M. Waite, Deputy Administrator," Feb. 14-March 1, 1934, in "Feb. 14-Mar. 1, 1934" folder, box 1, entry 23, "Minutes and Reports of Conferences of the PWA, 1934-1941," RG 135, NA. This report summarizes

Delano, in a more formal letter that he sent to Ickes on behalf of the NPB, echoed many of the points made by Merriam. Delano pointed out the advantages of following the recommendations of the state advisory boards, especially for smaller projects that cost less than \$100,000. While he acknowledged that the PWA staff in Washington "appears to be well organized thoroughly to investigate each project from its practical engineering, financial, and legal point of view," there was at the same time the perception that the complex bureaucratic structure in Washington served mainly to block and delay projects. "[T]here are many obstacles," Delano noted, "so much so that if a local project has a strong backing, a committee of leading citizens, including some politicians, is sent to Washington to exert pressure upon the Administration or its staff. There is a feeling that only in that way only are projects reasonably certain of approval." Delano also recommended that the PWA permit force account and "cost plus" contracts to be let, but only with reliable contractors.<sup>44</sup>

While Ickes responded to Merriam with good humor, he disagreed sharply with the points made by Merriam and Delano. It was not the PWA that was holding things up. "If some way can be devised to speed up the government departments and the state and municipal authorities to which money has been allocated," Ickes wrote, the program would begin to see success. Indeed, he had already begun to urge federal departments to move quickly to start public works construction.<sup>45</sup> Ickes thought that the PWA's engineering and financial divisions were functioning well and that any delays on the PWA's part were to be found in the legal division, and these were due mainly to understaffing. "I have been giving this my particular attention now for several days,"

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the proceedings of PWA conferences held in New York, Boston, Detroit, St. Paul, Atlanta, Portland, Los Angeles, Little Rock, and Fort Worth.

<sup>44</sup> Franklin Delano to Ickes, Oct. 6, 1933, "Political 4) 1933 October 2-15" folder, box 248, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>45</sup> Ickes to FDR, Sept. 25, 1933, "OF 466b PWA Aug-Sept" folder, box 13, Official File 466b, FDR Papers, FDRL.

Ickes assured Merriam, but "You know the legal type of mind. It just can't be hurried. But I am making every effort to induce greater speed in turning out the projects." On the topic of Ickes's micro-management of the public works program, the Secretary took great exception to Merriam's assessment. "You have one wrong notion," he wrote to Merriam, "about which I would like to set you right."

I am not trying to supervise every detail myself. I am giving the widest possible authority to [deputy administrator] Colonel Waite and his staff. Believe it or not, but I actually sign important contracts involving millions of dollars without even pausing to read them cursorily. I am not sure but that I haven't paid enough attention to details in public works. I have organized public works on the theory that I ought to get trustworthy and able men and then let them go to it, coming to me only on questions of policy. This is the way we have been working.<sup>46</sup>

Ickes, however, entered the hospital in December 1933 after falling on the ice and breaking a rib. Ickes was also suffering from insomnia and exhaustion, due in no small part to increased drinking and an extramarital affair.<sup>47</sup> Although his doctors informed him that he would need three weeks of rest to recover, Ickes told Merriam that "My plan is to be at the office on Tuesday but I will try to keep it as quiet as possible so that I will not have to withstand the rush of Senators and Congressman urging projects."<sup>48</sup>

Subsequently, however, Ickes did not delegate much to his deputy administrator, Colonel Waite, forcing his resignation in August 1934.<sup>49</sup>

Ickes was particularly upset when criticism of the PWA made its way into print. So, when Assistant Secretary of the Interior Oscar Chapman publicly acknowledged to newspaper reporters that "There has been some conflict between the legal and finance

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<sup>46</sup> Ickes to Merriam, Oct. 4, 1933, "Interior File, Friends, Charles Merriam, 1933-45" folder, box 162, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>47</sup> Watkins, Righteous Pilgrim, 366.

<sup>48</sup> Ickes to Merriam, Dec. 22, 1933, "Interior File, Friends, Charles Merriam, 1933-45" folder, box 162, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>49</sup> PWA Press Release #859 [undated], volume 21, box 4, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA; Ickes, Secret Diary, 1:141-42; 193-94.

divisions of the administration" of the PWA, Ickes was not pleased. While Chapman optimistically proclaimed that "I am certain it can be worked out satisfactorily," he added that "the slowness, while discouraging...shows the administration is not tossing money away but is proceeding in a sane and conservative manner in the issuance of federal funds." Chapman later pleaded to Ickes that he had been misquoted regarding the conflict between the finance and legal divisions, but to little avail.<sup>50</sup>

While it is unclear if this conflict was caused by anything more than bureaucratic confusion, it is evident that both divisions were in serious disarray. Jim Farley noted of Ickes, "From all I can gather, there is a feeling of suspicion around his Department to such an extent that not one person trusts the other; the impression prevailing that everybody is being spied upon and more or less under suspicion." Farley concluded, "A feeling of that kind in any Department does not tend to increase the morale, and from all I know of his Department, I think there is less regard for him upon the part of his employees than any other official in Washington."<sup>51</sup> Ickes did little to build the morale of his legal division when he inserted quotations from "Alice in Wonderland" into PWA contracts and sent them to be reviewed by the division's attorneys. When the contracts came back to his desk with seven approvals, Ickes called a conference of the legal staff, told them he knew he could confidently sign anything that they had approved, and then picked up the test contracts and read them aloud.<sup>52</sup> In addition to stunts such as this, Ickes further demonstrated his trust in his staff by having legal proofreaders fired for overuse of sick leave.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Chapman quoted in the July 16, 1934, issue of the Rocky Mountain News; Chapman to Ickes, July 16, 1934; and Ickes to Chapman, July 20, 1934; all in "Political 8) 1934 June-August" folder, box 227, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>51</sup> James A. Farley diary, Dec. 20, 1934, "Private File, 1934 Oct.-Dec." folder, box 37, James A. Farley Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>52</sup> Clapper diary, March 12, 1934, "Diaries Jan-May, 1934," folder, box 8, Clapper Papers, LC.

<sup>53</sup> Division of Investigation Report, Aug. 29, 1935, "AF 366" folder, box 11, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

The PWA division of investigation had more serious concerns regarding the chief administrator of the PWA finance division, Fred R. Deaton. Agents recommended to Ickes that Deaton be fired, because Deaton "had so flagrantly violated and betrayed the confidence and trust reposed in him" by Ickes. Deaton was regularly handing out confidential information and PWA reports to contractors and politicians, and he had issued internal recommendations that certain projects his friends were interested in being funded by grants, rather than the usual mix of grants and loans. Deaton, a Texan, wrote to his contact in Dallas, advising him to write to him only at Deaton's home, as "Every letter that comes into the Interior building, if it is not marked 'Personal' and some that are, is opened and a summary made of the contents so that practically every official from Secretary Ickes on down knows the contents of the letters received. As you can see, this often proves embarrassing."<sup>54</sup>

Over at the PWA accounting division, however, in order to advance his own career, division head George H. Parker welcomed staff members who owed their appointments to the intercession of influential people. As one of these accountants, William Bowers, informed Ickes, Parker was glad to hire him because he came recommended by Ickes's former law partner, New Dealer Donald Richberg. Parker, he wrote Ickes, "welcomed my appointment because he thought that my appointment would help him in his relationships with you and possibly with Mr. Richberg. He has continually favored me in various matters, I feel because he expected my being in his Division would assist him in indirect ways." Bowers observed "that Mr. Parker appears to favor appointment in his Division of individuals as Mr. James Schneider, a Senator Guffy protégé and Colonel R. G. Wooton, a Senator Bilbo protégé, also Mr. Don C. Fithian, said to be a protégé of Mr. Burlew," a personal assistant to Ickes who had been

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<sup>54</sup> Fred R. Deaton to George L. Simpson, quoted in Division of Investigation Report, Aug. 6, 1934, "AF 82" folder, box 3, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941." RG 135, NA.

employed in Interior since 1923. Bowers initially refused to accept any of these men into his section, but eventually, Bowers wrote, "practically on an ultimatum from Mr. Parker, I accepted Colonel Wooton and Mr. Schneider."<sup>55</sup>

While Bowers thought that Parker was an excellent administrator who produced first-class work, this appeared as rather faint praise to Ickes, in light of Bower's warning that Parker "had the personal habit of drinking too much which left him with hang-overs and interferred [sic] with his work." Indeed, on a train trip from Washington to Chicago for an auditor's conference, Parker and approximately eighteen PWA employees drank between four and six cases of whiskey and, Bower related, "In the midst of this [drinking] Mr. Parker asked me to write you a letter for his signature asking that the salaries of all the officials of the Accounting Division be greatly increased. For the next day and a half I was hounded by Mr. Parker and his drinking associates on the preparation of this letter...." However, "Aside from his drinking, which sometimes took place in the office, and which was frequently revealed by his hang-over attitude on mornings following drinking festivities," Bowers concluded, "I felt that Mr. Parker was a most effective worker."<sup>56</sup> Parker was eventually fired for falsifying his travel vouchers.<sup>57</sup>

Despite this change in personnel, though, the accounting division did not become an efficient, non-political bureau. By May 1935 Charles Maxcy, the new chief accountant, was overwhelmed by the level of questionable activity. "Your attention," he wrote to PWA accountants, "is again directed to the Administrator's Order #110, dated October 19, 1934 quoted below, regarding the use of political pressure."

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<sup>55</sup> William Bowers to Ickes, Dec. 18, 1934, "AF 186" folder, box 6, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> "AF 183" folder, box 5, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941." RG 135, NA.

Many employees are attempting to use political pressure to secure other assignments or increases in salary. These special requests have grown in volume to a point where the Staff in my office is unable to handle them. Notice is hereby given to all employees that requests of this nature will be ignored and will not enhance their standing for future advancement. An office cannot operate on a theory that employees can regulate the assignment of duties either directly or through political influence. Once an applicant has been employed, he should be content to stand on his record of performance for advancement. It is the constant effort of supervisors and the personnel office to fit people into position where they more properly belong. This is a continuous process and has resulted in benefit to numerous employees. It is the only method by which an organization of the size of the Public Works Administration can function effectively.

"Recently," Maxcy continued, "numerous violations of this order by members of this Division have occurred. It is the privilege of all members of this Division to make formal application to this office for promotion, transfer, etc., and if the results obtained by your request, in your opinion, are not satisfactory, permission may be given to go further. However, any additional requests must be routed through this office to the individual addressed."<sup>58</sup>

While the finance and accounting divisions of the PWA had their problems, these paled next to those of the PWA's engineering division. The engineering division was particularly inefficient, suffered from a surplus of staff, and, due to its role of reviewing projects sent in by PWA state engineers, soon became a central location for lobbying by politicians, contractors, and local boosters interested in getting projects approved. Interestingly, though, this new bureaucracy was supposed to compensate for the Army Corps of Engineers's relationship with private interests. As Ickes later told one young historian, his own investigations in the summer of 1933 had disclosed that there was a "close camaraderie between the Army Engineers and the private utilities."<sup>59</sup> Ickes hired Louis Glavis, the General Land Office official fired in the 1909 Ballinger-Pinchot Affair,

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<sup>58</sup> Accounting Division Order #7, May 1935, "ACCOUNTING DIVISION ORDERS 1-41 inclusive." folder, box 1, entry 104, "Orders Issued by the Accounting Division, 1935-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>59</sup> Ickes to William E. Leuchtenburg, July 21, 1950, "General Correspondence 1946-1952. Leuchtenburg, William E. July 21, 1950--Jan 20, 1951" folder, box 71, Ickes Papers, LC.



to take charge of Interior's division of investigation and, subsequently, to supervise investigations within the PWA. For his first task, Ickes had Glavis examine the management of the Wilson Dam power plant at Muscle Shoals, Alabama. FDR had toured the site with Senator George Norris in January 1933, contemplating the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Glavis reported that the systems of the Alabama Power Company and the Tennessee Power Company had been connected at Muscle Shoals, with the full knowledge of the Army Corps of Engineers at Wilson Dam. Glavis showed that the federal government was losing revenue from this secret arrangement, and that the power companies and the Corps of Engineers cooperated in hiding their relationship from FDR.<sup>60</sup> Thus, while Ickes was happy to take various army engineers into the PWA organization, he wanted to build an engineering staff that was separate from the Corps of Engineers. Although Ickes avoided the immediate pitfalls that might have befallen the PWA if it had worked through the Corps, the PWA division of engineering could hardly be termed a success.

The conduct of the engineering division and its director, Clarence McDonough, commanded the scrutiny of the PWA division of investigation. The primary task of the engineering division was to check over the state engineer reports and project applications. Investigative agents examined engineering project dockets, and "careful consideration and examination disclosed the glaring fact that reports prepared by the engineer examiners in the engineering division were almost without exception duplicates of the state engineers' reports and/or the applications submitted by the applicant." PWA engineers were simply re-copying, verbatim, the state engineer's evaluation into their report, rather than doing original analysis. Indeed, the investigation disclosed, the engineering division mustered a "tremendous organization of highly paid examiners and a

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<sup>60</sup> Louis Glavis to Ickes, in "The Glavis Report," April 12, 1933, "Glavis-Thompson Tennessee Valley Authority 1933-34" folder; and see also "Statements of Maj. Gen. Lytle Brown, Mr. Carl H. Giroux, Lt. Col. Edmund L. Daley, Major Robert R. Neyland, Captain H.D.W. Riley," "Glavis-Thompson Invest. Tennessee Valley Authority 1934" folder, all in Official File 42, FDR Papers, FDRL; and Ickes, Secret Diary, 1:17-18.

corps of stenographers and clerks" to produce its report, but this document was subsequently never used by any other PWA division. "The report of the engineering division," the agents concluded, "had served no purpose except to have given the engineer examiner an opportunity to waste days writing the report after copying the same from the state engineer's report and/or the applicant's application, or else expressing his own limited opinion and experience in the report." This relationship turned the state engineers into mere "office boys," as PWA's engineering division kept them "groping in the dark at all times for information." State engineers faced "a constant pecking away" at their authority, "with the result that his morale had become seriously affected, thereby destroying the prestige of the state engineer in the community, and concentrating the attention of the applicant on Washington rather than on the local state engineer's office." The state engineer for Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont concurred, observing that it is "the nature of the beast" for the PWA engineering division to hamper the functions of the state engineers. Indeed, commented the investigating agents, "The state engineer's office was created as the hub of the PWA and would have been a proper 'wheelhorse', all to the advantage of the PWA, if the engineering division had not assumed control to such an extent as to make a delivery boy and a 'rubber stamp man' out of the state engineer." McDonough, defending his division's work, claimed that the state engineer reports were shoddy and that "they were subject to politics and above all" because the state engineers blindly "approved all projects." If this was the case, though, the PWA engineering division was not an effective check on the state engineers. At the time of the investigation, only 103 projects out of approximately 9,800 projects submitted by state engineers were disapproved by engineering examiners in Washington.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> "Engineering Division Etc. The Report," [unpaginated] n.d., no folder, box 1, entry 93, "Records Relating to the Investigation of the Engineering Division, 1934," RG 135, NA.

Director McDonough, the agents found, "has proved a failure, for when closely examined, he has admitted that his division was inefficient and a means of delaying the proper functioning of the PWA." Furthermore, McDonough's "reasons and answers to questions have been anything but straightforward. At all times he has contradicted himself in the same breath, which shows conclusively that he either does not know anything about his division, or else he wished deliberately to confuse the issues." The agents concluded that they could "conservatively state" that McDonough "is incapable of performing the duties imposed upon him." McDonough had employed eleven former colleagues in the engineering division, and three of the division's four section heads used to work with him in private industry. McDonough never clarified what the engineering division staff was supposed to do, leaving all control to the section heads and keeping himself secluded in his sixth floor office.<sup>62</sup>

The staff of the engineering division often exceeded its responsibilities, considering questions of economic soundness when reviewing project plans. This not only needlessly repeated the work done by the finance division, but the investigation of the engineering division disclosed that the finance division actually did a better job of reviewing the plans submitted by state engineers than the engineering division.<sup>63</sup> This sort of internal confusion led to much back-and-forth between Ickes and his assistants, with Ickes at one point voicing his displeasure with "the engineers" who "are going rather far afield in examining into and passing upon the financial phases of projects for which applications are made." Ickes argued that the finance division should properly handle these questions, tersely ordering that "In the future, members of the engineering staff

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

should confine their attention to engineering questions."<sup>64</sup> The engineering staff, though, faced a mountain of forms, correspondence, and paperwork. One engineer observed, "We can't keep a record of all conversations [about public works projects]. Christ, we haven't enough stenographic help here now to get our letters out." Another noted that "our greatest headache" was "Cooperation with NRA" codes governing competition, because the NRA "recommend cancellation of contracts on violations of trivial sections of the [construction] code, or what we consider trivial."<sup>65</sup>

Despite Ickes's administrative instructions to use extreme care in approving exemptions to the usual PWA practice of using private contracting to build public works, it seems that the engineering division employed a very free hand in permitting public works to be executed by "force account," constructed directly by the government. Investigating agents discovered that it was "impossible to obtain any accurate information concerning force accounts" approved by the PWA and, further, that it was "obvious that no attempt had been made to limit this type of project." Indeed, the projects division, under the direction of Fred Schnepfe, not only had no information on the subject of force accounts but was also termed "a floundering unit" by the investigating agents, one that was "serving no one and without any definite goal." Nominally, the projects division was in charge of summarizing the reports of other PWA divisions and noting if they disapproved of any projects, making them ineligible for funding.<sup>66</sup> One PWA employee, though, stated that in reality the projects division was "like a large snake with its head cut off--writhing here and there without any particular direction." The PWA's technical

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<sup>64</sup> Ickes to Major Fleming, Jan. 14, 1935, "Public Works 23) 1935 Jan.-Feb." folder, box 252, Ickes Papers, LC; and see Glavis to Harry Slattery, Jan. 10, 1935 and Slattery to Ickes, Jan. 11, 1935, both in "Public Works 23) 1935 Jan.-Feb." folder, box 252, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>65</sup> Transcript of PWA Division of Investigation interview with Henry J. Sullivan and Arthur J. Bulger, Jan. 21, 1935, "AF 266" folder, box 8, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel. 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>66</sup> Isekoff, Public Works Administration, 43-44.

board of review similarly came in for harsh criticism. Originally intended to serve as a forum for appeals from state engineers, the board instead became a helpless "sixth finger" serving only to further delay progress on public works. The fact that board members seemed to "have been actively connected with projects submitted to the PWA for loan and grant" was determined to merit more investigation.<sup>67</sup>

After a ten-week investigation, in which investigating agents conducted forty-five interviews, reviewed the reports of thirty-eight engineer examiners, conducted a survey of state engineers, and drew up a chart of day-by-day work accomplished by the engineering division between September 1933 and November 1934, the agents concluded that "The results of this investigation would seem to indicate that the engineering division has been a haven for unemployed engineers, with very little constructive work accomplished, all to the detriment of the PWA and its possibility of function as an efficient organization." The division was thrown together with 133 examiners and 72 stenographers and clerks. This staff was overpaid and "One would think," wrote the agents, "that in view of the high salaries paid, it was worth the money spent, but this is not so, because the work of the engineering division as a whole has consisted of writing reports based on state engineer's reports and/or applicant's applications. The only exception to this type of work is that of a handful of men passing on administrative engineering policies."<sup>68</sup>

Despite their lackluster performance, however, these engineers provide a valuable record of how the PWA functioned during the early New Deal. A.L. Sherman, chief engineering examiner in charge of sewer, water, and irrigation projects, once reprimanded another PWA engineer, E.B. Besselièvre, in order to "put him on the carpet" and advise him that he should not act simultaneously as an engineer for the PWA and as a salesman

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<sup>67</sup> "Engineering Division Etc. The Report," [unpaginated] n.d., no folder, box 1, entry 93, "Records Relating to the Investigation of the Engineering Division, 1934," RG 135, NA. For the PWA technical board of review, see PWA, Circular No. 1, 10.

<sup>68</sup> "Engineering Division Etc. The Report," [unpaginated] n.d., no folder, box 1, entry 93, "Records Relating to the Investigation of the Engineering Division, 1934," RG 135, NA.

for the Dorr Company. Sherman did not want Besselievre to give out confidential information regarding a \$21 million dollar Washington, D.C., sewage project to his other employer, but not because this was ethically wrong. Rather, Sherman was concerned that Besselievre might accidentally undo the "gentleman's agreement" by which the project was already awarded to another group of engineers friendly with District of Columbia commissioners. Sherman, in the midst of blithely relating this incident to two PWA investigators, asked, "This is only among we three, isn't it?", and when informed that Ickes would be told of the interview, remarked, "Well, I'll shut up then" and proceeded in a clearly restrained fashion. Glavis did not trust Sherman, at one point notifying Ickes that he wanted to investigate "some more dirty work at the crossroads" involving him.<sup>69</sup>

Glavis indeed found more evidence of questionable activity by Sherman when one of his agents reported observing Sherman and Andrew B. Lail, another engineering inspector, meeting at the Hotel Powhattan in Washington with a Mr. H.A. Forbes. Forbes was pressuring the two men for a \$1.6 million PWA loan for the Huemena Dock Corporation of California, which would be used to build a harbor and terminals. The agent also saw Harry M. Brown, the PWA section chief in charge of buildings, bridges, roads, and docks, with Forbes. "As late as March 23, 1935," the agent wrote, "I saw Mr. Sherman coming out of Mr. Forbes' room. I understand that Mr. Forbes has also entertained Mr. Grubb and Mr. Moore of the Projects Division." Further, the agent reported to Glavis that Forbes "boasts of his having been indicted," according to information that he gathered.<sup>70</sup>

The man seen with Sherman, Andrew B. Lail, was the engineer examiner in charge of preparing resolutions and summary memoranda for the PWA Special Board for

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<sup>69</sup> Division of Investigation report, Sept. 25, 1934, "AF 137" folder, box 5; Glavis to Ickes, Jan. 16, 1935, "AF 265" folder, box 8, both in entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>70</sup> I.J. Canton to Glavis, March 30, 1935, "AF 211" folder, box 6, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

Public Works. Another former engineer examiner in Brown's section, Richard R. Ault, told investigators that he thought Lail was "like a snake in the grass" who "has no business in the [PWA] organization at all." Lail, according to Ault, went behind Ickes's back and routinely "was passing out confidential information by telephone anywhere from one to six Congressmen."<sup>71</sup> One investigator noted in his files that Lail "was playing hand in hand with several of the large independent engineering firms in the east...divulging confidential information to these engineering firms for the purpose of making a good impression on them and with the hope in mind of receiving a position of importance with one of the firms." Lail told investigators that there was nothing wrong with one of these firms, Remington and Goff, "except that they are normal municipal engineers." When asked what this meant, Lail replied "It means that--I will not say in every case, but the majority of your municipal contracts, you get them through political pull." By this, Lail clarified:

[W]hat I meant was that it required politics. For instance, if you were acquainted with the right kind of political party and worked with the administration on this particular municipality--I do not mean graft if that is what you mean. I will say that I have been in the engineering business a long time now and I have never seen any graft. There are isolated cases, of course. When I say political pull I do not mean anything like that. When I say political pull I mean if you were a municipal engineer and wanted to, you could go to, say, Philadelphia to get a contract. Your only chance of getting that contract would be if you were a good democrat or good party man. That would be the only chance you have of getting it. If you have one of your friends who has influence in that community to go in and speak for you. That is what I mean. I do not mean this idea of so much graft in engineering and Public Works. I have never run across it. There are only isolated cases.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "Engineering Division Etc. The Report," [unpaginated] n.d., no folder, box 1, entry 93, "Records Relating to the Investigation of the Engineering Division, 1934," RG 135, NA.

<sup>72</sup> G.H. Hurley, "Memorandum for the File," March 4, 1936; and transcript of interview between PWA Special Agent Russell MacDonald and Andrew B. Lail, Engineering Division, PWA, May 25, 1936; both in "AF 494" folder, box 15, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

While the head of the engineering division, Clarence McDonough, tried to argue to investigators that the PWA was not subjected to lobbying from contractors or from Congress, agents asked McDonough, incredulously, "How then does it appear that the Congressmen from the various districts where projects were being propounded would make representations by telephone, letter, or in person?" McDonough tried to dodge this issue, stating "That influence never exerted any pressure on our opinion." Investigators returned to this question, however, pressing McDonough: "Is it a fact that the applicants [for PWA loans and grants] were constantly in contact with your engineer examiners?" The engineering division director conceded that "I issued cards to the various applicants who had any information to give the examiner. I issued no cards to those that had nothing to give." McDonough, however, finally acknowledged the influence of interested politicians, laughing heartily and conceding to the agents that when push came to shove, "There is no way of keeping a Congressman from seeing an examiner."<sup>73</sup>

While some engineers readily entertained project applicants and congressmen, others used their position to advance their own interests more directly. George F. Hurt, an engineer examiner who worked on power projects, was found by investigators to have spent the bulk of his time engaged in a "sinister" attempt to gather information regarding public works projects that required incinerators while at the same time patenting his own incinerator design. Hurt gave information about PWA projects to private contractors, in exchange for which the contractor would use his patented design.<sup>74</sup> While PWA investigators kept a close watch on Hurt, some of their evidence of Hurt's activities arrived purely by chance, as when the secretary to the Detroit Housing Commission, Josephine Comon, happened to overhear Hurt talking while they were on a train from

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<sup>73</sup> "Engineering Division Etc. The Report," [unpaginated] n.d., no folder, box 1, entry 93, "Records Relating to the Investigation of the Engineering Division, 1934," RG 135, NA.

<sup>74</sup> "Engineering Division Etc. The Report;" [unpaginated] n.d., no folder, box 1, entry 93, "Records Relating to the Investigation of the Engineering Division, 1934," RG 135, NA; Glavis to Ickes, Jan. 26, 1935, "AF 258" folder, box 8, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941." RG 135, NA.



Detroit to Washington. Upon arrival in Washington, Comon followed Hurt in a cab over to the Department of Interior. Several days after arriving in the Capital, Comon swore an affidavit for Division of Investigation agents, stating that Hurt and another man were discussing garbage collection and disposal in Detroit.

"The words 'city council', 'garbage reduction', 'union' and 'PWA.' made me wonder," said Comon, "whether they were discussing the Detroit situation and I listened very attentively but was able to hear only a very small fraction of the conversation." Comon stated that Hurt said, "They haven't any other way out. They can't borrow money and there is no possibility of their getting the PWA, I tell you. That's all taken care of." Comon noted that "The entire conversation, as I interpreted it from what I heard, was about the garbage reduction in Detroit. This particular remark was repeated at least three times during the time I was listening." It is clear from the documents in this case file that PWA investigating agents took these remarks as confirmation of Hurt's practice of holding up and delaying PWA incinerator projects in order to further his own interests; in this instance presumably keeping Detroit from drawing on PWA funds in order to modernize its disposal facilities. Comon's narrative expanded on this point:

The younger man in the conversation said: "They have a strong Union", and the older man [Hurt] replied: "That's the easiest thing in the world to take care of. You can precipitate a strike at the outset. One thing that the American people were [sic] never stand for is interference with garbage collection. You can get the sympathy of the people right at the start." There was a good deal of conversation that I did not hear, then the older man said "I have gone over the situation very carefully and there are not more than five men that you will have to get rid of--key men--I can take care of that myself". The younger man remonstrated and I heard the words "careful about kidnapping", to which the older man replied: "Don't let anyone talk you into kidnapping. It is always dangerous. Anything you do, see that no one talks afterwards. When people disappear off the face of the earth, there may be a little trouble in the beginning but that's the end of it."

Later Comon overheard Hurt retort to his companion, "If you are going to let conscience interfere with business, you might as well quit now."<sup>75</sup>

Evidence of Hurt's practices not only came from Josephine Comon; interviews with Clarence E. Rose, a former engineer examiner, and with Benjamin F. Thomas, Jr., an engineer examiner who worked with Hurt in the power section, confirmed investigators's suspicions. Rose described Hurt's conduct, posing a "hypothetical question" to the PWA investigating agent. He asked, "If an examiner who pass[es] on a certain group only of applications, had a patent on a system that would be used in that group, or had a caveat, and was in process of getting a patent, and thirteen companies in the United States only make this equipment, and he was trying to sell this patent to four of them, and at the same time pass on contracts from all of them, what would you think?" Agents concluded that Hurt was delaying action on these contracts while he was waiting for his patent to be approved; a conclusion that was further supported when the agents discovered that Hurt was routing his private mail through the Maryland Casualty Company, in the Transportation Building in Washington, D.C., and having it brought by messenger to him each morning. This confirmed that Hurt was conducting private correspondence with construction companies while they were bidding on PWA projects.<sup>76</sup>

Another group of engineers, in charge of reviewing power projects, had been hired by the PWA after long careers working for private utilities. Philosophically opposed to municipally owned power plants, these engineers reportedly got together over scotch and soda, denounced FDR and the New Deal, and were slow to move on applications to develop publicly owned power plants.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Affidavit of Josephine Comon, July 31, 1934, "AF 258" folder, box 8, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>76</sup> Glavis to Ickes, Jan. 26, 1935, "AF 258" folder, box 8, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>77</sup> Division of Investigation report, Jan 14, 1936, "AF 468" folder, box 15, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

Despite the thorough and damning investigation of the engineering division, little evidence of this report's impact remains within extant PWA records. McDonough left the PWA to join the Lower Colorado River Authority and was replaced as director of the engineering division by Jabez G. Gholston on October 1, 1935. Before joining the PWA, Gholston, a graduate of Mississippi Agricultural and Mechanical College, worked in Central and South America as an engineer for a variety of railroads, oil companies, and several large ship and dock companies. With the PWA, however, Gholston did not manage to distinguish himself in comparison to McDonough. By the summer of 1936 he was reassigned as director of the PWA's inspection division. Here, Gholston was responsible for overseeing and monitoring the execution of PWA construction, making certain that the plans and specifications approved by the PWA were in fact carried out in the field. While this lateral move in the PWA bureaucracy does not provide direct evidence of Gholston's performance as director of the engineering division, his departure from the PWA does indicate the opportunities available to PWA administrators.<sup>78</sup>

After refusing to resign, on August 27, 1937, Gholston was fired from the PWA following charges of improper lobbying before Congress. Ickes informed FDR that he was drafting a statement "in line with your suggestion that it might be well to circulate something of this kind throughout the Government service" to discourage this sort of activity, also enclosing a copy of the dismissal letter sent to Gholston.<sup>79</sup> By April 1938, though, Gholston was re-employed as an engineering consultant to Ickes's office, and by July he was again receiving a salary of \$6000 per year from the PWA. In February 1939, however, Gholston decided to capitalize on his PWA contacts. He wrote to G.L. Rounds, an assistant PWA director in Michigan, "I am now closing an arrangement with the

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<sup>78</sup> PWA Press Release #1648, Oct. 1935, volume 38, box 8; and PWA Press Release #2019, circa May-July 1936, volume 42, box 9, both in entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA. On the PWA inspection division see Isakoff, Public Works Administration, 48-49.

<sup>79</sup> Ickes to FDR, Sept. 14, 1937, "OF 466b PWA May-Aug 1937" folder, box 15, Official File 466b. FDR Papers, FDRL.

Maryland Casualty company and several other insurance companies handling other types of insurance that will put me in a position to write bonds and insurance of almost every kind anywhere in the United States. I know that I have friends among the contractors, engineers, and architects in the country who will give me a hand. Many influential friends have encouraged me to make such a hook-up for some time in order to cash in on the Nation wide contacts that I have."

Clyde Austin of Detroit is my associate in the bond and insurance business. He has an established clientele already which he is bringing into the picture. He already has a working arrangement with Beard, the agent of Maryland Casualty Company in Chicago, to the effect that if an Illinois contractor gets a contract in Michigan, we are to get half of the commission on whatever of his business Beard is able to land. Likewise, if a Michigan contractor gets a contract in Illinois and we are able to get all or part of his bond and insurance business we split 50-50 with Beard. Naturally we have to service the Michigan contracts and Beard has to service the Illinois contracts. Beard is very active and so is Clyde Austin. It is my plan to make similar arrangements in many other parts of the country. Our headquarters will be in Washington from now on. However, if any contractor in Illinois, or any adjoining state for that matter, places his bond and insurance business with Beard and tells him that he wants Clyde Austin and Capt. Gholston to get credit for it Beard will do the writing and servicing and we will get our share. After we get our offices in Washington set up and going we can write bonds and insurance for anybody in the United States in our office.

Gholston was blunt in explaining his plans to Rounds. "I am giving you this confidential information for this reason; I know that you have confidential friends in Illinois, who, by simple suggestion, can throw bond and insurance business our way. I also feel reasonably sure that a good many contractors over the country would be glad to let me have their business on account of what has happened in the past, as they know I was in the game and I am prepared to give the service."

Whether they realize it or not, I am in a position, and have connections whereby I can give contractors who place their business with us quick and effective service with the various Government departments here in Washington. This will do and I believe I can handle it better in most instances that [sic] the headquarters office of AGC [Association of General Contractors]. In the instances where the business is handled through Beard, the person or person who throw that business to us will receive as their share of the commissions 1/3 of our share of the commission which will amount to 1/6 of the total commission paid by the company to its

agents. In the instances where the business is sent directly to us in Washington, we will pay the person or persons who forward such business to us 1/3 of the total commissions paid by the company to its agents. For your confidential information, contractors' surety bonds pay us all the way from 20 to 30 per cent of the amount of the premiums paid for the bond. This is a good business and a few large contracts really add up.

Gholston did not think that any of this constituted the crossing of ethical boundaries. Rather, setting himself up in the insurance business for contractors while continuing to work for the PWA was a simple matter of common sense. He informed Rounds, "I know I do not have to explain to you that I am even suggesting that you do anything unethical. The simple fact of the whole thing is that somebody will get the business, if we can get it without placing ourselves in an unethical position it is nobody's business." Indeed, Gholston thought, Rounds himself ought to realize that "No one is in a better position than yourself to know how the necessary contacts could be set up and you might just as well have something out of that knowledge as some of the big shots in Washington who have all kinds of outside relationships. I have found out a lot about how they make their money and have decided to give some of them a little competition."<sup>80</sup> Gholston's letter was obtained by the PWA division of investigation, however, and five days after he sent it he quietly submitted his resignation to the PWA, leaving as his forwarding address an office in the Normandy Building, located on 1626 K Street, the street of lobbyists.

### **Public Works and Patronage: Emil E. Hurja, the New Deal's Political Doctor**

While the difficulties of building a new organization led to many difficulties in getting public works underway, once they were functioning the PWA's bureaucracy and projects played a key role in building and solidifying the Democratic party at federal, state, and local levels of government. As Virginia Senator Carter Glass once quipped, speaking of the occasionally hellish nature of passing New Deal measures, the road to

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<sup>80</sup> J.G. Gholston to G.L. Rounds, Feb. 10, 1939, in "AF 652" folder, box 28, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

hell can be lined with post offices.<sup>81</sup> Central to brokering this relationship between government and party was Emil E. Hurja, who coordinated patronage during the early stages of the PWA. Hurja was in charge of distributing patronage appointments for the Democratic party, placing people not only in Ickes's Interior Department and the PWA, but also consulting with Postmaster General James Farley and New Dealer Rexford G. Tugwell about appointments in Tugwell's Resettlement Administration.<sup>82</sup> Although Hurja is little remembered today, in 1935 one journalist observed that he was "as much a product of the New Deal as Rex Tugwell...an actuarial antidote to the nonpolitically minded and impractical brain trusters and reformers."<sup>83</sup> While this statement contrasts Hurja with a stereotypical view of Tugwell, the general point about Hurja's importance is well-taken.

The PWA created new ties between the federal government and localities, and not simply through the grants-in-aid and the loans offered by the federal government.<sup>84</sup> The large number of appointments required by the PWA led to a silent upheaval in the distribution of patronage by the Democratic party. Ickes complained that once he was in charge of the PWA it was as if "everybody in the country, both male and female, had worked for years for the Democratic party at great personal sacrifice...[and] had fixed upon a berth with PWA as his reward." Ickes was deluged with what he estimated to be thousands of job seekers, sent to him by congressmen and other influential figures.

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<sup>81</sup> Glass quoted in Anthony J. Badger, The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 275.

<sup>82</sup> Farley diary, July 17, 1935, "Private File 1935 July 1-18," box 38, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>83</sup> Ray Tucker, "Chart and Graph Man," Collier's, Jan. 12, 1935, in "Reference File Hurja Emil" folder, box 153, Clapper Papers, LC.

<sup>84</sup> For more on the history of these ties, see Williams, Grants-in-Aid Under the Public Works Administration; James T. Patterson, The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); and see also John Joseph Wallis and Wallace E. Oates, "The Impact of the New Deal on American Federalism," in Michael D. Bordo, Claudia Goldin, and Eugene N. White, eds., The Defining Moment: The Great Depression and the American Economy in the Twentieth Century (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 155-80.

Despite Ickes's desire to help these politicians and "give every possible aid to them in their patronage difficulties," he claimed he had "made up my mind never to sacrifice the efficiency of the organization to politics. After all the best politics for PWA was an absence of politics."<sup>85</sup>

The staffing of the PWA, however, was suffused with political considerations. Postmaster General Farley approved all state-level appointments to the PWA, with party pollster Hurja correlating job offers by congressional district, past election returns, and the loyalty of the applicant's congressman to Roosevelt. In the opinion of one biographer, in this manner Hurja was able "to transform spoilsmanship into a quasi-scientific exercise in personnel management."<sup>86</sup> Ickes complained to his diary, "I am trying hard to complete the setting up of our Public Works organization" but it "has been a slow process because Farley has wanted to visé all the names. Then he goes out of town with his assistant who is representing him in the Public Works organization [Hurja], with the result that not a wheel can move until one of them comes back."<sup>87</sup> With Hurja's careful statistical calculations and Farley's political power, Democrats attempted to steer government relief funds towards states that might be leaning against them in upcoming elections.<sup>88</sup> In Louisiana, for example, the influx of money after Huey Long's death was referred to as the "Second Louisiana Purchase," as the local Democratic party used federal relief dollars to solidify its political machine.<sup>89</sup> While it is logical to assume that FDR and Democrats expected to reap political benefits from New Deal programs, most

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<sup>85</sup> Ickes, Back to Work, 63.

<sup>86</sup> Melvin G. Holli, "Emil E. Hurja: Michigan's Presidential Pollster," Michigan Historical Review 21 (Fall 1995): 134; see also William D. Reeves, "PWA and Competitive Administration in the New Deal," Journal of American History 60 (Sept. 1973): 367-68.

<sup>87</sup> Ickes, Secret Diary, 1:67.

<sup>88</sup> Holli, "Emil E. Hurja," 133.

<sup>89</sup> Douglas L. Smith, The New Deal in the Urban South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 111-12.

research on this question has indicated that, whatever his intentions, FDR probably did not have much direct success in using New Deal spending to influence the fortunes of Democrats.<sup>90</sup> However, this insight has had minimal impact on the history of the Public Works Administration, as historians from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., to William E. Leuchtenburg to Colin Gordon have either accepted Ickes's account of apolitical administration, or simply ignored the PWA altogether.<sup>91</sup>

Patronage was something to be taken seriously, argued Hurja. Patronage "is simply guarding the government against disloyalty. If you place friends in office, the government benefits. They work out of loyalty and don't do just a routine job." Of course, Hurja emphasized, "we have never asked any bureau to take anybody who is not qualified."<sup>92</sup> Michigan-born, Hurja was the son of immigrants from Finland. Following his graduation from the University of Washington, he served in the Army in World War I, owned a newspaper in Texas, and analyzed mining and oil stocks on Wall Street. Here, Hurja met such notable power brokers as Bernard Baruch, Frank C. Walker, and investor Bernard "Sell 'Em Ben" Smith.<sup>93</sup> Hurja's approach to politics was like his approach to analyzing the mining industry:

You apply the same test to public opinion that you do to ore. To discover whether a vein will pay, miners grab samples of ore from many places on its face. Then they pulverize them and melt them down. The residue, with only a small margin of error, shows whether the mine is worth working. In politics you do the same thing. You study polls among all classes and sections of voters; you check new trends against past performances; you establish percentages of shifts among

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<sup>90</sup> A lucid summary of the field is found in Jeremy Atack and Peter Passell, A New Economic View of American History: From Colonial Times to 1940 2d ed., (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 645-46; the essential treatment of this question is John Joseph Wallis, "The Political Economy of New Deal Spending Revisited, Again: With and without Nevada," Explorations in Economic History 35 (1998): 140-70.

<sup>91</sup> See my discussion of the literature in the Introduction, above.

<sup>92</sup> Hurja quoted in Tucker, "Chart and Graph Man."

<sup>93</sup> Paul Mallon, "Right-Hand Man," Today, Nov. 3, 1934; and "Political Notes," Time, March 2, 1936; both in "Reference File Hurja Emil" folder, box 153, Clapper Papers, LC.



different voting strata; you supplement these data with trustworthy information from competent observers in the field, and you can predict an election result almost to a mathematical certainty.<sup>94</sup>

After working for James Farley and the Democratic party during the 1932 campaign, Hurja became one of Ickes's two administrative assistants at the PWA; E.K. Burlew, a career official in the Department of Interior, was the other. Hurja's official job duties were listed as "Coordination between Federal State Representatives, Regional Offices, State officials & Public Bodies-& the Public Works Administration."<sup>95</sup>

Several weeks before Ickes formally announced Hurja's appointment, Farley noted in his diary the important part Hurja had played at Democratic party headquarters during the 1932 campaign, commenting that Hurja had "compiled very accurate figures on the vote which would be cast" and that he "was pleased to recommend him for appointment under Mr. Ickes and I feel that he will be of great service to us in that Department."<sup>96</sup> When Ickes did announce Hurja's appointment in late August it was clear that thoughts of Farley were not far from his mind. After welcoming Hurja as an administrative assistant, Ickes recorded that "Two weeks ago I asked Mr. Hurja to come into the Public Works Administration. He had not applied for a position here and he was not suggested by anyone. The opinion that I have formed of Mr. Hurja from my contacts with him since coming to Washington is that he can be a very useful man in administrative work. I am confident that he will be useful here." Then, aware of Farley and Hurja's desire to place job candidates in the PWA, Ickes declared that "As Secretary of the Interior, I have passed on personnel matters myself. I have done the same as Administrator of Public Works I shall continue to be my own personnel officer."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Hurja quoted in Tucker, "Chart and Graph Man."

<sup>95</sup> October 1933 organization chart, entry 28, "Organization Charts, 1933-1934," RG 135, NA.

<sup>96</sup> Farley diary, May 27, 1933, "James A. Farley Private File 1933" folder, box 37, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>97</sup> PWA Press Release #70, Aug. 22, 1933, volume 2, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA.

In his position as Ickes's administrative assistant, Hurja coordinated the hiring of personnel throughout the PWA. Engineering division director Clarence McDonough recalled how Hurja directed the hiring of his personnel: "Mr. Hurja brought over a bunch of applications that came from (pause) the personnel office (pause) that was--Hurja's office." When PWA investigating agents probed further, asking McDonough if this process constituted "Selection through Hurja?" McDonough replied that Hurja "just brought them over." McDonough cursorily interviewed these candidates and skimmed their employment history, and "if they had enough on their applications to show who they worked for, I would have believed it." This practice quickly led to the hiring and overpaying of many marginally qualified, if personally and politically connected, engineer inspectors.<sup>98</sup>

Hurja kept records of such information as the distribution of PWA funds for federal and non-federal projects by state, displaying them in carefully drawn bar charts. Hurja also tracked the number of PWA employees in Washington, D.C., breaking this down by the state they hailed from, and recording whether or not they had been "endorsed" by a home state congressman or senator.<sup>99</sup>

Hurja, in fact, began filling jobs in the PWA while still working as a special assistant in the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. The RFC, in many ways the precursor to the PWA as the central place in the federal government for approving public works projects, was also an important precedent in terms of patronage. Hurja mailed lists of engineers directly to Major Philip B. Fleming, a member of the Army Corps of Engineers who worked for the PWA for many years, eventually becoming head of the Federal Works Administration from 1941-1949. Hurja let Fleming review these pre-

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<sup>98</sup> "Engineering Division Etc. The Report," [unpaginated] n.d., no folder, box 1, entry 93, "Records Relating to the Investigation of the Engineering Division, 1934," RG 135, NA.

<sup>99</sup> "Public Works Administration Funds Allotted (Confidential)" and "Number of Washington PWA Employees as of Jan. 15, 1934" bar charts, both in "Patronage Matters, Misc." folder, box 96, Hurja Papers. FDRL.

screened candidates, and then had him contact Hurja before making any appointments off this list of recommended engineers. Hurja, in his own records, recorded each engineer's name, home state, work experience, and political endorsements.<sup>100</sup> In addition to helping staff the PWA Washington headquarters, Hurja kept copious records of state engineering appointments for the PWA, noting which senators and congressmen approved of which candidates, and recording such information as whether a candidate supported FDR before the Chicago nominating convention. After Ickes sent his list of candidates over to Hurja and Joseph O'Mahoney, the First Assistant Postmaster General, for review and approval, Hurja and O'Mahoney returned "a substitute list based on the investigations" they made. Hurja and O'Mahoney contacted senators, congressmen, and state party chairmen and summarized their thoughts in a final two-column list; one labeled "Ickes List" and the other "Hurja List."<sup>101</sup>

By January 1934, however, journalists in Washington were reporting that Hurja was planning to leave the PWA, "after an unhappy five months as 'patronage man' in the Interior Department." Hurja was rumored to be considering running for a Michigan Senate seat and was also reported to desire appointment as envoy to Finland. Ickes and E.K. Burlew were said to be blocking Hurja in what one reporter termed "his efforts to find jobs for worthy Democrats."<sup>102</sup> Although Ickes no longer wanted Hurja within the PWA, Farley was more than happy to welcome him and his political expertise back to the Democratic National Committee. Hurja's vast circle of acquaintances and his personal relationships with virtually every senator and congressman made him the ideal candidate

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<sup>100</sup> Hurja's Administrative Assistant to Philip B. Fleming, July 14, 1933, and "Engineers' Applications Submitted to Major Fleming by E.E. Hurja, Special Assistant to the Directors, Reconstruction Finance Corp.," both in "Patronage Matters, Misc." folder, box 96, Hurja Papers, FDRL.

<sup>101</sup> Ickes to Joseph O'Mahoney, Aug. 4, 1933, and O'Mahoney to Ickes, Aug. 4, 1933, and unlabeled and undated notes, all in "Public Wks State Engrs" folder, box 96, Hurja Papers, FDRL. See also notes and materials in box 90-95, Hurja Papers, FDRL.

<sup>102</sup> Newspaper clipping (source unknown), Jan. 17, 1934, and New York Times clipping, no date (probably Jan. 3, 1934), both in "Reference File Hurja, Emil" folder, box 153, Clapper Papers, LC.

to take over much of the detailed work Farley had been doing on party matters.<sup>103</sup> While Farley was ready to announce on March 17, 1934, that Hurja would be assuming his new position on April 1, there were some misgivings on the part of Roosevelt advisor Louis Howe. Farley sketched out the pros and cons of bringing Hurja back: "This appointment of Emil Hurja was made because I felt that he could be of great service to the Party. I considered him the ideal man for the job because he knows the Congressmen and Senators intimately and they have great respect for his judgment." However, Farley noted, "It took some time for me to get Louis Howe's consent to this appointment because he was fearful of the reaction. I felt certain, however, that the appointment would be well received." In fact, Howe and FDR Press Secretary Steve Early sat down with Farley and closely reviewed the press release announcing the addition of Hurja to the DNC. Farley had discussed Hurja's return with Roosevelt, however, and both agreed that his political savvy would be a welcome asset to the Party.<sup>104</sup> Ickes managed to keep his opinion to himself, stating publicly only that Hurja had "been a real help in many difficult situations and there has never been a time when I could not rely upon you loyally and intelligently to work for the best interests of the organization of which you were a part."<sup>105</sup> The significance of Hurja's move was not lost on political professionals such as New Dealer Thomas Corcoran, however. Corcoran wrote to Felix Frankfurter that Hurja was "now the real head of the Democratic National Committee."<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Farley diary, March 5, 1934, "James A. Farley Private File 1934 March-April" folder, box 37, Farley Papers LC.

<sup>104</sup> Farley diary, March 17, 1934 and March 14, 1934, "James A. Farley Private File 1934 March-April" folder, box 37, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>105</sup> Press Release #588, March 15, 1934, volume 13, box 3, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>106</sup> Thomas G. Corcoran to Felix Frankfurter, April 22, 1934, "Special Correspondence. Oxford Correspondence. Corcoran, Thomas G. 1933-34 & undated" folder, reel 70, Frankfurter Papers, LC.

By 1936 the Saturday Evening Post agreed with Corcoran, proclaiming Hurja "The New Deal's Political Doctor."<sup>107</sup> Hurja's careful record keeping, the Post reported, showed "not only how the vital organs or the New Deal are doing but how each muscle, nerve and cell is getting along." Hurja broke down all Federal appropriations, by department, for each state, mailing this information out to every Democratic candidate. Several weeks following Hurja's return to the DNC, Ickes wrote to Hurja to warn him against bringing politics into the PWA. "I hope you will understand me," wrote Ickes, "when I say that I don't like the bringing to bear of political pressure in support of public works projects."

My policy will continue to be to consider all such projects strictly on their merits. You can see for yourself what an embarrassment it would be if an investigation should disclose letters in our files on the letterhead of the Democratic National Committee and over your signature as Assistant to the Chairman, advocating the adoption of certain projects as a political matter. If having received such letters the project should actually be allowed, the inescapable inference would be that political pressure had something to do with it. As you know, I have tried to keep politics out of this matter. I consider this not only proper from every point of view, but particularly advisable from the point of view of the Administration.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to sending Hurja this explicit warning, through the PWA's investigation division Ickes kept a close eye on his activities. In May Ickes received reports that Hurja had taken a representative of publisher Funk and Wagnall to visit George F. Zook and an R.S. Marsh, educational directors of the Civilian Conservation Corps. At this meeting Hurja urged Zook and Marsh to buy the Literary Digest Encyclopedia, published by Funk and Wagnall, for CCC camps throughout the nation. Zook recalled that Hurja said "that the Literary Digest had been very helpful to the Administration and that he wanted to reciprocate as best he could." Marsh stated that Hurja noted "that the several polls conducted by the Literary Digest, some of which were

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<sup>107</sup> Alva Johnston, "'Prof.' Hurja, The New Deal's Political Doctor," Saturday Evening Post, June 13, 1936, in "Reference File Hurja Emil" folder, box 153, Clapper Papers, LC.

<sup>108</sup> Ickes to Emil E. Hurja, May 28, 1934, "Public Works 18) 1934 May-June," box 251, Ickes Papers, LC.

not made public, had been very helpful to the present Administration and that in the nature of acknowledging a debt the Funk and Wagnall Encyclopedia should be purchased for every Civilian Conservation Corps camp." After Zook and Marsh protested that they could not afford to do this, Hurja replied that they could probably get the money they needed from Louis Howe.<sup>109</sup> It is unclear if Hurja succeeded in foisting these encyclopedias on the CCC.

Hurja, however, had not simply attempted to broker deals after he left his position as Ickes's administrative assistant. While working at the PWA, Hurja instructed his own assistant, PWA examining engineer Richard R. Tatlow, to provide confidential information regarding projects to favored construction and engineering firms. Tatlow did this for a number of concerns, favoring in particular his former employers, the Kansas City engineering firm of Harrington and Courtleyou, who as a result consulted on bridge and sewer projects worth over \$12 million in Louisiana, Nebraska, Florida, and Texas. After Hurja left the PWA Tatlow stayed in contact with him, at one point asking Hurja if he could use his influence with the PWA's Special Board of Public Works to get the PWA to take over construction of two private hospitals that were under construction in New York.<sup>110</sup>

During the 1936 campaign, Hurja was contacted by Don J. Sterling of the Oregon Journal. Sterling inquired about the credentials of two Democratic party fundraisers, J.F. Gormley and John Cahill. These two men, according to the Morning Oregonian, were the "salesmen from the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee" who had arrived in Portland and were "contacting individuals and firms that have benefited from PWA projects, such as the five Oregon bridges and Bonneville Dam." Gormley and

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<sup>109</sup> Glavis to Ickes, May 29, 1934, "AF 27" folder, box 3, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>110</sup> Division of Investigation report, June 13, 1934, "AF 14" folder, box 1, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

Cahill were selling advertising space in a "campaign book" to contractors, lumber men, and cement businessmen. Gormley summed up their approach: "If a man is making money from selling the government something, why shouldn't he contribute something as a token of appreciation, whether he is a Republican or Democrat? We are not making a blind canvass. We know who to see; we know who has been making money furnishing cement, lumber, and other material to build these dams and bridges." Hurja, clearly concerned, wired back to Sterling, "Men you named are bona fide solicitors of revised convention book stop Have asked W. Forbes Morgan Treasurer of Committee to withdraw them." PWA investigating agents looked into Gormley and Cahill's conduct. Theodore Shoemaker, the president of Warren Northwest, Inc., and recipient of five PWA contracts, told the agents that "no improper methods of approach, no 'strong arm methods,' no implication that purchase or refusal might affect possible future contracts was made in any manner whatsoever..... The solicitation was about a legitimate matter, conducted in a gentlemanly way, and parties thereto were within their rights in every respect."<sup>111</sup>

Evidence that Hurja's dealings were fairly common knowledge around the Capitol comes from journalist Paul Mallon's Washington Star newspaper column. On one occasion, Mallon observed that the "biggest news" making the rounds

is an advertisement signed by one Edward Hurja of the Democratic National Committee. The advertisement says there are still some public works left for the right people, also a few second-class postmasterships at nominal rates. Then, at the bottom, in the smallest possible type is: "Yoo-hoo Matt. Hi Tom. Hello Ben." The purpose of such a postscript would be clear only to those who know Matthew Brush, Tom Bragg and Ben Smith, most ferocious of the bulls and bears.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Morning Oregonian clipping, Sept. 4, 1936; Emil Hurja telegram to Don J. Sterling, Sept. 4, 1936; affidavit of Theodore Shoemaker, undated (probably between Sept. 14 and Sept. 19, 1936); all in "AF 581" folder, box 19, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>112</sup> Clipping of Mallon's column, May 29, 1934, in "AF 1" folder, box 1, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

Ben Smith, also known as "Sell 'em Ben," was the well-known stock trader who proclaimed "Sell 'em all; they aren't worth anything" during the market crash of 1929. This "advertisement" was clearly intended to be a joke, as the PWA division of investigation soon discovered upon making a full inquiry after Mallon's column crossed Ickes's desk.<sup>113</sup> They located the full text of the ad in an obscure humor circular:

**FEDERAL SECURITIES COMMITTEE JOBS**

Sealed bids, in duplicate, will be received by the Democratic National Committee Wash. D.C. until 10 AM, Saturday June 30, 1934, and will then be privately opened or purchased from the committee of

**FIVE GOOD JOBS ON NEW  
FEDERAL SECURITIES COMMITTEE  
AT \$12,000.00 A YEAR "AND"**

The 5 jobs will be very lucrative. We have no objection to smart Republican money. No experience required beyond having sold aluminum in the summer vacation of your Soph year.

This is your chance; be one of the famous "They" who put things down or up. Get ready now by registering your stocks in your wife's name or better organize a personal holding co in Panama or Bermuda. Don't envy other's success: be successful yourself. Grasp this opportunity! Send in your bid today:

**ALSO A FEW SECOND-CLASS POST OFFICES AT REASONABLE PRICES  
DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE**

By E. Edward Hurja,

Asst. Chairman and Deficit Man.

Yoo-hoo Ben Smith--Yoo-hoo Tom--Hi Matt<sup>114</sup>

However, despite Ickes's misgivings over publicity such as this, he maintained a relationship with Hurja and corresponded with him regarding the organization of the Democratic party and the specifics of certain PWA projects. After he visited with Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly, Ickes asked Hurja if he could advise Ickes regarding the selection of African-American Arthur W. Mitchell as Democratic candidate for Congress

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<sup>113</sup> See the reports and memos in "AF 1" folder, box 1, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA; and Ickes to Glavis, June 9, 1934, "Public Works 18) 1934 May-June" folder, box 251, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>114</sup> "AF 1" folder, box 1, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941." RG 135, NA.



from the first district in Illinois.<sup>115</sup> Ickes, progressive on racial issues, wanted to see the Democrats make a strong attempt to unseat the African-American Republican incumbent, Congressman Oscar DePriest. Kelly, tired of seeing the Democrats field a white candidate against an African-American incumbent in an African-American district, was also willing to do what was necessary to win. In addition simply to taking an interest in certain Democratic candidates, Ickes was willing to use PWA projects to advance the fortunes of others. As the 1934 midterm elections approached, Hurja urged him to do just this, writing Ickes, "Pursuant to the promise which you gave me the other day, may I remind you of the University of Washington building project which has been pending for some months? If at all possible to expedite this before your forthcoming vacation, I am sure it will be very much appreciated." Hurja reminded Ickes that "You should have had, during the last day or two, a telegram regarding it from Honorable Louis [sic] B. Schwellenbach," the president of the University of Washington's board of regents. "If you could answer Mr. Schwellenbach's wire affirmatively," Hurja added, "I am sure it would serve a very good purpose." Hurja wrote a postscript to this missive, informing Ickes that "Mr. Schwellenbach is likely to become a senatorial candidate to supplant C.C. Dill. He is a very good friend of mine and one of the best Democrats in the West." Driving the point home, Hurja further appended, in blue ink, "You met him."<sup>116</sup> Ickes wired Schwellenbach that same day, informing him that the PWA had approved loans and grants totaling \$687,500 for university construction.<sup>117</sup> That Ickes was most likely making a special exception for Hurja is clear from a subsequent list of PWA projects for

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<sup>115</sup> Ickes to Hurja, June 23, 1934; and Ickes to Hurja, July 11, 1934; both in "Political 8) 1934 June-August" folder, box 261, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>116</sup> Hurja to Ickes, July 18, 1934, "Public Works 19) 1934 July-August" folder, box 251, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>117</sup> Ickes to Lewis B. Schwellenbach, July 18, 1934, "Public Works 19) 1934 July-August" folder, box 251, Ickes Papers, LC.

Washington that he sent Hurja, asking him "Please bear in mind that Washington has had 192 per cent of quota, so don't stretch the elastic to the breaking point."<sup>118</sup>

### **Public Works and Party Building**

While Emil Hurja played an important role in Washington, D.C., attempting to connect the PWA's bureaucracy and projects to the larger task of building and solidifying the Democratic party at the federal, state, and local levels of government, much of the hard work of party building took place away from the nation's capital. Although there were many obstacles, the growing involvement between these different levels of government led National Planning Board member Louis Brownlow (himself a former city manager) to observe that if the early New Deal was a period in which "it has been said that the federal government has discovered the cities, it is equally true that the cities have discovered the federal government."<sup>119</sup>

The nation's mayors were especially interested in the PWA's potential to aid the cities, banding together in 1933 to form the United States Conference of Mayors to confront the problem of unemployment. Political scientist Leonard D. White found the "rapid growth of the corporate consciousness and corporate organization of the cities themselves," epitomized by the founding of the Conference of Mayors, as cause for rating 1933 as "the most eventful [year] for municipal affairs in the twentieth century."<sup>120</sup> On September 23, 1933, Ickes traveled to Chicago to address the mayors at their national meeting. He there tried to confront charges from the mayors that the PWA was holding up the distribution of public works funding, arguing that the cities were failing to send

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<sup>118</sup> Ickes to Hurja, Sept. 17, 1934, "Public Works 20) 1934 September" folder, box 250, Ickes Papers. LC.

<sup>119</sup> Brownlow quoted in Mark I. Gelfand, A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 37.

<sup>120</sup> White quoted in Gelfand, Nation of Cities, 66-67.

Washington their plans for fiscally sound projects in a timely fashion. "We have moved and are moving expeditiously, if circumspectly, but there is a point beyond which we cannot go," Ickes said.

We can give you money; we can help you to decide what project to undertake; we can assist you with your plans and your specifications and the letting of your contracts; we can aid you in supervising your work; we can meet the charges of the contractors when they fall due; we can even encourage you to speed up your projects. But we cannot do more than this. We cannot decide for you whether you want public works. We cannot make you borrow money from us on favorable terms. We cannot force you to move any faster than you are willing to move.

"All we can do," Ickes said, "is to ask you to 'get on your marks! Get set! Go!' You will have to run the race." Interestingly, Ickes did not then move to justify the PWA as an unemployment relief program to the assembled mayors. Rather, he announced that the PWA "offers the greatest opportunity for municipal improvements in the history of any country," adding, "Here is an opportunity to build necessary and desirable public works on more favorable terms than you have ever had before or than you may ever have again. Do you need new water works, or an extension of your present plant? Do you want a new or improved sewage system? Do you require bridges or viaducts or public buildings or roads or new schools? These things and others you may have on unbelievably generous terms." While the PWA had a role in increasing employment, for Ickes it was a role that pivoted on increasing indirect employment, arguing that "for every hundred thousand men at work on public works projects there are at least an equal number at work back of the lines in saw mills, in steel mills, in factories, in quarries, and on railroads, producing materials and performing services necessary to supply the men on actual projects with what they need for their work."<sup>121</sup> Ickes's emphasis on the twin abilities of public works to provide needed municipal improvements and to stimulate indirect employment in

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<sup>121</sup> Sept. 23, 1933 speech of Harold L. Ickes to the U.S. Conference of Mayors, in The Public Speeches and Statements of Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes, volume 1, box 1, entry 26, "Public Speeches and Statements of Harold L. Ickes, 1934-1939," RG 135, NA.

related industries echoed a generation of thinking by such engineers and economists as Otto T. Mallery, Leo Wolman, Arthur D. Gayer, and John Kenneth Galbraith.<sup>122</sup>

The mayors, however, were less interested in Ickes's thoughts on unemployment than they were in how the PWA was going to eliminate delays in processing their applications. As Ickes later recalled, "I looked those mayors in the eye and I told them what the exact truth was--that the reason the public works program was delayed was because they and others like them, and governors of states, didn't get their projects in to us but were trying to excuse their own delay and ineptitude by blaming us."<sup>123</sup> Ickes temporarily defused the mayors's anger by inviting them to send a subcommittee to Washington to see the PWA in action and to make suggestions for improving the application process. After reviewing the PWA's workings, mayors T. Seems Walmsley (New Orleans), Daniel W. Hoan (Milwaukee), James M. Curley (Boston), Oscar Holcombe (Houston), C. Nelson Sparks (Akron), and secretary of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, Paul V. Betters, declared that while Ickes's basic bureaucratic plan was sound, he lacked the personnel necessary for expeditious handling of applications.<sup>124</sup> Ickes remained unconvinced, however, that the PWA was at fault in any way. Writing to his friend, California Senator Hiram Johnson, Ickes related that the mayors "had adopted some ill-considered resolutions vociferating about red tape and delay in the public works program at this end." While Ickes conceded that "There has been delay, lots of it," he still

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<sup>122</sup> Otto T. Mallery, "The Long-Range Planning of Public Works," chap. 14 in Business Cycles and Unemployment (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1923); President's Conference on Unemployment, Report of the Committee on Recent Economic Changes, Planning and Control of Public Works, Including the Report of Leo Wolman (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1931); Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression; and J.K. Galbraith, assisted by G.G. Johnson, Jr., The Economic Effects of the Federal Public Works Expenditures, 1933-1938 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940).

<sup>123</sup> Ickes, Secret Diary, 1:97.

<sup>124</sup> PWA Press Release #171, Sept. 29, 1933, volume 3, box 1, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA.

asserted that "I think I can honestly say that it isn't here at Washington."<sup>125</sup> Indeed, Ickes insisted to another friend, "I am not cutting down on allotments or squeezing nickels as they pass through my hands," adding that "The period when we will have to exercise watchful care is when the works have actually been commenced. Then it will be a question whether the contractors are performing according to specifications and doing an honest job." Ickes continued, arguing that the PWA "will exercise all the care of which we are capable then, but just now we are really allotting money as fast as we are given an opportunity to allot it, subject to careful scrutiny in the future covering its actual expenditure." At any rate, Ickes felt, it was "[i]n the very nature of things" for public works to be "a slow proposition because they involve planning, the drawing of specifications, the letting of contracts, and the actual start on the propositions themselves." As he observed, "If I should shovel out the balance of this fund today there wouldn't be an additional man at work in all human probability for weeks to come."<sup>126</sup> Despite efforts to address delays, however, in February and March 1934, the PWA again heard repeated complaints about bureaucratic slowness from state and local PWA officials in New York, Boston, Detroit, St. Paul, Atlanta, Portland, Los Angeles, Little Rock, and Fort Worth.<sup>127</sup>

While PWA presented local and state politicians with an opportunity to employ federal funds to improving infrastructure while reducing unemployment, in many cases, the building of public works engendered the building of party organizations as well. In Chicago, for example, local politicians seized upon the PWA as a chance to improve the

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<sup>125</sup> Harold L. Ickes to Hiram Johnson, Sept. 25, 1933, "Interior File Friends Hiram Johnson 1933 Apr-Oct." folder, box 161, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>126</sup> Ickes to Rowland Rogers, Sept. 25, 1933, in "Public Works 3) 1933 September 15-30" folder, box 248. Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>127</sup> "Report of Regional Conference Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works called by Colonel H.M. Waite, Deputy Administrator," Feb. 14-March 1, 1934, in "Feb. 14-Mar. 1, 1934" folder, box 1, entry 23, "Minutes and Reports of Conferences of the PWA, 1934-1941," RG 135, NA.

Democratic party's fortunes. There was some precedence for this; the Civil Works Administration had been beset by a number of scandals, notably kickbacks involving truck rentals in Chicago.<sup>128</sup> While both Ickes and Hopkins often brought in presumably nonpartisan Army officers from the Army Corps of Engineers to run problematic relief and public works programs, just as often the PWA and CWA were content to work through local political machines, both Democratic and Republican, so long as major scandals were avoided.<sup>129</sup>

The PWA's own investigations found that the Democratic party in Chicago was not restricting its solicitations to PWA employees. More seriously, the Democratic party in Chicago was drawing on the personnel of the Chicago Sanitary District in order to raise funds. One of several overlapping governmental authorities in Chicago, the Sanitary District had a deserved reputation for being, as the special assistant to the Illinois attorney general wrote Ickes, "nothing but a legal expedient to avoid constitutional debt limitation and permit the people of Chicago to borrow money with which to construct the canals through the device of a separate corporation which the constitutional limit at the time prevented their borrowing in the normal way to perform a function essentially that of the City."<sup>130</sup> Ickes and the PWA funded a \$41 million dollar sewage project that the Sanitary District was in charge of building, and they were concerned about the

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<sup>128</sup> Roger Biles, Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1984), 34.

<sup>129</sup> For the CWA, see Bonnie Fox Schwartz, The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934: The Business of Emergency Employment in the New Deal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 72-101; for the experience of cities during the New Deal, helpful works include Gelfand, Nation of Cities; Bruce M. Stave, The New Deal and the Last Hurrah: Pittsburgh Machine Politics (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970); Lyle W. Dorsett, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press Corp., 1977); Biles, Big City Boss in Depression and War; and Jo Ann Argersinger, Toward a New Deal in Baltimore: People and Government in the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 57-92. Unfortunately, the most influential recent treatment of the New Deal's impact in a major city, Elizabeth Cohen's Making a New Deal, ignores the intersection of public works programs and local politics.

<sup>130</sup> Cornelius Lynde to Ickes, June 21, 1933, in "Harold L. Ickes Secretary of Interior File. Chicago Sanitary District. 1933-39" folder, box 146, Ickes Papers, LC.

appearance of impropriety that might arise if the Sanitary District were to award contracts to politically connected construction firms.

A secretary to Chicago Congressman Adolph Sabath went so far as to approach a PWA engineering inspector, Myles S. Tomaska, suggesting that he stop by the local Democratic party headquarters. Upon doing so, Tomaska was informed that since his job was "a political job," he was required to pay two percent of his monthly salary, or \$9.50, to his Democratic precinct captain, Joseph Hines, each month. Later that week, Hines told Tomaska that since he did not live in the same ward that he worked in, Tomaska needed to pay an additional \$10 a month. "While I was at the Democratic Headquarters," Tomaska later recalled, "I was told that if I did not pay the money that they asked, my position would be in jeopardy, and that I could lose my job," even though "At no time did I have any knowledge of owing any dues to this organization, nor have I been a member of this organization prior to this time."<sup>131</sup> Although Sabath was, as one historian put it, a "firm believer in the patronage system," Tomaska's supervisor had little sympathy for Tomaska's situation, writing to PWA's Washington headquarters, "If I had my way about this matter I would immediately dismiss the man [Tomaska] for ignorance..... If he shows such stupidity as to pay for his job, he most certainly is not the kind of a man we should have in our organization."<sup>132</sup> In investigating Tomaska's case, however, the PWA uncovered that 24 of 27 men who worked for the Sanitary District as engineers were paying dues to various local Democratic organizations.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Affidavit of Myles S. Tomaska, Feb. 26, 1935, in "AF 250" folder, box 7, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>132</sup> Burton A. Boxerman, "Adolph Joachim Sabath in Congress: The Roosevelt and Truman Years," Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society 66 (winter 1973): 430; C.H. Bauer to H.A. Gray, Feb. 25, 1935, in "AF 391" folder, box 12, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

<sup>133</sup> Report of PWA Special Agent J.F. O'Connell, May 24, 1935, in "AF 391" folder, box 12, entry 85. "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA.

The intersection of the Chicago Sanitary District, Congressman Sabath, and PWA engineer inspector Myles Tomaska was not an isolated occurrence; rather, many similar incidents were recorded by the PWA division of investigation, in many parts of the nation. As we shall see in the next chapter, on the ground there was actually very little difference between the ways the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration provided an important arena for local political struggles to be worked out. While the local impacts of New Deal spending have been noted by historians, the significance of this finding has not transcended a debate focused on the relationship between the New Deal and the fate of urban boss rule. To be sure, as FDR pointed out, the New Deal "never had a teapot dome scandal." However, not enough attention has been paid to the ways that the core of the New Deal--its public works programs--reshaped the political landscape in the short-term, as well as the actual landscape of the United States in the longer run.

### **Louis Glavis and the Costs of Surveillance**

While Glavis began his job as head of the PWA's division of investigation with Ickes's full backing, he soon began to overstep his authority. The common denominator among the investigators hired by Glavis was that many were "personal friends with no qualifications other than their loyalty to Glavis." The head of PWA's investigation division, one Department of the Interior report observed, had "gathered around him a small coterie of special agents who were little more than personal retainers."<sup>134</sup> These moves, combined with Glavis's zeal, did not benefit Ickes's public image. Journalist Paul Mallon, for example, published jibes such as a collection of "New Year resolutions supposed to have been made mentally by New Deal statesmen," including "Mr. Ickes--'To

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<sup>134</sup> "Louis R. Glavis," Feb. 1, 1937, "Departmental File Interior: 1936-39" folder, box 54, PSF, FDR Papers, FDRL.



have Glavis investigate me."<sup>135</sup> Ickes later told his immediate circle of aides that he had given Glavis "very extraordinary powers" because the PWA staff had been assembled so quickly that Ickes could not tell "whom I could trust and whom I could not trust." But, once Ickes had figured this out, and once Glavis began to investigate the PWA too closely, relations between the two soured.<sup>136</sup>

Before this break occurred, however, Ickes defended Glavis to FDR against anonymous charges that "Glavis is a law unto himself." Ickes flattered FDR, stating that the president knew Glavis "too well and too favorably, I am sure, to consider seriously vague charges against him." More directly, Ickes stated that

without the protection that he and his force of investigators have given me, I doubt very much whether as Public Works Administrator I could have carried on as I have so far done without even a single minor scandal. He is after the crooks all the time and the crooks are afraid of him. His very name is a protection. He reports directly to me and works directly under my orders. Every week I have a detailed report from him covering all the cases he has in hand.<sup>137</sup>

While this bought Glavis more time, his reprieve was only temporary.

Glavis's investigation into bidding practices on the construction of a New York City Post Office annex led to his undoing. Glavis informed Ickes that the procurement division of the Treasury Department, which was letting this contract with PWA funds, "has shown favoritism toward certain companies and that it has permitted political influence to affect its supervision of construction work." Three times Treasury's procurement division had received and rejected bids for construction on the Post Office Annex in New York City, until "its favored company underbid competitors, whereupon it

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<sup>135</sup> Clipping of Paul Mallon column, Washington Star, Jan. 1, 1935, "Columnists, 1935-39" folder, box 149, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>136</sup> Minutes of Staff Meeting, May 11, 1938, "Interior File. Friends. Charles West, 1937-42" folder, box 164, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>137</sup> Ickes to FDR, Dec. 27, 1934, "Interior 1933-36" folder, box 54, PSF, FDR Papers, FDRL.

was promptly awarded the contract."<sup>138</sup> This favored company, James Stewart & Company, was not just any preferred business. Fred Driscoll told PWA investigators that the failure of his firm, Driscoll and Company, to win the contract was in part due "to the fact that the General Builders Supply Company of New York City, of which he believes the Postmaster General James A. Farley is one of the owners, was interested in having the James Stewart Company obtain the contract, for the purpose of selling the building materials to the Stewart Company." Driscoll added that Assistant Secretary of the Treasury, Lawrence "Chip" Robert, had links to Stewart. Robert, a jaunty Democrat and friend of Farley, was in charge of Treasury's procurement division and, reported PWA agents, was "known to be very friendly with officers of the James Stewart Company" and "has been entertained by the Stewarts in New York rather extensively."<sup>139</sup>

The division of investigation undertook a joint investigation with the procurement division, meeting together with the officials of Stewart and Company. However, after Stewart and Company agreed to let the PWA look through their correspondence files, under the condition that a Treasury Department representative would be present, they required that the PWA agents to explain what they were investigating. After stating generally what they were looking into, Stewart and Company refused to let the PWA agents examine their correspondence. In fact, the PWA agents reported, "the officials of the Treasury Department assumed the attitude that their Department was being investigated, and under this pretense they allied themselves with Stewart and Company and resisted all efforts of this Division to proceed with the investigation."<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Glavis to Ickes, Dec. 21, 1934, no folder, box 1, entry 25 (unidentified entry), "Records Relating to Investigation of New York Post Office Annex and Courthouse. Division of Investigation." RG 135, NA.

<sup>139</sup> PWA Special Agent Thomas J. Dodd to PWA Special Agent A.D. Bailey, Jr., Re: Interview of Fred Driscoll," Feb. 19, 1935, "AF 245" folder, box 7, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA. For Robert's denials of these allegations, see Admiral Christian Peoples to Glavis, Feb. 27, 1935, "AF 249" folder, in *ibid*.

<sup>140</sup> "Alleged Collusion between James Stewart & Company and Officials of the Procurement Division. Treasury Department," in Glavis to Ickes, Dec. 21, 1934, no folder, box 1, entry 25 (unidentified entry).

This rather twisted and confusing tale might have just sat in the PWA's files, but for Louisiana Senator Huey Long.<sup>141</sup> After getting wind that the Treasury Department seemed to be involved in a scheme to funnel PWA contracts to construction companies with direct links to party leaders such as Farley, Long blasted Farley and the Roosevelt administration on the Senate floor, calling for an inquiry. The Senate quickly passed a resolution requesting from the PWA all materials mentioning the Stewart Company and Farley. Farley flatly denied the substance of Long's charges, made on the Senate floor between February 11 and 21.<sup>142</sup> Irate, Farley arrived at the White House on the evening of February 17, 1935. FDR instructed Ickes to gather all the facts on this case and prepare a summary to be sent to the Senate after FDR, Treasury Secretary Morgenthau, Ickes, and Farley had collectively reviewed it. FDR made a point of telling Ickes to talk to Glavis "and tell him to discontinue his investigations of Departments wherein the Public Works Administration was not in any way connected; in other words, 'stay in his own back yard', which Secretary Ickes agreed to do." Over the next week, the PWA staff combed through its files for records of its investigations.<sup>143</sup> Ickes forwarded some of the PWA's internal correspondence to Farley, containing the denials of PWA investigators that they had ever investigated Farley and his affairs directly.<sup>144</sup> This somewhat mollified

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"Records Relating to Investigation of New York Post Office Annex and Courthouse. Division of Investigation," RG 135, NA.

<sup>141</sup> T. Harry Williams, Huey Long (New York: Vintage, 1981 [1969]), 806-10; Ickes, Secret Diary, 1:294-300; John Morton Blum, From the Morgenthau Diaries: Years of Crisis, 1928-1938 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 87-91.

<sup>142</sup> Typed Notes "Dictated 3/1/35 En Route," "Private File 1935 Jan.-April" folder, box 37, Farley Papers, LC; and see also Farley, Behind the Ballots, 247.

<sup>143</sup> Minutes of PWA Staff Meetings, Feb. 19 and Feb. 26, 1935, both in "PWA Staff Meetings" folder, box 2922, entry 749B, "Office of the Secretary. Central Classified Files, 1937-53," RG 48, NA--College Park.

<sup>144</sup> PWA Special Agent Wharton Green to Glavis, Feb. 26, 1935; PWA Special Agent L.W. Morrissey to Green, Feb. 26, 1935; and PWA Special Agent Maxwell B. Bruce to Green, Feb. 26, 1935; all enclosed in Farley to Ickes, March 1, 1935, "Interior File Post Office Dept. 1933-1935" folder, box 242, Ickes Papers, LC.

Farley, who looked forward to vindication: "Secretary Morgenthau has indicated a great interest in endeavoring to have this matter handled so that it will be proven conclusively that I am not at all guilty of the charges made by Huey Long. Secretary Ickes, too, has stated that the records are clear, and that when the facts are made known, the matter will die a slow death and make a laughing stock out of Long." FDR's will to fight Long reassured Farley, too, as he wrote in his diary, "I am satisfied that everything will be done to protect my interest, because the President realizes that it isn't my fight but his."<sup>145</sup>

Glavis and his agents quickly reported to Ickes on the state of their investigation: they had looked into the construction of the New York Post Office Annex, learned that there was what Glavis termed "an alleged conspiracy" involving the construction of the Annex and Stewart's other big contract, for the federal court house in New York City. Although the court house was not a PWA project, there was evidence that Stewart had obtained the contract following a similarly questionable series of bids. After the director of the procurement division, Admiral Christian Peoples, and Glavis had agreed that the PWA would investigate both projects, the joint investigation fell apart and the PWA pulled out.<sup>146</sup>

Although Long continued to draw attention to himself and vigorously promoted his "share-the-wealth" plan, Ickes and NRA head Hugh Johnson struck back. In a nationally broadcast speech, Johnson famously proclaimed that, thanks to Long and his fellow "pied piper," Detroit priest and radio broadcaster Father Charles Coughlin, "this country was never under a greater menace." Ickes threatened that unless Long stopped trying to establish state authority in Louisiana over federal funds, these moneys could be revoked. "No public works money is going to build up any share-the-wealth machine."

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<sup>145</sup> Farley diary, Feb. 18, 1935, "Private File 1935 Jan.-April" folder, box 37, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>146</sup> PWA Special Agent Wharton Green to Glavis, Feb. 19, 1935; and Glavis to Ickes, Feb. 18, 1935, both in no folder, box 1, entry 25 (unidentified entry), "Records Relating to Investigation of New York Post Office Annex and Courthouse. Division of Investigation," RG 135, NA.

Ickes declared. After Long declared that Ickes could go "slambang to hell," Ickes rejoined that the Kingfish had "halitosis of the intellect."<sup>147</sup>

Glavis's stock began to decline following the Farley-Long episode, although Ickes continued to rely on the many reports produced by his division of investigation. Farley objected to what he understood to be Glavis's practice of keeping "private files on every one of prominence in the Administration, including the members of the cabinet, also members of the Roosevelt family and Louis Howe." Farley conferred with FDR about Glavis more than once. "I am sure," Farley wrote, "that the President is not in sympathy with his methods but it would probably be embarrassing to attempt to do anything about it just at present inasmuch as Glavis is so close to Ickes." As far as Farley was concerned, though, this was not a case of an out-of-control subordinate disobeying the orders of his superior. Rather, he thought, "Ickes is desirous, like Glavis, of getting something on everyone connected with the Administration. In that way he will make it impossible for the President to release him from his office." Farley thought the safest course of action was to keep Glavis in his post until the end of FDR's term, and if FDR replaced Ickes as Interior Secretary at some point, Glavis could be moved aside without much fuss.<sup>148</sup>

While Glavis survived in his post until July 1936, following the Farley-Long episode he did little to raise his stock with Ickes. In fact, when the division of investigation brought about the suspension of two engineer examiners and the PWA Acting Director for Rhode Island and Connecticut, Ickes reversed this action and

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<sup>147</sup> Williams, Huey Long, 808-13.

<sup>148</sup> Farley diary, May 15, 1935, "Private File 1935 May-June" folder; and Farley diary, July 23, 1935, "Private File 1935 July 19-31" folder; both in box 38, Farley Papers, LC. Farley's opinion of Ickes did improve, however, and by 1936 he thought Ickes an important asset to the administration. See Farley diary, Jan. 19, 1936, "Private File 1936 January" folder, box 38, Farley Papers, LC.

reprimanded Glavis for overstepping his bounds.<sup>149</sup> Glavis's assistant, B.W. McLaughlin, then infuriated Ickes when McLaughlin sent him a memo criticizing him for disregarding the division of investigation's findings, and then destroyed some PWA investigation records. Glavis, ill, was in New York and ignored Ickes's attempts to reach him. Further, Glavis was reported to be seeking employment as a project expediter, working in Washington for the New York City Midtown Tunnel PWA project.<sup>150</sup> Exasperated, Ickes finally eased Glavis out of his post, allowing him to save face by sending him to a position on the staff of the Senate's campaign expenditures investigating committee.<sup>151</sup> Following Glavis's departure, "his division was found to have been organized clumsily and operated incompetently and extravagantly" and his staff was reduced and reorganized.<sup>152</sup> Ickes took the opportunity to divide responsibility for PWA and Interior investigations among two people. He placed Angelo R. Clas, a Harvard graduate and Chicago architect who had worked as an executive in manufacturing and steel companies before working for the PWA housing division, in charge of PWA investigations.

After Glavis's departure, Ickes feared that he would try to seek revenge. Ickes suspected that Glavis was conspiring with Undersecretary of the Interior Charles West in an effort to discredit him. West, a former Democratic congressman from Ohio, had locked horns with Ickes, accusing him of wiretapping his phone line. West then began leaking stories to that effect to the press. Ickes later told his staff, "there were more and

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<sup>149</sup> Glavis to Ickes, Nov. 9, 1935, in "AF 443" folder, box 14, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," RG 135, NA; PWA Press Release #1775 [undated, but between Nov. 1, 1935 and Jan. 31, 1936], volume 40, box 8, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>150</sup> Ickes to Glavis, April 9, 1936, in "Louis R. Glavis," Feb. 1, 1937, "Departmental File Interior: 1936-39" folder, box 54, PSF, FDR Papers, FDRL; Ickes, Secret Diary, 1:549-51.

<sup>151</sup> PWA Press Release #2019, [undated but between May 1, 1936 and July 31, 1936], volume 42, box 9, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA; Ickes, Secret Diary, 1:641.

<sup>152</sup> "Louis R. Glavis," Feb. 1, 1937, "Departmental File Interior: 1936-39" folder, box 54, PSF, FDR Papers, FDRL.

more stories in the newspapers, if you will remember, and finally, as a man will frequently do in a situation like that, he overplayed his hand, so that I knew and I was in position to prove, and I told him I could have proved in a court of law that he had given this stuff to the newspapers."<sup>153</sup>

More importantly, Ickes suspected that West and Glavis were attempting to use the forum of a Senate confirmation hearing to embarrass him. The "most despicable thing of all," Ickes informed his staff, was West's decision to provide Senator Key Pittman with information from Glavis, prior to the hearings on E.K. Burlew's nomination to become first assistant secretary of the Interior Department. "I don't know whether you know where he got his ammunition," Ickes speculated, "but most of it he got from West." West "took up this memoranda that Glavis supplied him with" to Pittman, and Pittman grilled Burlew.<sup>154</sup>

The Burlew hearings fascinated many, including New Dealers, as Glavis himself was called to testify about practices within Interior. At the conclusion of Glavis's testimony, Harry Hopkins's aide Corrington Gill rushed a copy of it to Hopkins, along with the news that WPA deputy administrator Aubrey Williams "asked me to get hold of this testimony by 'hook or crook', and I am glad to report that I did it by 'hook.'"<sup>155</sup> Glavis told the Senate that he had between six and seven hundred investigators in his employ when he was working for Ickes. Senators pressed him to discuss wiretapping the Interior Department and to assess rumors that his agents broke into Senate offices to search through files, allegations that Glavis denied.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Minutes of Staff Meeting, May 11, 1938; and Ickes to FDR, Nov. 20, 1937; both in "Interior File. Friends. Charles West, 1937-42" folder, box 164, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>154</sup> Minutes of Staff Meeting, May 11, 1938; and Ickes to FDR, Nov. 20, 1937; both in "Interior File. Friends. Charles West, 1937-42" folder, box 164, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>155</sup> Corrington Gill to Harry Hopkins, Jan. 19, 1938, "Testimony of Mr. Louis R. Glavis--18 Jan. 1938" folder, box 80, Hopkins Papers, FDRL.

<sup>156</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Public Lands and Surveys, Hearings on the Nomination of Ebert K. Burlew to be First Assistant Secretary of the Interior, 91-102. Glavis's figure of investigators may

Following his break with Glavis, Ickes re-examined his entire conception of the man, going all the way back to Glavis's involvement in the Ballinger-Pinchot Affair, even going so far as to reverse his assessment of Ballinger's guilt and Glavis's innocence.<sup>157</sup> In the division of investigation, Glavis had "raised up a veritable Frankenstein's monster" within the Public Works Administration, Ickes concluded. The investigators that Ickes had previously so trusted had become "persecutors, man hunters, and they are just as eager to hunt and drag down members of my staff as they are lobbyists and crooked contractors against whom we are trying to protect the Department and PWA."<sup>158</sup> These investigators, however, left a valuable record of the many difficulties confronting the PWA as it attempted to build public works projects across the nation. Indeed, despite all of the problems that beset the PWA--from its overstuffed and often incompetent divisions of engineering, finance, and legal affairs, to its over-zealous division of investigation, to the problems involved in attempting to pacify job-seekers, congressmen, senators, state and local officials, contractors, labor, and boosters--an examination of the infrastructure produced by the PWA lends credence to the notion that Ickes was "a builder to rival Cheops."<sup>159</sup> The next chapter turns directly to this PWA-built infrastructure, comparing it to the public works built by Hopkins's WPA, and looking at the significance of this building for comprehending the nature and limits of New Deal liberalism.

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reflect the total number of agents he supervised while in charge of investigations for the Interior Department, the Petroleum Administration Board created by the NRA, and the Public Works Administration.

<sup>157</sup> For Ickes's continued interest in this matter, see Harold L. Ickes, Not Guilty: An Official Inquiry Into the Charges Made by Glavis and Pinchot Against Richard A. Ballinger, Secretary of the Interior, 1909-1911 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940); and Ickes, "Not Guilty! Richard A. Ballinger--An American Dreyfus," Saturday Evening Post, May 25, 1940.

<sup>158</sup> Ickes, Secret Diary, 1:551.

<sup>159</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 133.



## CHAPTER THREE

## THE DILEMMA OF NEW DEAL PUBLIC WORKS: PEOPLE OR PROJECTS?

While the Public Works Administration built a new bureaucracy, solicited and selected plans for public works, and began to spend the \$3.3 billion appropriated by Congress, Harold Ickes and other New Dealers were confronted with a stark question: were they in fact sending people back to work by adhering to a philosophy of selecting "worthwhile" public works projects? This philosophy was not new to the New Deal. The notion that government construction should be "worthwhile" was rooted in the assumption that public works should be self-liquidating. Progressives such as Herbert Hoover believed that public works projects should make back the cost of their construction by generating revenue. A dam, for example, could produce revenue by selling the electricity it generates. The Hoover administration's approach to choosing and funding public works, through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, followed this approach.<sup>1</sup>

However, as economist and public works advocate Otto T. Mallery pointed out in a candid moment, "self-liquidating" was defined in such a limited way by the RFC that it came to mean, in effect, "a first-class business proposition in which the government can't lose and which will not be paid for in any part out of the proceeds of taxation."<sup>2</sup> Self-

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the history of public works financing, see V.A. Mund, "Prosperity Reserves of Public Works," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 149, Part II, (May 1930): 1-9; Arthur D. Gayer, Public Works in Prosperity and Depression (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1935), 268-332; Jack P. Isakoff, The Public Works Administration (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1938), 11-17; J. Kerwin Williams, Grants-in-Aid Under the Public Works Administration: A Study in Federal-State-Local Relations (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 1-40; and Roger Daniels, "Public Works in the 1930s: A Preliminary Reconnaissance," in The Relevancy of Public Works History: The 1930s--A Case Study (Washington, D.C.: Public Works Historical Society, 1975), 2-17.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Dorfman, The Economic Mind in American Civilization 5 vols. (New York: Viking Press, 1946-59), 5:619; Udo Sautter, "Government and Unemployment: The Use of Public Works before the New Deal," Journal of American History 73 (June 1986): 83-84; for a more detailed account see Udo Sautter, Three Cheers for the Unemployed: Government and Unemployment before the New Deal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). For the RFC, see James Stuart Olson, Herbert Hoover and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, 1931-1933 (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977) and Olson,

liquidation produced valuable public works in a financially prudent manner, but this approach had its limitations: it did not seem to put the public to work. Despite this drawback, though, Hoover's programs represented an important shift in public works policy. For the first time, the federal government was undertaking large-scale national planning and coordination of public construction. Due to their restrictions, however, the RFC's public works did not make much of an impact on the depression, and when compared to the well-funded New Deal agencies these programs represented only the proverbial drop in the bucket.<sup>3</sup>

Although Ickes and the PWA relaxed the Hoover-era requirement that public works be self-liquidating, this move was in name only. The PWA proclaimed that projects would be chosen based on their social and economic "desirability," their fit with pre-existing planning schemes, their engineering and technical "soundness," the financial stability of the applicant, and the "legal enforceability" of any securities bought by the federal government in order to fund the project.<sup>4</sup> In fact, however, only the last three factors--engineering, legal, and financial soundness--were formally measured and reviewed by the PWA, as it assumed that any project that reached it was perforce socially and economically desirable.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter explores how the ideology of self-liquidation shaped the way that New Dealers such as Ickes and Harry Hopkins defined the proper role of public works in addressing the crisis of the depression. Despite having to create a new federal

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Saving Capitalism: The Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the New Deal, 1933-1940 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Nancy E. Rose, Put to Work: Relief Programs in the Great Depression (New York: Cornerstone Books, 1994), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, Circular No. 1. The Purposes, Policies, Functioning and Organization of the Emergency Administration. The Rules Prescribed by the President (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1933), 7-8.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, Grants-in-Aid Under the Public Works Administration, 122-23.

bureaucracy and re-make the fiscal ties that joined local, state, and federal levels of government, the PWA eventually succeeded in building a substantial amount of infrastructure in all but three of the nation's counties. Given the PWA's apparent slowness in taking people off the unemployment rolls, however, by 1935 Roosevelt and his advisers decided they had to take a new approach. They created a new "works program," committing \$4.88 billion to public works.

After examining the strengths and shortcomings of the PWA, the remainder of this chapter turns to the program that became the core of this new approach, the Works Progress Administration. Although the WPA is best remembered today for the assistance it provided to artists, actors, musicians, and writers, this impression does not reflect the WPA's actual priorities during the depression. Ironically, while political historians have not corrected this mistaken view of the past, cultural historians have long been aware of it. William Stott, in his landmark study Documentary Expression and Thirties America, noted that the WPA in many ways symbolized the New Deal itself. However, Stott observed, although "The WPA's monuments are all about: highways and streets, small dams, sewers, parks, power flumes, hospitals, airports, libraries, schools.... they are not why WPA captures the imagination." Rather, "WPA looms large in our thinking of the thirties thanks to projects that cost less than 7 per cent of its budget...the arts projects."<sup>6</sup> Stott's emphasis on the cultural significance of these arts projects, first published in 1973, has shaped subsequent historical inquiries, from Karal Ann Marling to Bruce Bustard.<sup>7</sup> While we now know much about, for example, the murals painted by WPA artists on the interiors of WPA buildings, plays performed under the auspices of the Federal Theater Project, and travel guides written by employees of the Federal Writers Project, this

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<sup>6</sup> William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1986 [1973]), 102-103.

<sup>7</sup> Karal Ann Marling, Wall-to-Wall America: A Cultural History of Post-Office Murals in the Great Depression (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Bruce I. Bustard, A New Deal for the Arts (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997).

chapter underscores the need for historians to account for the scale and scope of the WPA's central achievement: the production of public works projects. In fact, 75 percent of WPA employment and 75 percent of WPA expenditures went to such construction projects as highways, streets, public buildings, airports, public utilities, and recreational facilities.

Hopkins's WPA resolved a fierce debate among New Dealers over the benefits of direct and indirect employment created by public works projects. This debate over employment, however, had important implications for the production of the nation's infrastructure. While the WPA would prove more successful than Ickes's PWA in generating direct employment on public works projects, the infrastructure generated by the WPA has been given short shrift by scholars. The WPA's projects may have been temporary "make work" in comparison to the heavier projects of the PWA, but as I argue in this chapter, they were by no means insubstantial. In fact, in its production of projects such as schools, streets and roads, and public buildings, the WPA compared favorably to the public works produced by the PWA.

By examining the actual projects produced by the two major New Deal public works programs, I argue that the story of the New Deal appears as the story of a public works revolution. While economic historians have done excellent work on problems of public finance at the federal, state, and local levels during the New Deal, they generally draw a distinction--unwarranted, in my view--between spending on "public works" done by the PWA and "work relief" performed by the WPA, neglecting that both efforts in fact produced substantial infrastructure throughout the nation.<sup>8</sup> Previous scholarship, while correctly noting the different impacts of the PWA and WPA on the problem of unemployment, has missed the significance of the infrastructure produced by these

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<sup>8</sup> For a review of the best of this literature, however, see John Joseph Wallis, "The Political Economy of New Deal Spending Revisited, Again: With and without Nevada," *Explorations in Economic History* 35 (1998): 140-70.

agencies.<sup>9</sup> Considering the public works programs as the New Deal's central enterprise helps to clarify what one historian recently termed "the ambiguity of New Deal economics."<sup>10</sup> The core of the New Deal, I argue, resided in the federal government's ability to use its various public works programs to dramatically improve the nation's infrastructure.

### **The Triumph of PWA Infrastructure and the "Failure" of PWA Employment**

Contrary to the appraisals of historians such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., William Leuchtenburg, and Anthony Badger, the PWA was not a failure because Harold Ickes was too slow and cautious in spending money.<sup>11</sup> However, as we saw in the last chapter, neither was the PWA the graft-free, apolitical, efficient engine of construction that Ickes claimed it to be.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the PWA demonstrated both the realization on a national scale of Hoover's philosophy of public works and the remarkable persistence of a locally oriented, distributive driven, partisan brand of politics. In short, the case of the PWA--and, more generally, the case of New Deal public works programs--indicates that the

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<sup>9</sup> Daniels, "Public Works in the 1930s." Since Daniels's pathbreaking treatment, the only significant treatment of the New Deal's use of "state capitalism" to spur economic development has been Jordan A. Schwarz, The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993). Howard Rosen, the director of the Public Works Historical Society for the American Public Works Association, has also made the case for the central place of public works in the New Deal. See his "Public Works: The Legacy of the New Deal," Social Education 60 (Sept. 1996): 277-79.

<sup>10</sup> Robert M. Collins, More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 1-16.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Coming of the New Deal (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 285-87; William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 70-71; Anthony J. Badger, The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 81-84. While these historians do indeed acknowledge the infrastructure produced by the PWA, this is done only in passing.

<sup>12</sup> Ickes's boosting of the PWA is most conveniently found in his Back to Work: The Story of PWA (New York: Macmillan, 1935). This positive reading of the PWA's legacy is largely echoed by Ickes's biographers; see esp. the best of these works, T.H. Watkins, Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes, 1874-1952 (New York: Henry Holt, 1990), 367-88.

legacies of what has been called the "party period" in American history extend well beyond the Progressive Era.<sup>13</sup>

A closer look at what the PWA built makes it clear that as far as infrastructure was concerned, the PWA was a resounding, and nationwide, success. By March 1939 the PWA had authorized the construction of 34,508 projects costing over \$6 billion dollars, completing 34,448 of them. All but three of the nation's 3,071 counties had received PWA dollars, as the agency funded 17,831 projects costing \$1.9 billion built by federal agencies, and 16,677 costing \$4.2 billion sponsored by non-federal bodies.<sup>14</sup>

[table 1 here]

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<sup>13</sup> For the concept of the "party period," see Richard L. McCormick, The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); but for a critique that raises important questions about the continuities within this period see Joel Silbey, The American Political Nation, 1838-1893 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). For synthetic treatments that make much of the persistence of the local, distributive, partisan aspects of politics, see Robert Harrison, State and Society in Twentieth-Century America (New York: Longman, 1997); and Barry D. Karl, The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>14</sup> It is difficult to pin down which counties did not receive PWA funds. Internal correspondence among PWA officials indicates that these counties were Ohio county (Indiana), Trimble county (Kentucky), and Kennedy county (Texas). All other counties in the U.S. received PWA funds: 3,035 counties received them in the form of projects, while 36 counties were the site of PWA spending through the Forest Service, the Coast and Geodetic Survey, geological surveys, entomology and plant quarantines, the Weather Bureau, or fishery related projects. See N.O. Wood, Jr., to Dan H. Wheeler, March 10, 1939, "Counties in Which No Projects Are Definitely Located" folder, box 8, entry 30, "Records of the Project Control Division, Subject Files, 1933-1940," Records of the Public Works Administration, Record Group 135, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

In 1936, however, a glossy promotional pamphlet published by the PWA claimed that Union and White counties in Georgia, along with Putnam county in Missouri, were the only counties in the nation where the PWA had built no projects. See The Story of PWA in Pictures (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1936), unpaginated.

**Table 1: Federal projects, Non-federal projects, and federal low-cost housing projects sponsored by the PWA (through March 1, 1939).**

| Type of Project           | % of all PWA Projects<br>(34,508) | % of all PWA<br>Spending |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Educational Bldgs         | 22.0                              | 14.0                     |
| Hospitals                 | 2.0                               | 4.1                      |
| Public Bldgs              | 12.4                              | 9.1                      |
| Sewer Systems             | 5.4                               | 7.1                      |
| Water Systems             | 7.5                               | 4.1                      |
| Electric Power            | 1.0                               | 1.8                      |
| Streets and Highways      | 33.0                              | 15.7                     |
| Engineering Structures    | 1.9                               | 6.9                      |
| Flood Control/Reclamation | 1.4                               | 10.4                     |
| Limited-Dividend Housing  | 0.02                              | 0.2                      |
| Federal Low-Cost Housing  | 0.15                              | 3.2                      |
| Railroads                 | 0.09                              | 4.7                      |
| Vessels                   | 0.75                              | 6.4                      |
| All others                | 12.0                              | 12.2                     |

Source: *America Builds: The Record of PWA* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 291, table 21. Note: Column two (% of all PWA Spending) includes both loans and grants made by the PWA.

Streets and highways were the most common PWA project, with 11,428 road projects, or 33% of all PWA projects, accounting for over 15% of total PWA spending. Educational buildings were the next most common project (7,488, or 22% of all PWA projects), comprising about 14% of PWA spending. By July 1936 one or more PWA school projects had been built in nearly half (47%) of the nation's counties.<sup>15</sup> The PWA explicitly targeted some of its school (and several of its hospital) projects for African-Americans, building in 24 of the 48 states, concentrating its efforts in North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Missouri, and Tennessee.<sup>16</sup> Flood control and reclamation

<sup>15</sup> "Educational Buildings and Facilities Provided by PWA Allotments under the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935," July 1, 1936, no folder, box 3, entry 50, "Publications of the Division, 1936-1939. Projects Control Division," RG 135, NA.

<sup>16</sup> "PWA Non-Federal Allotments: Educational Institutions for Negroes," undated [after March 1, 1939], no folder, box 11, entry 50, "Publications of the Division, 1936-1939. Projects Control Division"; and "Summary of PWA Allotments for Non-Federal Projects for Negroes, By State," Sept. 30, 1937. "Negro

projects, while only comprising 1.4% of PWA projects, accounted for 10.4% of all PWA spending. Public buildings, along with sewer and water projects, were also a favored target of PWA funds, taken together comprising 25.3% of PWA projects and 20.3% of PWA spending.<sup>17</sup> During the period 1933-1940, the PWA made possible about 80% of all sewer construction in the nation, allotting funds for more than 1500 projects costing nearly half a billion dollars.<sup>18</sup>

Which projects were losers under the PWA? Clearly, for all the attention they have gathered--from New Dealers, their critics, and subsequent historians--it is immediately evident from Table 1 that public housing under the PWA was nearly non-existent. The seven limited-dividend federal housing projects built by the PWA accounted for 0.02% of all PWA projects and 0.2% of total PWA spending, while the fifty-one federal low-cost housing projects sponsored by PWA comprised 0.15% of all projects and 3.2% of all spending. This raises obvious questions about the validity of using PWA public housing as any kind of "test case" for examining New Deal public policy, unless one wanted to point out the truly marginal status of PWA housing within the PWA program.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, one might point to the more intriguing cases of PWA naval spending (0.75% of all projects accounted for an impressive 6.4% of PWA funds) and the PWA's modernization program for the nation's railroads (0.09% of all projects comprised 4.7% of PWA funds) when examining where the PWA's money and attention went. Overall, however, the projects most favored by the PWA were streets, highways, roads,

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Facilities (Correspondence)" folder, box 12, entry 30, "Records of the Project Control Division, Subject Files, 1933-1940," both in RG 135, NA.

<sup>17</sup> America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 264; 291, table 21.

<sup>18</sup> See materials in "Public Work Reserve" folder, box 3, entry 746, "Division of Information. Publications of the Federal Works Agency and Subordinate Agencies, 1936-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>19</sup> For an important attempt to make this case for the significance of PWA's housing program, however, see Gail Radford, Modern Housing for America: Policy Struggles in the New Deal Era (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).



and bridges; schools; and public buildings such as court houses, post offices, auditoriums, armories, city halls, prisons, community centers, and government office buildings.<sup>20</sup>

[table 2 here]

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<sup>20</sup> America Builds, 291, table 21.

Table 2: PWA Non-federal projects, by region and state (through March 1, 1939).

| Region and State |                | Number of Projects | Total PWA loan and grant allotment (in millions \$) |     |
|------------------|----------------|--------------------|---|-----|
|                  | Total          | 16,645             | 2,135   |     |
| Region #1        |                | 3,090              | 685   |     |
|                  | Connecticut    | 261                |   | 28  |
|                  | Delaware       | 43                 |   | 3   |
|                  | Maine          | 84                 |   | 4   |
|                  | Maryland       | 142                |   | 32  |
|                  | Massachusetts  | 392                |   | 50  |
|                  | New Hampshire  | 112                |   | 7   |
|                  | New Jersey     | 319                |   | 58  |
|                  | New York       | 762                |   | 358 |
|                  | Pennsylvania   | 784                |   | 125 |
|                  | Rhode Island   | 87                 |   | 15  |
|                  | Vermont        | 104                |   | 3   |
| Region #2        |                | 3,419              | 445   |     |
|                  | Illinois       | 808                |   | 181 |
|                  | Indiana        | 477                |   | 44  |
|                  | Michigan       | 461                |   | 63  |
|                  | Ohio           | 1,061              |   | 103 |
|                  | West Virginia  | 150                |   | 20  |
|                  | Wisconsin      | 462                |   | 35  |
| Region #3        |                | 2,832              | 311   |     |
|                  | Alabama        | 330                |   | 32  |
|                  | Florida        | 232                |   | 32  |
|                  | Georgia        | 518                |   | 20  |
|                  | Kentucky       | 298                |   | 26  |
|                  | Mississippi    | 231                |   | 34  |
|                  | North Carolina | 352                |   | 38  |
|                  | South Carolina | 243                |   | 62  |
|                  | Tennessee      | 278                |   | 36  |
|                  | Virginia       | 350                |   | 31  |
| Region #4        |                | 2,611              | 217   |     |
|                  | Iowa           | 598                |   | 24  |
|                  | Minnesota      | 564                |   | 35  |
|                  | Missouri       | 562                |   | 47  |
|                  | Montana        | 161                |   | 20  |
|                  | Nebraska       | 307                |   | 73  |
|                  | North Dakota   | 193                |   | 6   |
|                  | South Dakota   | 168                |   | 7   |
|                  | Wyoming        | 58                 |   | 5   |

Table 2, continued:

| Region and State                     | Number of Projects | Total PWA loan and grant allotment (in millions \$) |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|---|
| Region #5                            | 2,430              | 249   |
| Arkansas                             | 236                | 23  |
| Colorado                             | 206                | 21  |
| Kansas                               | 450                | 27  |
| Louisiana                            | 228                | 24  |
| New Mexico                           | 96                 | 8   |
| Oklahoma                             | 302                | 39  |
| Texas                                | 912                | 109   |
| Region #6                            | 1,153              | 126   |
| Arizona                              | 122                | 12  |
| California                           | 807                | 103   |
| Nevada                               | 42                 | 2   |
| Utah                                 | 182                | 9   |
| Region #7                            | 977                | 59  |
| Idaho                                | 157                | 6   |
| Oregon                               | 291                | 17  |
| Washington                           | 496                | 34  |
| Alaska                               | 33                 | 2   |
| District of Columbia and Territories | n.a.               | n.a.  |
| District of Columbia                 | 14                 | 25  |
| Hawaii                               | 57                 | 5   |
| Puerto Rico                          | 59                 | 15  |
| Virgin Islands                       | 3                  | .1  |

Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 284-85, table 16.

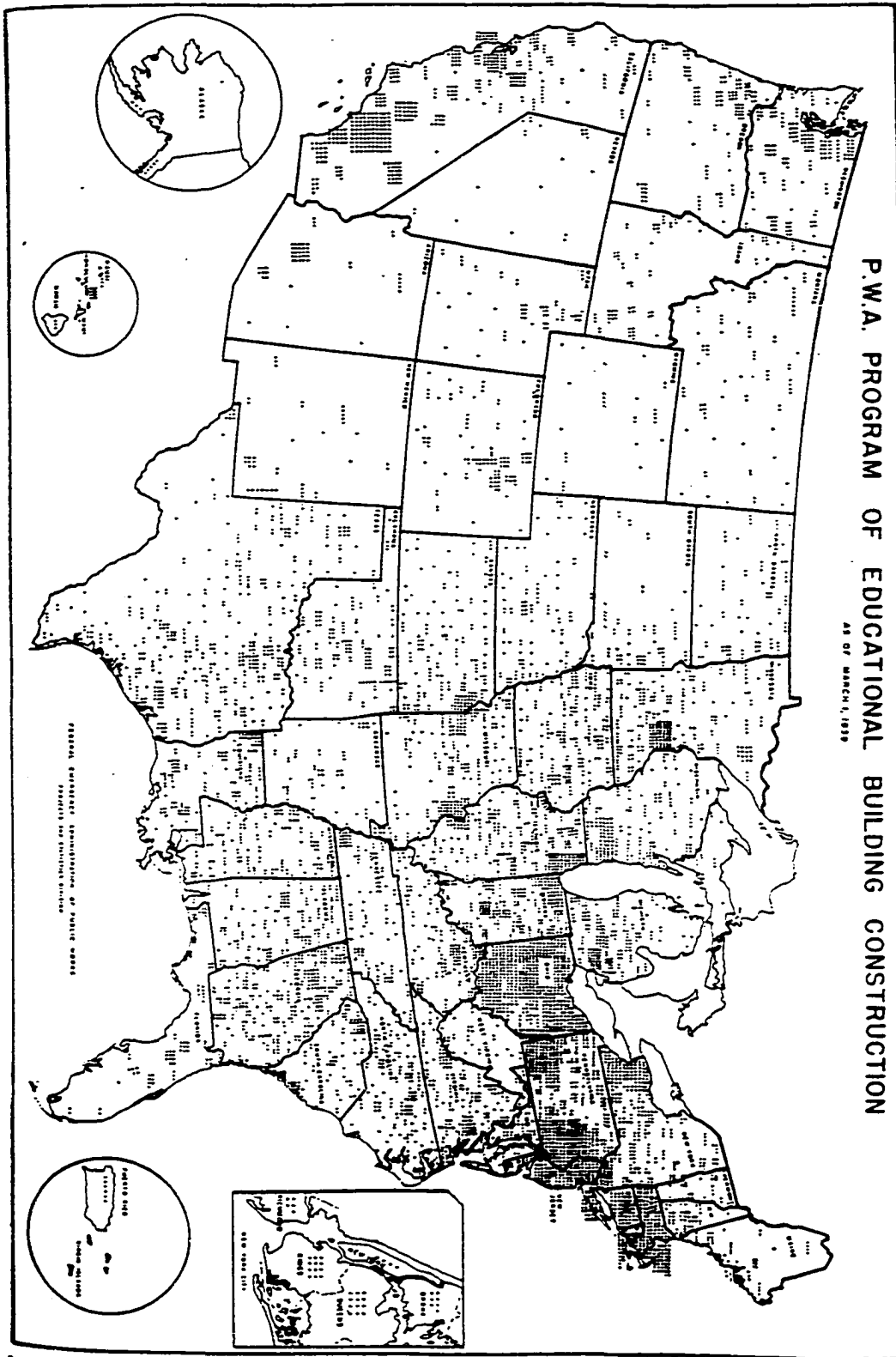
The eastern and midwestern parts of the United States benefited the most from PWA's 16,645 non-federal projects. Region one received 3,090 projects and allotments of \$685 million and region two received 3,419 projects and allotments of \$445 million. Out of these two regions, Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New York received the most projects, but the greatest amount of PWA funds went to New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. In the other PWA regions, Texas and California were clear winners. The Lone Star state received 912 projects and allotments of \$109 million, while

the Golden state was the recipient of 807 projects and allotments totaling \$103 million. In an attempt to address criticism of unfair distribution of funds, the PWA compared New York and Pennsylvania to the southern states, looking at their population and at the number of people gainfully employed in the building trades. The PWA found that the percentage of PWA non-federal projects in New York and Pennsylvania was close to the percentage of people gainfully employed in the building industry in each state. The southern states's share of PWA non-federal projects, for the most part, exceeded the percentage of the building industry active in each state.<sup>21</sup> [map 1-5 here]

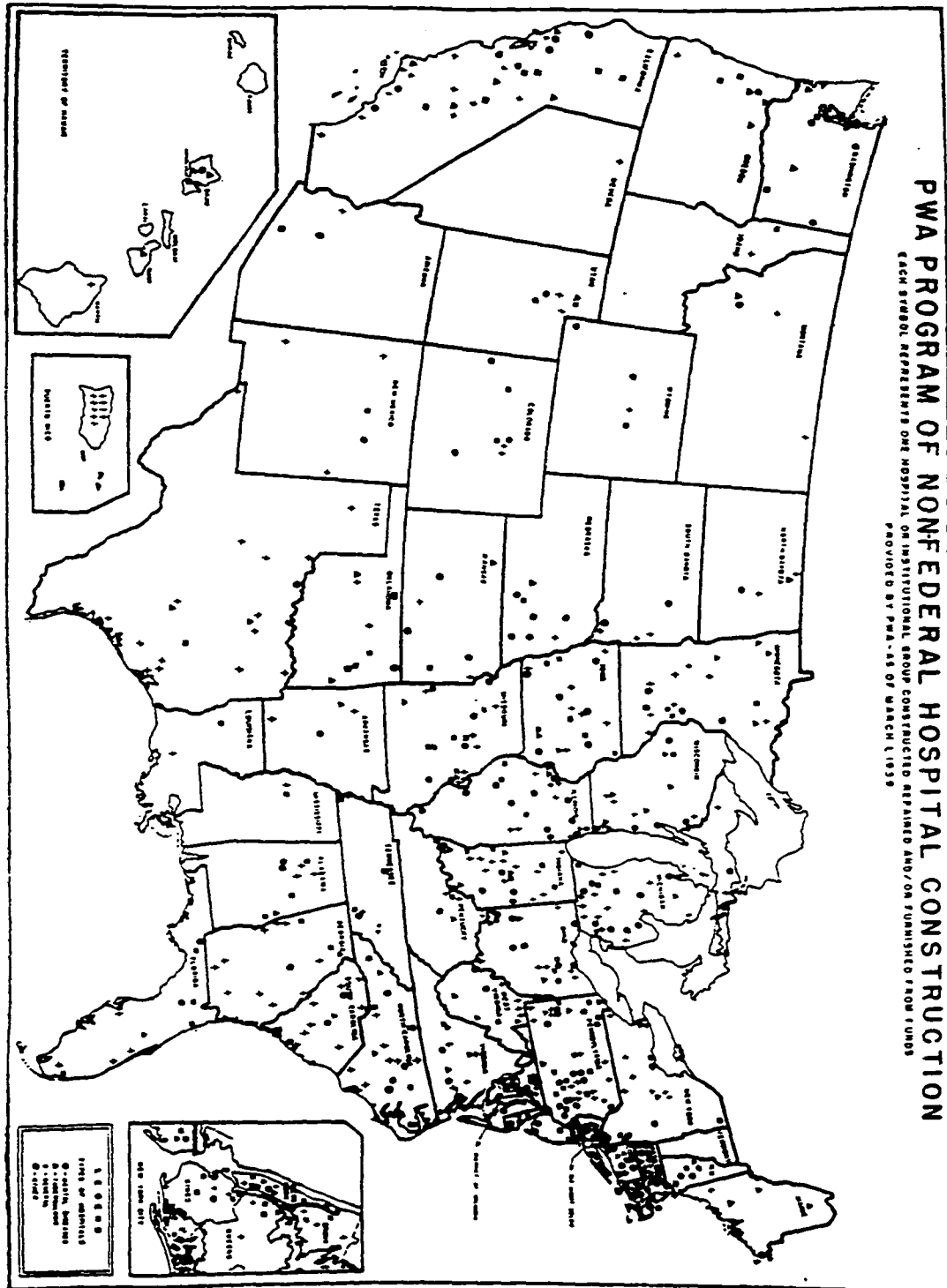
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<sup>21</sup> L.N. Beeker to M.L. Devine, Jan. 18, 1939, "Non-Federal Projects, Accomplishments of the PWA, Review of PW study, Looking into the Future, History of Time Limitations on PWA Program" folder, box 4, entry 49, "Records of the Projects Control Division, Research Materials, 1935-1940," RG 135, NA.

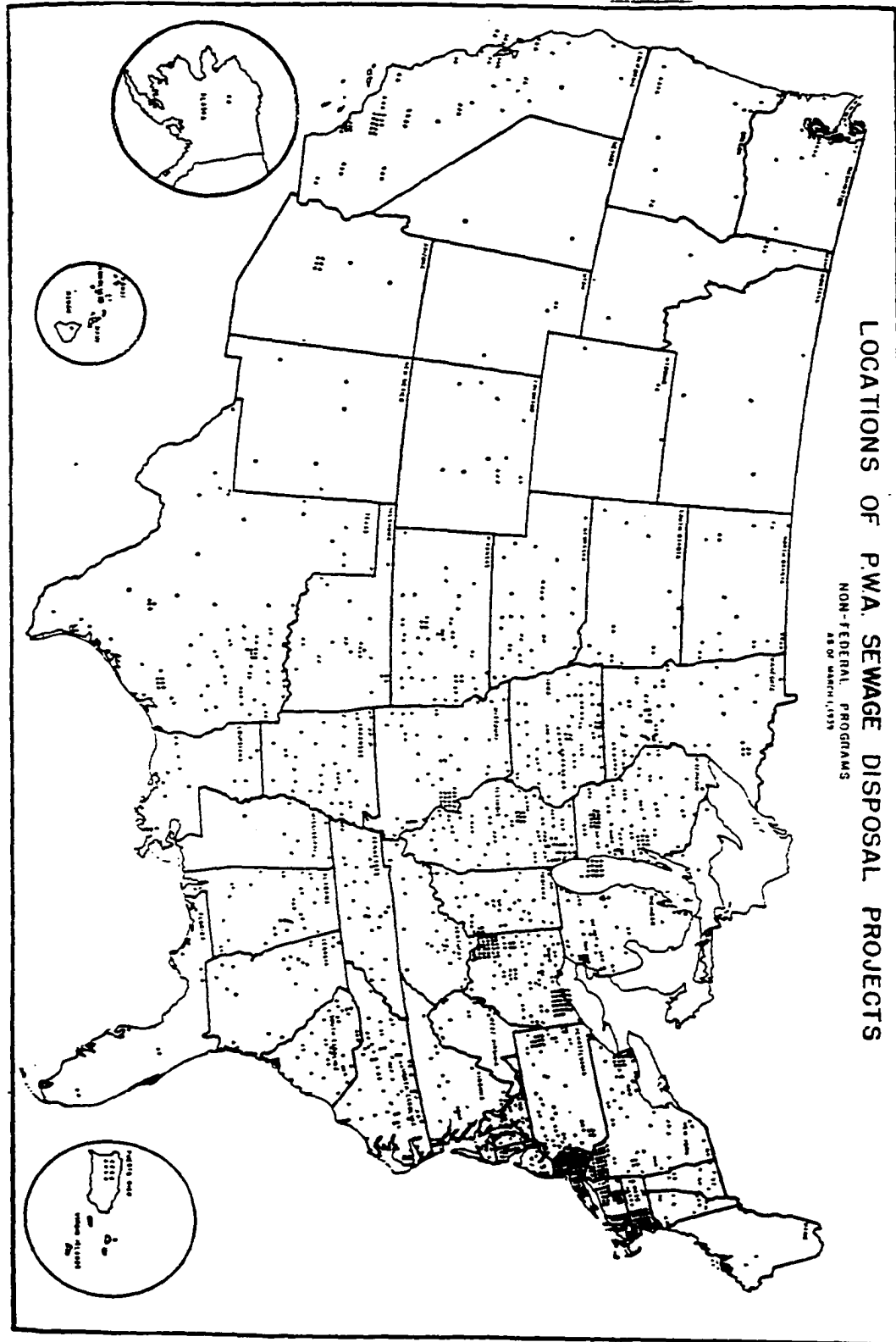
Map 1. Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).



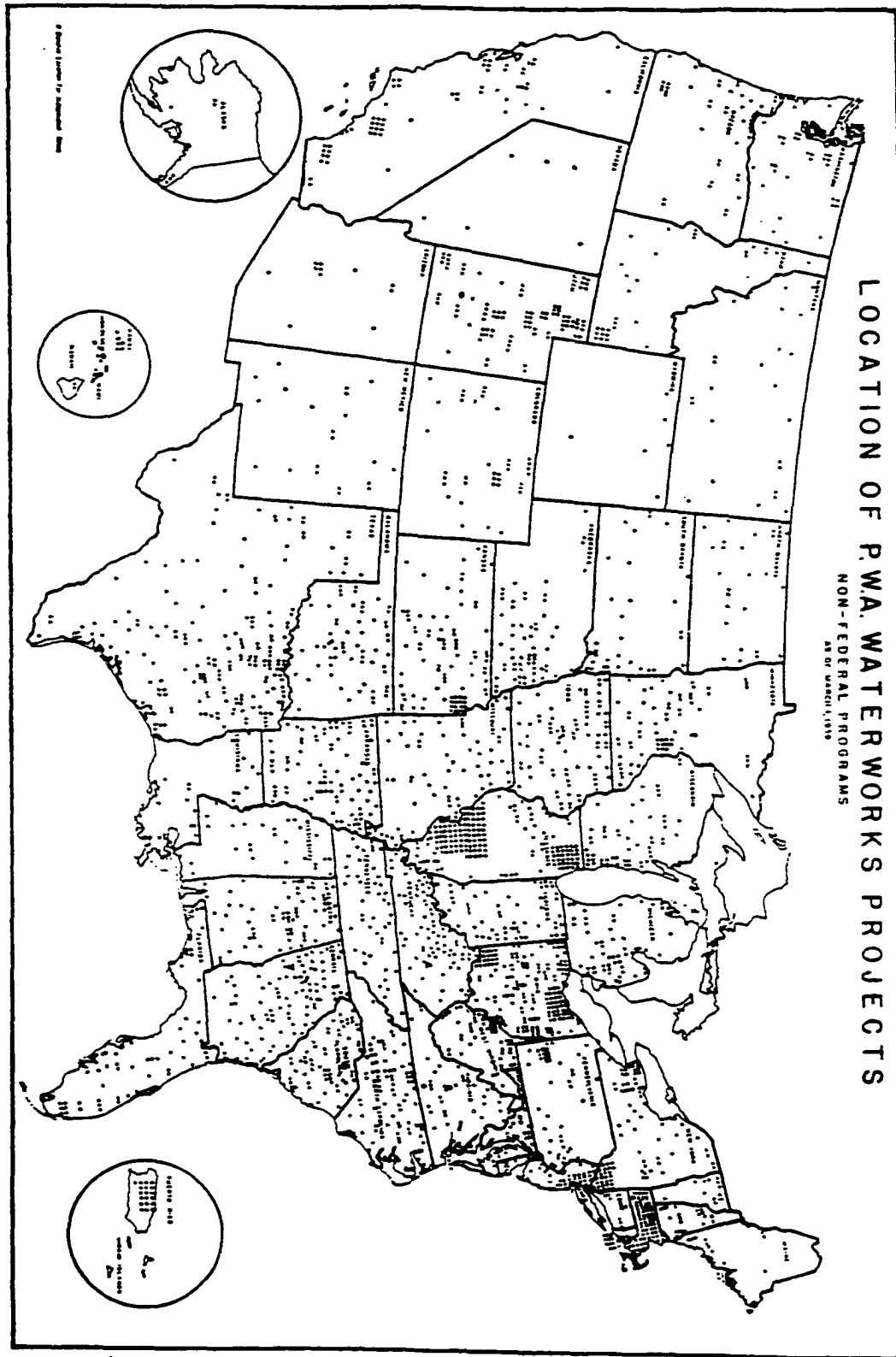
Map 2. Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).



Map 3. Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).

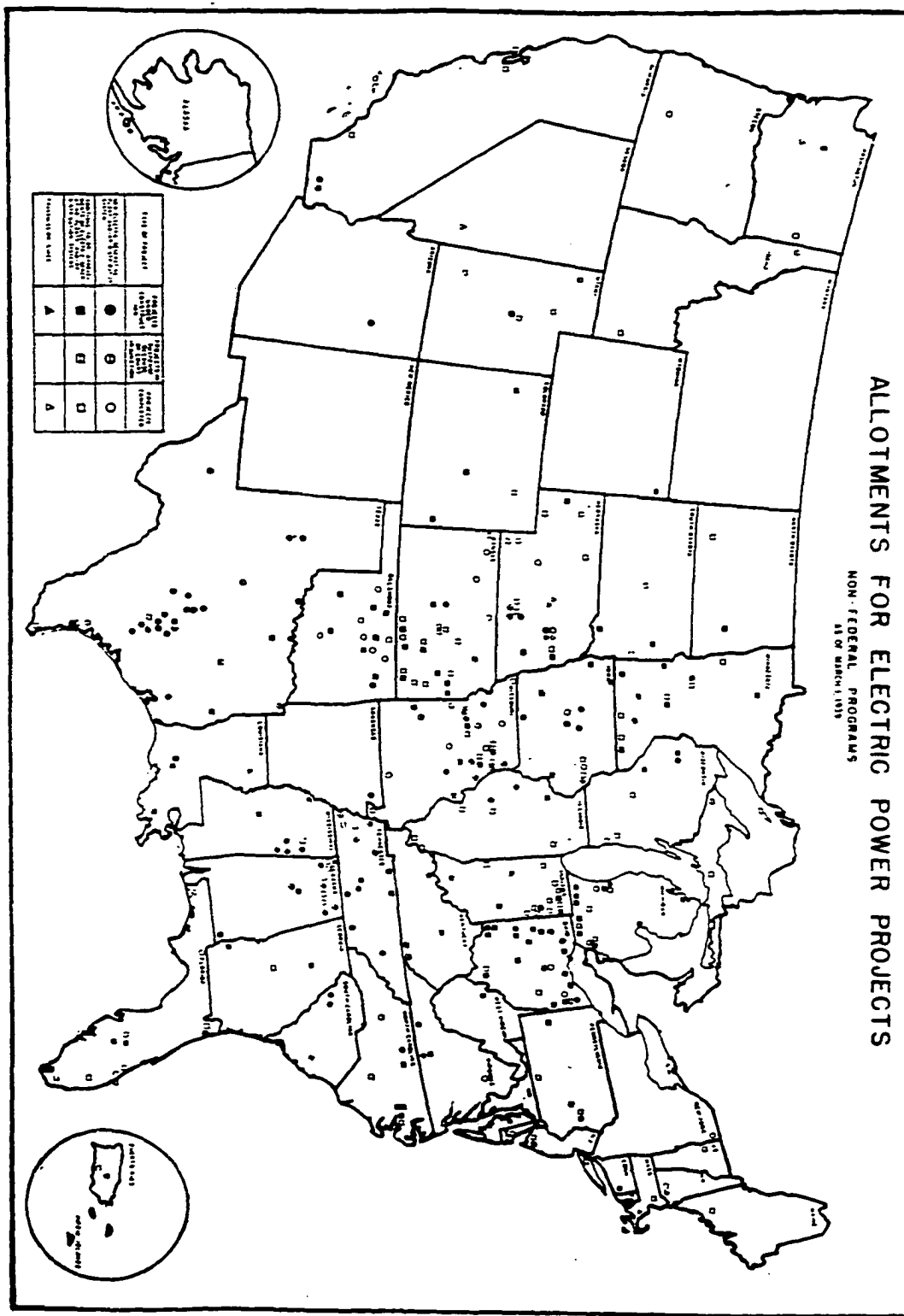


Map 4. Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).





Map 5. Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).

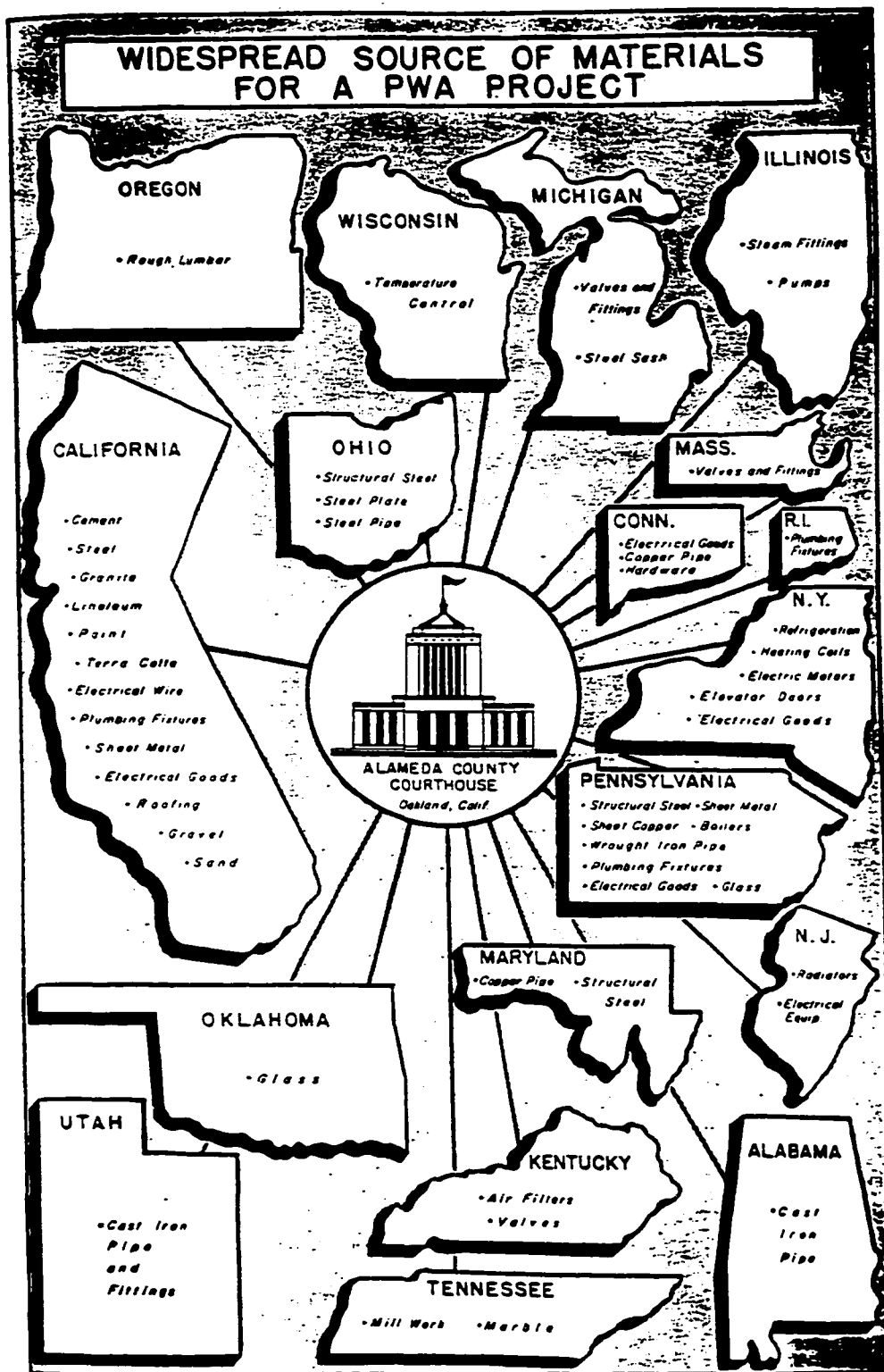


In addition to providing direct employment on project sites, the PWA's projects generated over \$2.1 billion in orders for construction materials between 1933 and 1939. Stone, clay, and glass products such as brick, cement, concrete, marble, and tile made up 28% of the total value. Sharing the lead with stone, clay, and glass were items made from iron and steel, such as nails, rails, pipes, and structural steel, also accounting for 28% of the total value of PWA material orders. Coming in at third place was machinery such as elevators, turbines, meters and gas generators, electrical machinery, and refrigeration equipment, making up slightly over 16% of the total value. Miscellaneous items (electric wiring, furniture, unclassified paving, petroleum products, and unclassified plumbing supplies) followed closely in fourth place, at 14% of total value. Forest products such as lumber did not even make up 7% of PWA materials. Air, land, and water transportation equipment such as locomotives, airplanes, trucks, and boats comprised a little over 4% of the value of material orders. Bringing up the rear were nonferrous metals (aluminum, copper, lead, and zinc products), at 0.9%; chemicals (mostly paint and explosives), at 0.9%; and textiles such as awnings, carpets, linoleum, and various cotton goods at 0.2% of materials used on PWA projects.<sup>22</sup> Rather than rely simply on these raw figures to make this point, PWA officials visually charted various projects, the materials used in their construction, and the various states that produced these materials. [figures 1-4 here]

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<sup>22</sup> America Builds, 273-74, table 2.

Figure 1. Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).







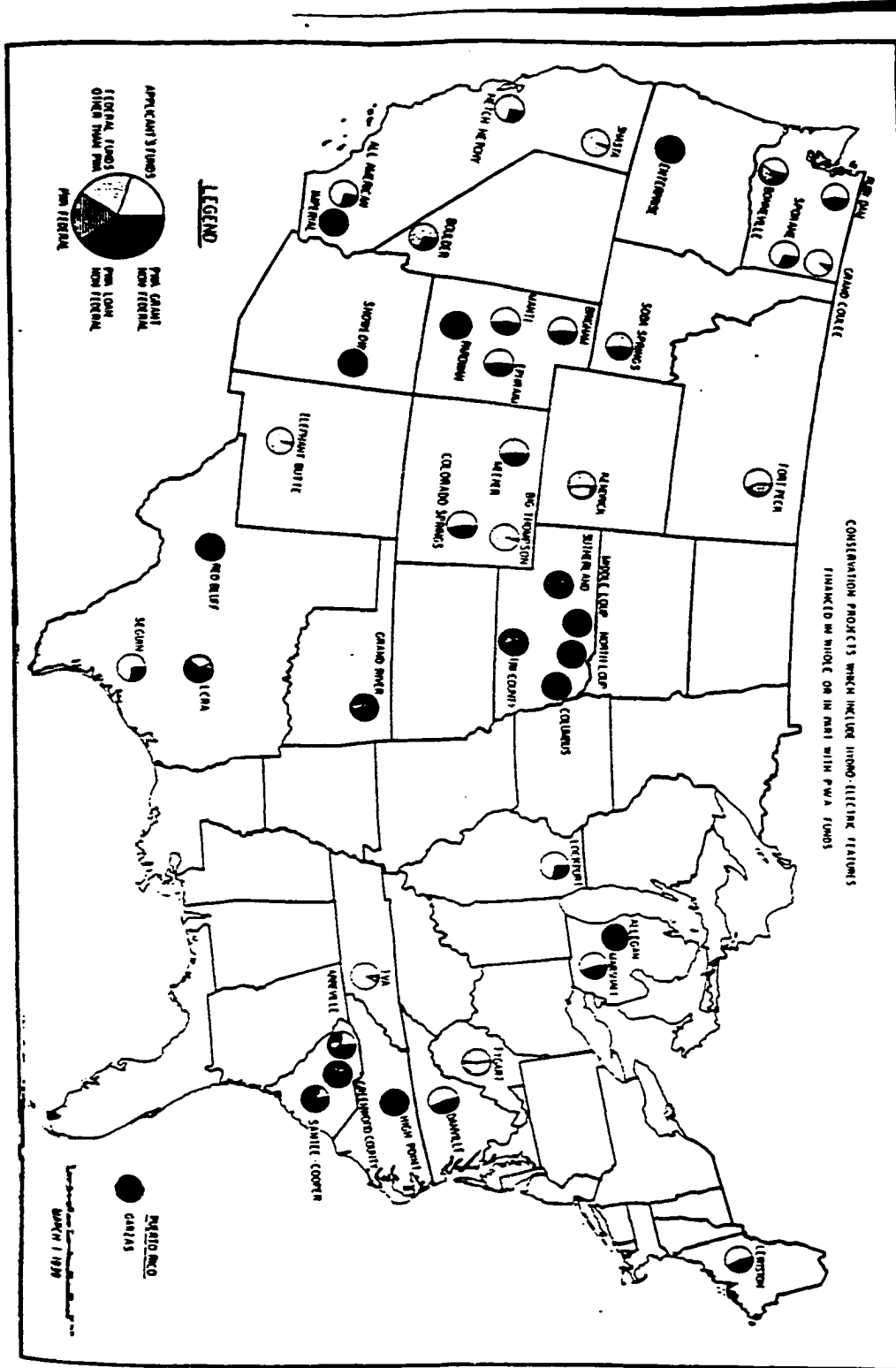


The PWA was responsible for playing a pioneering role in funding non-federal and federal hydroelectric projects. These non-federal projects included, most notably, California's Hetch Hetchy and Imperial hydroelectric projects, South Carolina's Santee-Cooper project, the Grand River Dam in Oklahoma, the sprawling Lower Colorado River Authority, as well as projects ranging from Arizona, Idaho, Illinois, Maine, and Michigan to Nebraska, Oregon, Utah, Virginia, and Washington. Federal projects included California's huge Shasta Dam, Montana's Fort Peck Dam, the Bonneville Dam project, covering Washington and Oregon, the Grand Coulee dam in Washington, and the Tennessee Valley Authority, among others.<sup>23</sup> [map 6 here]

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-78, table 7.

Map 6. Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).





In fact, when the TVA was created the PWA immediately granted it \$50 million. In 1937, the PWA estimated that seventeen Western states received approximately \$268 million in federal money for irrigation, power, and other water projects.<sup>24</sup>

Projects related to public health, such as sewers, waterworks, and hospitals, received direct support from the PWA. The construction of sewers and other waterworks projects received a substantial boost from the PWA. The PWA funded 60% of all new sewer systems built in the nation in 1934, increasing this support to 70% of 1935 projects, 81% of 1936 projects, and 80% of 1937 projects. The PWA sponsored 37% of new waterworks projects built in 1934, 50% of those built in 1935, 77% of 1936 projects, and 37% of 1937 projects. By March 1939 the PWA had contributed to the building of 1527 sewer projects in the country.<sup>25</sup> At this point, the PWA was also responsible for the construction of 762 hospitals, including insane asylums, schools for the "feeble-minded," accommodations for victims of epilepsy and tuberculosis, old-age homes, and general hospital facilities, at an estimated cost of roughly \$330 million.<sup>26</sup>

Between 1933 and 1939, the PWA also invested in transportation projects and in city, county, and state government buildings. In the realm of transportation, the PWA built 11,159 federal projects at an estimated cost of about \$761 million and 2,080 non-federal projects with about \$687 million in PWA grants and loans. Streets, roads, and highways claimed the bulk of PWA transportation spending and projects, with PWA federal and non-federal street, road, and highway projects accounting for 11,428 of the

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<sup>24</sup> Unsigned memo, Re: "Allotment and Estimated Cost of All PWA Federal and Non-Federal Projects Involving Irrigation, Irrigation and Power, and Other Water Conservation 17 Western States," July 22, 1937, "Flood Control, Reclamation and Related Projects" folder, box 12, entry 30, "Records of the Project Control Division, Subject Files, 1933-1940," RG 135, NA. For more on the connections between the PWA and the TVA, see Steven M. Neuse, David E. Lilienthal: The Journey of an American Liberal (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 84; and Erwin C. Hargrove, Prisoners of Myth: The Leadership of the Tennessee Valley Authority, 1933-1990 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 44, 105.

<sup>25</sup> America Builds, 279, table 9 and table 10.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 280, table 12.

13,239 total transportation projects undertaken, at a total cost of about \$1.3 billion in money loaned and granted by PWA.<sup>27</sup> In addition to other miscellaneous projects, the PWA spent over \$200 million out of its non-federal funds, loaning this money to 32 railroad modernization projects. In doing this, Ickes argued, the PWA could "expedite this work so that railroads, which are among the country's greatest employers, will be able to finance such purchases with reasonable interest and in this way recall a great number of men to jobs in the fabrication of steel rails and other equipment and to aid the heavy industries in furthering reemployment in large centers of unemployment."<sup>28</sup>

Most of the roughly \$142 million the PWA spent on government buildings for cities, counties, and states went to city and town halls, courthouses, and other administrative office buildings (a total of about \$68 million), although jails, prisons, and warehouses were also recipients of about \$17 million in PWA loans and grants.<sup>29</sup> The PWA also engaged in high-profile projects in the nation's capital, for example undertaking a thorough cleaning and renovation of the Washington Monument so it might "look down without shame on the dazzlingly white Lincoln Memorial."<sup>30</sup>

All of these different public works, distributed in counties across the nation-- streets and highways, schools, flood control and reclamation projects, public buildings, sewer and waterworks projects, hydroelectric plants--represented Ickes's vision for the nation in steel, concrete, and mortar. Ickes put this vision of public works into words at the annual Associated Press luncheon in 1935. He argued that "an intelligently administered public works program planned well ahead of time, with enough flexibility to

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-82, table 13.

<sup>28</sup> PWA Press Release 267, no date (between Oct. and Nov., 1933), vol. 5, box 1, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>29</sup> *America Builds*, 283, table 14.

<sup>30</sup> PWA Press Release 695, May 20, 1934, vol. 16, box 4, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA.

permit the amount of work done in any year to be adapted more or less to the employment needs of that year, would be as nearly perfect a regulator of the balance between the capital and consumption industries as is practically possible under our economic system." The public works funded by the PWA, Ickes stated, "are vitally essential to safeguard America's national capital resources and assure our future prosperity. They are works which we cannot afford not to do." While in 1933, Ickes claimed, "we had no tradition of public works," the United States did have "a hampering tradition of the pork barrel."

One of the most fundamental tasks we have undertaken in these two years has been to make over the unsavory tradition of the pork barrel into a tradition of Federal works executed as efficiently and honestly and intelligently in the public interest as private builders would build for their own account. We have been furiously attacked, as we have insisted on this transformation, for being "over-suspicious," "over-legal," "over-cautious." But we have held on because we were building for the future as well as for today.<sup>31</sup>

In arguing in favor of the PWA's public works program, however, Ickes neglected the Achilles's heel of self-liquidation: its difficulties in generating direct employment. This distinction between direct and indirect employment long occupied many New Dealers. In a 1940 report he prepared for the National Resources Planning Board, economist John Kenneth Galbraith presented a clear definition of these two concepts:

The main purpose of work relief is to provide the maximum of direct, or on-site, employment to needy unemployed; usually this work is done by force account and not by contract. Public works place less emphasis on on-site employment; much of the expenditure is for materials which provides a considerable volume of off-site employment; a considerable volume of heavy construction is undertaken, and, typically, the work is done under contract. These differences are not too sharply defined, but the broad purposes of public works and work relief, as well as the different cost ratios and procedures, make such a distinction necessary.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ickes speech at the Associated Press Annual Luncheon, April 22, 1935, "OF 466b PWA Jan-May 1935" folder, box 13, Official File 466b, FDR Papers, FDRL. Ickes was fond of contrasting the "pork barrel tradition" with the "intelligent public works tradition" inaugurated by the PWA; see PWA Press Release 1051, Oct. 3, 1934, vol. 27, entry 24, "Press Releases, 1933-1939," RG 135, NA.

<sup>32</sup> Galbraith, Economic Effects of the Federal Public Works Expenditures, 107.

Indeed, these "different cost ratios and procedures" were at the heart of FDR's misgivings over the performance of the PWA, and were a pivotal factor in his subsequent embrace of Harry Hopkins's WPA in 1935.<sup>33</sup> As economist Herbert Stein noted, in comparing the PWA and the WPA Roosevelt "could not get over the fact that, per dollar, the WPA program put about four times as many men to work directly as did the public-works program" [i.e., the PWA].<sup>34</sup> But, in coming to this conclusion what Roosevelt refused to grasp was the extent of indirect employment generated by the PWA. As Harold Ickes put it, "No one has been able to mention indirect employment to the President for a long time. He simply has no patience with the thought."<sup>35</sup> The PWA estimated that every two hours of on-site construction work it created resulted in five hours of work in various manufacturing and shipping industries.<sup>36</sup> Straight work relief programs, on the other hand, did not create any measurable amount of indirect employment because of the lower wages they paid, and because of the restricted range of building materials they used.<sup>37</sup> If off-site employment was included in calculating the effectiveness of the PWA, John Kenneth Galbraith concluded that, contrary to conventional wisdom, the PWA compared quite well to the WPA in creating

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<sup>33</sup> Jonathan R. Kesselman, "Work Relief Programs in the Great Depression," in John L. Palmer, ed., Creating Jobs: Public Employment Programs and Wage Subsidies (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1978), 166, n. 40, 186-87; see also Herbert Stein, The Fiscal Revolution in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 50-51, 57-58.

<sup>34</sup> Stein, Fiscal Revolution, 57. Emphasis in original.

<sup>35</sup> Ickes quoted in Stein, Fiscal Revolution, 57.

<sup>36</sup> America Builds, 28-29; and see Horatio B. Hackett to Congressman Alfred F. Beiter, March 4, 1936, "Original Write-Ups on Direct & Indirect Labor" folder, box 17, entry 49, "Records of the Projects Control Division, Research Materials, 1935-1940"; and PWA and Industry: A Four-Year Study of Regenerative Employment (75th Congress, 3d Session--House Document No. 605), no folder, box 6, entry 21 (unidentified entry), "Published Reports on Non-Federal Projects, 1934-41. Projects Control Division," both in RG 135, NA. For more on the accomplishments of the PWA, see C.W. Short and R. Stanley-Brown, Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies Between the Years 1933 and 1939 with the Assistance of the Public Works Administration (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).

<sup>37</sup> Isakoff, Public Works Administration, 138-39.

employment. "Total off-site and on-site employment resulting from PWA, Federal projects under the Works Program [FERA], RFC, and regular Federal construction averaged 1,177,000 men from 1934-38," Galbraith reported, "and the employment resulting from all work relief construction averaged 1,642,000 men."<sup>38</sup> The PWA easily outpaced the WPA in generating material orders, spending a little over \$2 billion compared to \$920 million.<sup>39</sup> FDR, however, not only mistrusted data such as these, but (like Hoover) also refused to increase funding to the Census Bureau, fearing that more accurate employment figures would expose government relief efforts as insufficient.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the misgivings of FDR, Ickes and supporters of the PWA pointed to the public support for the program. As evidence of this support, they noted the willingness of localities to supplement the grants the PWA supplied to their projects. Communities often voted, in special elections, to issue bonds to support public works projects. In 2,613 local elections, in which more than 10 million votes were cast, localities voted 83% of the time to make direct contributions to their public works. One concerned resident of Chula Vista, California, wrote of his community's willingness to provide over \$100,000 for a PWA street paving project, expressing himself in words that would have pleased Ickes. To obtain a PWA grant, the residents of Chula Vista "went to the polls and voted to bond themselves in the amount of \$107,000 to enter into the spirit of the New Deal."<sup>41</sup> For

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<sup>38</sup> Galbraith, Economic Effects of the Federal Public Works Expenditures, 55; see also David M. Polak to Acting Director, Projects and Statistics Division, "Review of Mr. Galbraith's Report on 'Economics of Public Works,'" Jan. 23, 1940, no folder, box 6, entry 49, "Records of the Projects Control Division, Research Materials, 1935-1940," RG 135, NA.

<sup>39</sup> Galbraith, Economic Effects of the Federal Public Works Expenditures, 23.

<sup>40</sup> Margo J. Anderson, The American Census: A Social History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 177; Richard J. Jensen, "The Causes and Cures of Unemployment in the Great Depression," Journal of Interdisciplinary History 19 (Spring 1989): 564-65, n. 17.

<sup>41</sup> "Accomplishments of the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works," "Public Works Administration Miscellaneous" folder, box 1, entry 51, "Miscellaneous Publications, 1936-1941. Projects Control Division"; "Handbook of Pertinent Information Relative to Public Works Programs," May 1, 1936, no folder, box 2, entry 50, "Publications of the Division, 1936-1939. Projects Control Division"; and Howard D. Sutliff to James A. Farley, Oct. 23, 1935, "8000-8499" folder, box 2, entry 70 "Records of the Engineering Division. Records Relating to Equipment to be Used on Certain PWA Projects. 1935-1938.

Chula Vista, the spirit of the New Deal meant the improvement of local streets by private contractors employing a combination of skilled labor and workers taken from the relief rolls, funded by a mixture of federal grants, loans, and locally issued bonds. This broad and deep range of support for federal public works spending at the local level suggests that portraits of New Deal political culture that emphasize such features of daily life as taxpayer resistance, or the role of mass culture in mediating the growing acceptance of the welfare state by ethnic workers, are incomplete.<sup>42</sup> Through the PWA's public works, the New Deal won the support of native-born white property owners, too. While the PWA's approach to public works would soon give way, for a time, to a revised approach to public works embodied in Harry Hopkins's Works Progress Administration, the public works built by the PWA epitomized this spirit--the spirit of self-liquidation.

#### **From PWA to WPA: Public Works, Employment, and the Economy**

Soon after Ickes had become director of the PWA, Business Week published an evaluation of the two programs created by the National Industrial Recovery Act--the National Recovery Administration and the PWA--entitled "The Three-Legged Stool." Ickes, the magazine editorialized, "has approached the public works program with the determination that there shall be 'no smell of pork,' that there shall be no graft, that loans shall be sound. All this is highly commendable--to a certain point, or under normal conditions." However, given the extended economic depression, Business Week clamored for quick spending on public works projects that would immediately put people back to work. "Mr. Ickes," the editorial concluded, "is running a fire department on the

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#1,000-4,999," all in RG 135, NA. See also Louis Brownlow, "The Citizen as a Stockholder in Public Facilities," Engineering News-Record, May 18, 1933, pp. 628-31; and Leo Wolman, "Financial Aspects of Budgeting Public-Works Construction," ibid., pp. 659-60.

<sup>42</sup> David T. Beito, Taxpayers in Revolt: Tax Resistance during the Great Depression (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Lizabeth Cohen, Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

principles of a good, sound bond house." If economic recovery were to occur, New Dealers needed to realize that the recovery plan was like "a three-legged stool; we can balance precariously on two legs for a little while, but unless the third soon is driven into place, we shall have a nasty fall."<sup>43</sup> As one newspaper put it, "Let us get busy. Give the blue eagle [symbolizing the NRA] a running mate, a bird, say, with a shovel in one claw and a pickax in the other."<sup>44</sup>

Ickes responded to these criticisms, claiming that the PWA was trying to put men back to work quickly, and outlining the indirect benefits of the PWA for the economy. While "thousands of men are going back to work every day, on the roads of every state, along the inland rivers, in the shipyards on the coasts," Ickes also stressed that "And back of these thousands are still other thousands who are resuming work in cement plants, quarries, asphalt refineries, steel mills, engine works, manufacturing, and in bringing to the men on public construction the materials they must have for their work." As these men received their paychecks, "they begin to spend money again. They pay their bills. They buy clothes and shoes and more groceries and all kinds of household necessities. They begin to think again of such modest luxuries as a radio and a car. This increased purchasing power leads to the employment of thousands of others. The benefits spread out through the community in an ever-widening circle." The PWA, despite evidence to the contrary, was "not a huge, impersonal thing of bridges and dams and battleships." Rather, "It is an intensely human, personal effort, which will mean a great deal to your neighbors and to yourself."<sup>45</sup> [figure 5 here]

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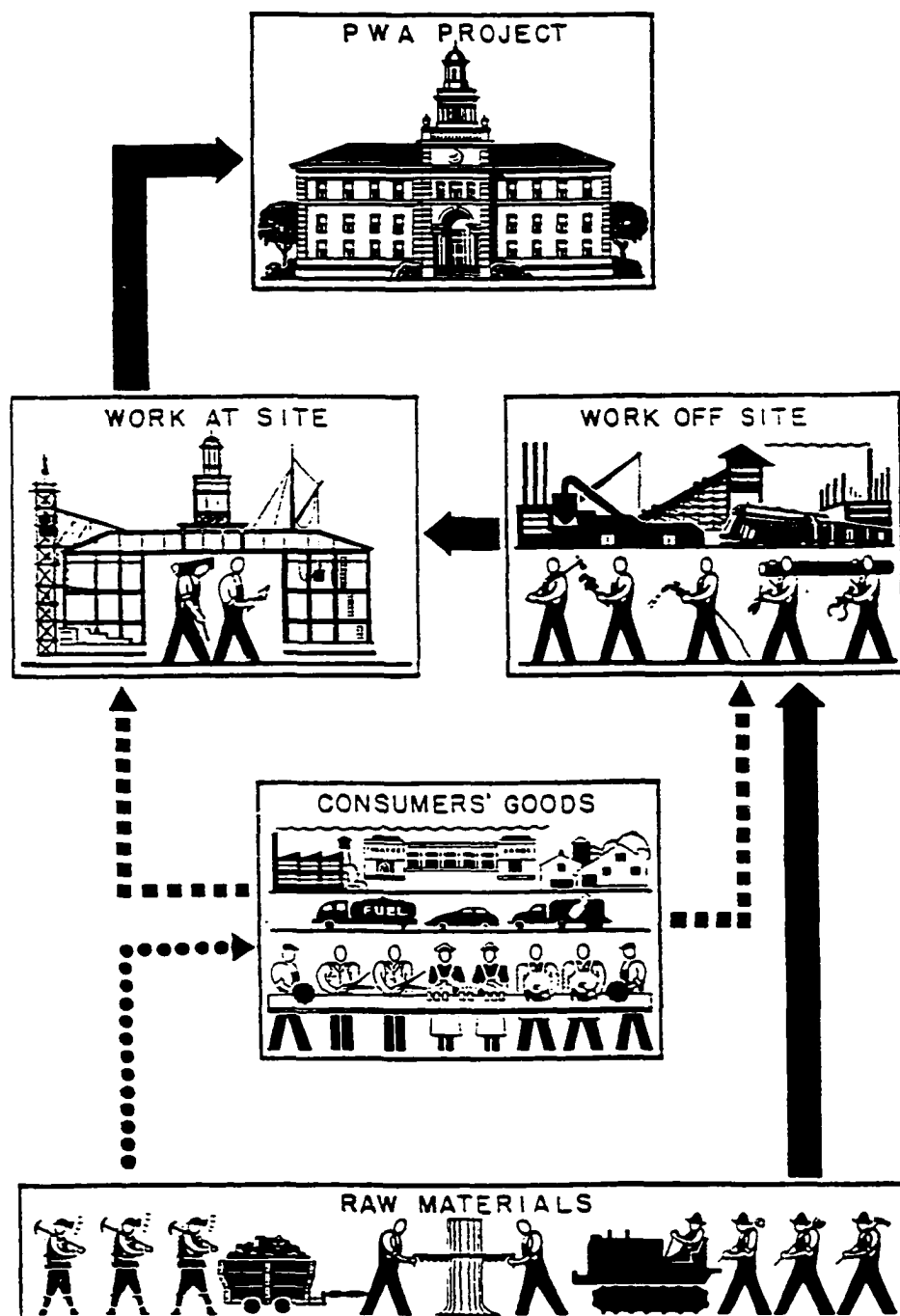
<sup>43</sup> Business Week, Aug. 26, 1933, clipping, "Editorials 1" folder, box 157, Harold L. Ickes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>44</sup> "What About Public Works, Secretary Ickes?" clipping from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Aug. 25, 1933, "Editorials 1 1933-1935" folder, box 157, Ickes Papers, LC.

<sup>45</sup> Ickes, "Spending Three Billions of Your Money!" clipping from The American Magazine, Oct. 1933, "Articles 'Spending Three Billions of Your Money' Oct. 1933 [corres. Aug.-Oct. 1933]" folder, box 170, Ickes Papers, LC.

Figure 5. Source: America Builds: The Record of PWA (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939).

## PUBLIC WORKS GENERATE EMPLOYMENT





By January 1935, however, David Cushman Coyle, a member of the PWA technical board of review, had rejected Ickes's position and had embraced that of Business Week. While the PWA was generating worthwhile public works, Coyle dryly observed that "the big gun that was going to blast the depression out of the landscape finally went off with a pop that was not heard round the world." The blame for this, Coyle thought, lay in the philosophy of self-liquidating public works that the PWA had inherited from Hoover's RFC:

The theory of self-liquidation springs from the general assumption on which the policies of the previous Administration were based--that expenses must be chiefly borne by the people with small incomes, so as to avoid the necessity of taxing further the people with large incomes. A "sound self-liquidating" project is one that is so arranged that charges can be laid directly upon the consumer, so that no expense will fall on the Federal treasury (and the income tax).<sup>46</sup>

Coyle had stumbled onto a point that other proto-Keynesians, such as Harry Hopkins, economist Lauchlin Currie, and Federal Reserve Chairman Marriner Eccles, would amplify over the next several years: if recovery were to occur, the federal government could not simply produce public works. Rather, it had to produce public works while injecting money into the economy, or, at a minimum, the government had to produce public works without placing demands for construction funds on those who could least afford it.<sup>47</sup>

To make this point, Coyle employed the image most often used in discussions of public works, that of priming a pump. Coyle declared that a truly effective public works program "would be like a pump that forces the circulation of water by sucking the water out of one place and driving it into another.... The function of an effective public works

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<sup>46</sup> David Cushman Coyle, "What About Public Works?" Harper's Monthly, Jan. 1935, 147.

<sup>47</sup> For more on the growth of Keynesianism among the New Dealers, see Alan Brinkley, The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), on the New Deal's sources of revenue, the key work is Mark H. Leff, The Limits of Symbolic Reform: The New Deal and Taxation, 1933-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

program would be to draw off some of this unspendable surplus and spend it, forcing it back into circulation..." A public works program that hewed too closely to a philosophy of self-liquidation, however, "is a means of connecting the outgoing pipe back to the pump, so that the pump will not have to draw from surplus incomes. The result is that a fine healthy current of buying power goes out into the business world for a short distance and then is cut back to the pump without making the full circuit."<sup>48</sup> Self-liquidation, in Coyle's analysis, focused too narrowly on achieving a return on investment in "worthwhile" public works, absorbing some of the funds that, in a truly recovery-oriented program of public works, should have been injected into the economy. "'Sound, self-liquidating' public works, and 'sound' methods of doing the financing," argued Coyle, "are clever ways of putting the suction end of the pump into the same bucket as the discharge end, so that we may be allowed to splash happily without dampening the good old business cycle and the gentlemen who live by the same."<sup>49</sup>

If the New Deal's public works were to achieve economic recovery, Coyle concluded, it would "have to be correct in all the ways that the orthodox financial authorities do not like. It will have to be made up of non-self-liquidating Federal projects or grants-in-aid, adequate in volume and speed, temporarily financed by bonds sold only to banks, and ultimately validated by taxes on the upper brackets."<sup>50</sup> In other words, public works projects, in conjunction with the recovery codes of the NRA, would not suffice. Rather, public works must be an essential part of a rethinking of the American economic system.

After making the Public Works Administration the centerpiece of New Deal public works programs for nearly two years, FDR shifted tactics. Public works would

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<sup>48</sup> Coyle, "What About Public Works?," 148.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

remain the central focus of the New Deal, but a new administrator and a new organization would prosecute these projects. The PWA continued as a functioning agency and its approach to public works would again become important during World War II. Harry Hopkins's Works Progress Administration, however, would come to epitomize a different approach to labor, contractors, and construction.

### **The Origins of the Works Progress Administration**

The establishment of the WPA by Executive Order 7034 on May 6, 1935, grew out of the Roosevelt administration's experience dealing with unemployment. In 1933 FDR had put Harry Hopkins in charge of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and, when it looked like special measures were needed during the brutal winter of 1933-34, gave him the task of running the Civil Works Administration (CWA). Both organizations tried to ease the burdens of unemployment by putting people to work on public works projects. Hopkins, a social worker from Iowa who had administered relief in New York state when FDR was governor, possessed both idealistic fervor and a keen sense of political realism. As Joseph E. Davies famously put it, Hopkins "had the purity of St. Francis of Assisi combined with the sharp shrewdness of a race track tout."<sup>51</sup>

Following large electoral victories for the Democrats in 1934, Hopkins and other New Dealers made the case to FDR for strengthening the federal government's commitment to work relief in place of a simple dole. In response to FDR's January 4, 1935, message to Congress, the House and Senate passed the 1935 Emergency Relief

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<sup>51</sup> Davies quoted in Searle F. Charles, Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963), 24. My account of the WPA's origins relies on Charles, Minister of Relief; Federal Works Agency, Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-1943 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947); Donald S. Howard, The WPA and Federal Relief Policy (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943); Arthur W. MacMahon, John D. Millett, and Gladys Ogden, The Administration of Federal Work Relief (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1941); and George McJimsey, Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of Democracy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

Appropriation (ERA) Act, totaling \$4.88 billion. Hopkins and Harold Ickes immediately set to work lobbying FDR, each seeking to be put in charge of this new works program. By April, Roosevelt accommodated their rivalry by creating a new layer of bureaucracy. Frank C. Walker, a Democratic lawyer with a talent for soothing egos, was placed in charge of a new Division of Application and Information. Walker's DAI screened project applications and sent them to an Advisory Committee on Allotments, chaired by Ickes, which reviewed them and passed its recommendation along to FDR. Hopkins's Works Progress Administration was then to be in charge of expediting selected projects and running smaller public works projects directly. FDR's desire to reduce unemployment through public works, however, led him to favor Hopkins' WPA and to slight Ickes.<sup>52</sup>

The WPA built on the organization of the FERA and the CWA, drawing on much of the same administrative personnel. The WPA was federally administered and organized by region and state, with a separate organization for New York City. The Senate confirmed WPA staffers--generally state administrators--who made more than \$5,000 a year. The WPA contained engineering and construction, service projects, finance, employment, management, statistics, research, investigation, information, and legal divisions. Hopkins's key aides included such figures as Aubrey Williams, who also ran the National Youth Administration, Ellen S. Woodward, Florence Kerr, Corrington Gill, Jacob Baker, Lawrence Westbrook, Howard O. Hunter, Alan Johnstone, and David K. Niles. Hopkins also drew on engineering expertise, particularly relying on Army Corps of Engineers Colonel Francis C. Harrington, who replaced Hopkins as the head of the WPA at the end of 1938. Although hesitant initially, Hopkins embraced the notion of using army engineers in the WPA. They had the technical know-how to speed the execution of public works projects, and their air of military and scientific authority helped

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<sup>52</sup> FDR, "Annual Message to the Congress," Jan. 4, 1935, in Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: Random House, 1938) 4:15-25; Final Report on the WPA, 7. For Walker's remembrances of this period, see Robert H. Ferrell, ed., FDR's Quiet Confidant: The Autobiography of Frank C. Walker (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 98-101.

quiet charges of political favoritism in the WPA. The WPA in New York City and Los Angeles, for example, was run by Army Corps of Engineer officers.

Although Ickes always maintained that Hopkins intentionally selected the name "WPA" in order to spark confusion with his PWA, Hopkins argued otherwise. On one occasion, Hopkins told a group of WPA officials in New York City that FDR aide Louis Howe came up with the name "Works Progress Administration" while reviewing government flow charts with Hopkins at the White House. Ill and dying, Howe reportedly made Hopkins promise to stop fighting with Ickes, and to ensure that Congress pass legislation establishing the WPA, name and all. Hopkins claimed that he still had the yellow sheet of notepaper with Howe's handwriting.<sup>53</sup>

Although the records of a temporary body soon superseded by the growing influence of Hopkins and the WPA, the minutes of the Advisory Committee on Allotments (ACA) provide crucial evidence of the tensions that had been building among the New Dealers since 1933 over the nature and goals of public works. Within the ACA, the questions of employment versus indirect employment, "make work" over infrastructure, private contracting versus directly supervised government construction ("force account" work), and economic recovery versus economic development, were heatedly revisited and refought. The ACA contained a wide range of cabinet officers, New Dealers, and business executives, reflecting a variation on the "associationalism" between government and the private sector often ascribed to Hoover.<sup>54</sup> The director of the Treasury Department's public buildings division, the acting director of the budget, the head of the Army Corps of Engineers, the Commissioner of the Reclamation Division,

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<sup>53</sup> Harry Hopkins, untitled address, Nov. 16, 1938, "Hopkins" folder, box 3, entry 737, "Division of Information. Administrative Speeches, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>54</sup> The classic statement on associationalism is Ellis W. Hawley, "Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an 'Associative State,' 1921-1928," *Journal of American History* 61 (June 1974): 116-40; an important reassessment is David M. Hart, "Herbert Hoover's Last Laugh: The Enduring Significance of the 'Associative State' in the United States," *Journal of Policy History* 10 (1998): 419-44.

the director of the Soil Erosion Service, the chief of the Forest Service, the head of the Civilian Conservation Corps, Resettlement Administration, Rural Electrification Administration, the National Youth Administration, and the head of the PWA's housing division joined such members of the Business Advisory Council as Sears, Roebuck president Robert Wood and Singer Sewing Machine Company president Robert Elbert, and such other notables as Frederick Delano, the vice chairman of the National Resources Board, George Berry of the National Recovery Administration, Edward O'Neal of the American Farm Bureau Federation, Julien Hill, representing the American Bankers' Association, and New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia, representing the U.S. Conference of Mayors.

FDR, speaking at the ACA's first meeting, placed the problem of providing work for the unemployed in front of the Committee as its "first task." FDR's skepticism of the PWA's efforts on this front were immediately evident. "Now, nobody knows what that total [employed] would be," he said. "Some experts say that we would employ indirectly two people by giving one man a job; others hold more than two; nobody seems to know." FDR proceeded to lay out the implications of direct employment:

[W]e have got to know certain facts: Where these unemployed are located, and we have got to give these projects insofar as is possible to those localities where these unemployed on the relief rolls actually live. That means also that a lot of us will have to give up a lot of "pet" projects of our own. It means that we will have to give up a lot of projects in out-of-the-way places--the harnessing of rivers, for instance; and so on, for the reason that such projects are very costly, and in the localities in which they are located there is so little unemployment that it would mean that in order to do this work we would have to go and build barracks a thousand miles away in order to move these people.<sup>55</sup>

Out of the 3.5 million on relief that the administration classified as "employable," (excluding the elderly and children) 478,000 were in the building and construction trades, 524,000 were white-collar workers, 205,000 were skilled in trades other than

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<sup>55</sup> Proceedings of the Advisory Committee on Allotments, 1:1-3, May 7, 1935, entry 32, "Minutes of Meetings of the Advisory Committee on Allotments," RG 135, NA.

construction, and 1 million were unskilled workers. Of the 3,022,000 workers who were not in construction, 2.5 million were men and 964,000 were women.<sup>56</sup>

At this first meeting, the ACA resolved to allot some of the \$4.88 billion to specific projects: \$400 million to roads and highways, \$250 million to rural rehabilitation and conservation, \$50 million to rural electrification, \$225 million to housing, \$150 million to white-collar jobs, \$300 million to the Civilian Conservation Corps, \$450 million to non-federal self-liquidating public works, and \$175 million for sanitation, prevention of soil erosion, flood control, and river and harbor projects.<sup>57</sup>

Fiorello La Guardia stressed the importance of presenting the new works program to the public in such a way that reached beyond the relief of unemployment. "We talk about the number of unemployed in this country," the New York mayor said. Aside from these people, he noted, "We have a class of people in this country that just cannot understand anything spoken in humane terms, but they will understand you when you speak to them in terms of tons of steel, thousands of brick, and so forth; and that is the language in which we will have to talk with them." La Guardia argued that materials ordered for public works projects should be distributed widely. "Instead of giving an order for all the steel to one man we could distribute these orders to several manufacturers, or we can obtain permission to purchase these materials, provided the prices are favorable, of course, from the mills and factories throughout the country, and in that way we may obtain assurances from these various mills and factories that more men would be put to work." In addition to distributing these funds across industries, La Guardia also pushed for the WPA to earmark funds for each city in the nation.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> ACA Proceedings, 1:12, May 7, 1935.

<sup>57</sup> ACA Proceedings, 1:12-24, May 7, 1935.

<sup>58</sup> ACA Proceedings, 1:25, May 7, 1935; and ACA Proceedings 2:4, May 16, 1935.

Hopkins stressed to his staff the importance of working with mayors and governors. "We would have been awful damned fools," he bluntly said, "if we thought for a minute that we have either the power or the ability to go out and set up 100,000 work projects as we are going to have to do, probably 200,000 before the year is over, without the complete cooperation of local and state officials. We couldn't do it if we wanted to." Indeed, Hopkins argued, the work the WPA does "in the main is work not on Federal property but on city and county and state property, it is work that is going to be of interest to the local taxpayers and local people, and we couldn't if we wanted to develop these projects, organize them or prosecute them for that matter, without bringing the cities and the counties and states into a complete partnership with us." Anticipating the important role that local officials would play in the New Deal, Hopkins asserted that "If we can't talk to those fellows in ways that will make them feel they are really a part of it, then we have failed."<sup>59</sup> Hopkins told his staff, "we have got to deal with people that live in these towns. They are your friends, your neighbors, members of the Chamber of Commerce, members of clubs, they are Masons or Knights of Columbus; they are mayors, public officials of all kinds. The way those people are treated, the way your deputies act toward them when they see them and meet them means an awful lot, in my opinion, in the kind of reputation we get throughout the country."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Proceedings Staff Conference, Works Progress Administration," June 16, 1935, "100 May-Sept 35" folder, box 67, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," Record Group 69, Records of the Works Progress Administration, National Archives, Washington, D.C. For more on the role of local constraints and the New Deal, see James T. Patterson, The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Anthony J. Badger, "The New Deal and the Localities," in Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones and Bruce Collins, eds., The Growth of Federal Power in American History (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983), 102-115; Badger, New Deal; the essays collected in John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., The New Deal: The State and Local Levels (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975); and, more recently, Douglas Carl Abrams, Conservative Constraints: North Carolina and the New Deal (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992).

<sup>60</sup> "Proceedings Conference of State Administrators. Works Progress Administration," June 17-19, 1935, "100 May-Sept 35" folder, box 67, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.



Hopkins urged his staff to take care in selecting administrative personnel, stating that in its reliance on the quality of its administrators the WPA resembled no other organization except for the university. "A university depends on its faculty and on nothing else," Hopkins stated. "A university that had a great reputation twenty years ago is second-rate now. Why? Because the faculty have gone, some other university got the great teachers. Ninety per cent of this depends on the people we have to run it."<sup>61</sup>

With administrative expertise, Hopkins thought, the WPA could avoid charges that they were playing politics. "We are going to be charged with buying the election," Hopkins told his staff. "We have already been charged with it, and boy, wait until this starts next fall and next spring." Hopkins, though, was skeptical of notions that federal spending on public works had a direct correlation on the voting of relief recipients. "[I]f anybody thinks you can buy an election through giving relief, or even work relief jobs, I think it is the silliest thing in the world. I have been in this game now for two years, and if there is one way not to do it, it is by giving relief, because none of the clients like you. They all think you're terrible, and you are not going to buy any elections that way."<sup>62</sup>

The WPA did believe in publicizing its program, however. During the summer of 1936, for example, the WPA broadcast fifteen-minute radio programs on 54,000 occasions, over 475 stations. Between August and December 1936, about 10 million people saw 20 motion pictures produced by the WPA. David K. Niles, the director of the WPA's information service, urged the WPA to "proclaim from the housetops what you are doing for the underprivileged in your community."<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> "Proceedings Staff Conference, Works Progress Administration," June 16, 1935, "100 May-Sept 35" folder, box 67, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

<sup>62</sup> "Proceedings Conference of State Administrators. Works Progress Administration," June 17-19, 1935, "100 May-Sept 35" folder, box 67, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

<sup>63</sup> "Proceedings Conference of State Administrators. Works Progress Administration," Feb. 12-13, 1937, "100 Jan-Feb 37" folder, box 69, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

### **WPA and Labor**

In trying to address the problem of direct employment, the ACA revisited the difficulty of trying to build public works on the one hand, and trying to employ the maximum amount of workers off the relief rolls, on the other. Harry Hopkins asked James McEntee, the assistant director of the Civilian Conservation Corps, about using labor from the relief rolls in building camps for the CCC. McEntee reported that they had no difficulties drawing unskilled labor from people on relief, but that "We ran into a lot of grief" in trying to find enough skilled labor from relief rolls. McEntee told Hopkins that "under these various relief agencies that building trades mechanics do not register there. That dates back to the PWA. They may be in distress and badly in need of work but because of the system of employment in the building trades--industry is something different--building trades mechanics do not register under these agencies."<sup>64</sup>

FDR himself held forth at a subsequent meeting of the ACA on this issue, summarizing an extended debate he had with Ickes, Hopkins, Walker, and Morgenthau. FDR attempted to "paint the picture in its actual terms," arguing that the WPA had to spend its appropriation to put roughly 3.5 million people to work via direct employment.<sup>65</sup> Champions of projects that relied more on skilled labor, such as Edward Markham of the Army Corps of Engineers, tried to object to FDR's reasoning. "I think it would be wise and well," Markham said, "for others than those representing the construction agencies to make some remarks on the subject since it seems to me we are dealing with the impossible. If the direct and indirect [employment figures] are included in such matters, it begins to bring the figure to the levels that are preferred." FDR, however, responded to Markham that "I have said not once but two or three times there is no use mentioning indirect labor in these discussions. Indirect labor does not count in our

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<sup>64</sup> ACA Proceedings, 2:42-43, May 16, 1935.

<sup>65</sup> ACA Proceedings, 4:32-34, June 3, 1935.

figures. We have a figure of direct labor, three and one-half million people. We hope it will put another three and one-half million people on indirect labor but it does not enter into the consideration of our projects."<sup>66</sup> Between July 1935 and July 1943, the WPA employed a total of 8.5 million people, reaching a peak of about 3.3 million in late 1938.<sup>67</sup>

Hopkins echoed FDR's stance on direct employment while conferring with his staff ten days later. "When I talk about employment," Hopkins declared, "I am talking entirely about direct employment on the job, and I think tomorrow we will have to make it perfectly clear to the State Administrators that we are not discussing now indirect employment in any way. All of us know there will be indirect employment; none of us know how much. The guesses will run from 1:1 to 1:5, depending on who is doing the guessing." Instead of guessing, Hopkins focused on specifics: "We are talking about 3,500,000 particular men whose names and addresses we now know, who are going to move from the relief rolls to direct employment on these particular jobs, not the men on the relief rolls that may get jobs in other ways but these particular 3,500,000 jobs."<sup>68</sup>

Roads and highways provided about half of the WPA's employment on construction employment. Taken together, public utilities such as water and sewer construction, public buildings, and parks and recreational facilities accounted for one-third of WPA employment. Unskilled workers were employed in great numbers on WPA projects: over 75 percent of road project workers were unskilled. While 60 to 70 percent of other construction project workers were unskilled, this figure excludes public building construction, which generally relied on more skilled workers. About 30 percent of public

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<sup>66</sup> ACA Proceedings, 4:37, June 6, 1935.

<sup>67</sup> Final Report on the WPA, 28-30.

<sup>68</sup> "Proceedings Staff Conference, Works Progress Administration." June 16, 1935, "100 May-Sept 35" folder, box 67, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

building workers were skilled laborers; unskilled workers accounted for under 50 percent of the workforce on public buildings constructed by the WPA.<sup>69</sup>

### **Private Contracting or Government-Run Construction?**

While the WPA put people to work directly, via force account labor, the PWA relied on contractors to build its projects. In the PWA's opinion, its projects--built via contracts given to privately held construction firms--were erected at the same level of efficiency and fiscal responsibility as if they were sponsored exclusively by the private sector. After polling project sponsors, examining an independent survey of New York state schools, reviewing instances of duplicate bid taking, and scrutinizing other data in their files, one PWA official concluded that there was only a one to three percent increase in the costs of certain projects, and no increase at all in other projects. "Contractors who have expressed themselves on this subject--as well as engineers and architects engaged in the construction business," this PWA official wrote, "have asserted that there is no real basis" for claiming that the PWA's construction was unduly expensive or inefficient. "Any expense that might be involved in operating under conditions imposed by PWA is offset by the certainty that the payments to the contractor will be made in accordance with the definite terms of the contract." While the PWA wage scale also helped insure cost certainty, PWA inspections were responsible for setting "higher standards of planning and execution" on PWA projects.<sup>70</sup>

The PWA's non-federal program of public works relied on private contractors throughout the nation. [table 3 here]

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<sup>69</sup> Final Report on the WPA, 47-48.

<sup>70</sup> Undated and anonymous confidential "Memorandum on PWA Construction Costs," "1939, Binder 1" folder, box 6, entry 6, "Materials Prepared for Congressional Hearings on PWA Appropriations, 1936-1941," RG 135, NA.

Table 3: Number of Contractors used in PWA non-federal projects, by state, as of November 1937.

|               |     |                  |     |
|---------------|-----|------------------|-----|
| Alabama       | 29  | New Hampshire    | 8   |
| Arizona       | 18  | New Jersey       | 97  |
| Arkansas      | 17  | New Mexico       | 11  |
| California    | 372 | New York         | 592 |
| Colorado      | 55  | North Carolina   | 62  |
| Connecticut   | 36  | North Dakota     | 9   |
| Delaware      | 3   | Ohio             | 255 |
| Florida       | 36  | Oklahoma         | 26  |
| Georgia       | 22  | Oregon           | 9   |
| Idaho         | 3   | Pennsylvania     | 269 |
| Illinois      | 438 | Rhode Island     | 67  |
| Indiana       | 99  | South Carolina   | 16  |
| Iowa          | 54  | South Dakota     | 17  |
| Kansas        | 16  | Tennessee        | 76  |
| Kentucky      | 53  | Texas            | 242 |
| Louisiana     | 47  | Utah             | 27  |
| Maine         | 16  | Vermont          | 1   |
| Maryland      | 74  | Virginia         | 62  |
| Massachusetts | 93  | Washington       | 46  |
| Michigan      | 97  | West Virginia    | 55  |
| Minnesota     | 42  | Wisconsin        | 105 |
| Mississippi   | 100 | Wyoming          | 3   |
| Missouri      | 260 | Washington, D.C. | 18  |
| Montana       | 29  | Alaska           | 2   |
| Nebraska      | 40  | Hawaii           | 4   |
|               |     | Puerto Rico      | 11  |

Source: Dan H. Wheeler to H.N. Gillman, Jr., Nov. 6, 1937, "Contractors (Receiving PWA Contracts)" folder, box 5, entry 30, "Records of the Project Control Division, Subject Files, 1933-1940," RG 135, NA.

In the East, Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania employed a great number of construction firms, while in the Midwest, Illinois, Missouri, Ohio, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Indiana did a similar job of spreading PWA employment among a variety of businesses. In the South, only Texas and Mississippi equaled or exceeded the mark of 100 contractors employed, and in the West, only California. On a per capita basis, it is difficult not to be impressed by the number of contracting firms employed in

Washington, D.C. (18), or, for that matter, in Montana (29), Utah (27), Arizona (18), South Dakota (17), or Puerto Rico (11).

The PWA kept close track of contractors it had banned from eligibility for PWA contracts. At Ickes's direction, the PWA compiled a list of banned contractors under its "confidential order no. 1." [table 4 here]

Table 4: Number of Contractors Banned by the PWA, by state, as of June 1938.

|               |    |                  |   |
|---------------|----|------------------|---|
| New York      | 55 | Wisconsin        | 5 |
| Massachusetts | 37 | Mississippi      | 5 |
| Illinois      | 36 | Florida          | 5 |
| Missouri      | 32 | Oregon           | 5 |
| New Jersey    | 28 | Virginia         | 4 |
| Texas         | 26 | Alabama          | 4 |
| California    | 23 | North Dakota     | 3 |
| Pennsylvania  | 23 | South Dakota     | 3 |
| Minnesota     | 17 | Hawaii           | 3 |
| Louisiana     | 12 | Maine            | 3 |
| Ohio          | 11 | West Virginia    | 3 |
| Michigan      | 9  | Georgia          | 3 |
| Indiana       | 9  | Connecticut      | 2 |
| Washington    | 9  | Maryland         | 2 |
| Iowa          | 8  | Arkansas         | 2 |
| Kansas        | 7  | Utah             | 2 |
| Arizona       | 7  | Idaho            | 2 |
| Rhode Island  | 6  | Tennessee        | 2 |
| Kentucky      | 6  | Nebraska         | 2 |
| New Mexico    | 5  | Colorado         | 1 |
| Oklahoma      | 5  | Montana          | 1 |
|               |    | Washington, D.C. | 1 |

Source: PWA Confidential Order No. 1 (Supplement No. 49), June 11, 1938, no folder, box 1, entry 11. "Confidential Memoranda," RG 135, NA.

The top eight states on this list all did well in the total number of contractors employed by the PWA on non-federal projects. By 1939, however, the PWA slightly relaxed its rules on employing banned contractors. Instead of declaring these contractors completely out-of-bounds, they required local PWA directors to request special approval from Washington in order to employ them on PWA contracts.

It was not until 1940 that the PWA had collected comprehensive information regarding contractors working on PWA non-federal projects and was willing to make this public. Through July 23, 1940, the PWA had awarded 54,637 non-federal contracts to 20,006 contractors, excluding material and equipment contracts.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> E.W. Clark to Chief, Research and Statistics Division, PWA, Sept. 5, 1940, "FWA" folder, box 1, entry 34, "Records of the Projects Control Division. File of Lloyd N. Beeker, Assistant Director of the Projects Control Division, 1936-1941," RG 135, NA.

The PWA took pains to publicize what it portrayed as the advantages of working through private construction firms, for example broadcasting a series of discussions about the PWA on the radio over several nights in 1937. One discussion featured a PWA state director and an architect discussing the support for PWA in the construction trades. In response to claims that projects built under the PWA cost more because of mark-ups by the contractors, the architect responded that this claim was "foolish, and every contractor in this business knows it is."

When you start a Public Works Administration job, you know you're going to get your money when you're supposed to get it. You know that nobody's going to come around chiseling you, either. That's one of the best things about the PWA. Its' [sic] stopped cheating. It kept out the fly-by-night contractors who skinned a job, and took them away from legitimate contractors by cheating their workmen and letting their sub-contractors hold the bag for them on financing. We have had to do more paper work and keep better records than heretofore but we have considered the expense we were put to in this connection as money spent for a good education. We are keeping closer tract [sic] of jobs than we used to and this applies to contractors as well; especially contractors who had been used to keeping records on the back of envelopes, small notebooks stuffed in their pockets and other inefficient methods.<sup>72</sup>

Jobs under the PWA, this architect and PWA official agreed, were subject to close inspections and safety regulations, and were executed efficiently. While clearly staged to drum up support for the PWA, the discussion concluded with the architect issuing a ringing endorsement of the program:

...the PWA saved the contractors and the whole construction business. I have been working at architectural designs since 1920. When I had a job with Wells and Hudson as an architectural designer I never saw construction hit as it was hit in this depression. From 1931 to 1933 we all sat tight with nothing to do. Many contractors had millions of dollars worth of equipment sitting idle and rusting away. If you do not believe this, go look up the building permits for this period and see for yourself. Many companies spent thousands of dollars in overhead and in trying to keep a nucleus of a force together, while not one nickel came in. The

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<sup>72</sup> "Fifth Night--Radio Series" transcript, no date (prob. after Feb. 11, 1937), "Addresses" folder, box 2, entry 34, "Records of the Projects Control Division. File of Lloyd N. Beeker, Assistant Director of the Projects Control Division, 1936-1941," RG 135, NA.



PWA was created in 1933 and a great many architects and contractors went back to work.<sup>73</sup>

Although it carried out its work by force account, with the federal government directly supervising public works construction, the WPA seriously contemplated constructing its projects under contracts, like the PWA. Army engineer Francis P. Harrington recalled in 1937 that the issue of contracting WPA work "was one of the first things which I had to deal with when I came with the WPA." The WPA, Harrington said, resolved that "the question" of contracts hinged on two issues. "In the first place, contracting doesn't give you the flexibility you must have in running the WPA program; and, secondly, if there is any way to make a contract[or] to use relief labor it has yet to be discovered. Some of them will do it but those who don't want to just don't do it and that is that."<sup>74</sup>

Not surprisingly, contractors disliked the WPA's approach to constructing public works projects because (unlike Ickes's PWA) the WPA cut contractors out of the construction process. One trade journal titled its profile of Hopkins, "The High Prophet of No Profits." Hopkins's approach to public works, it opined, was "the negative one. He doesn't believe in contractors, contractors's organizations, or contractors's profits. He is the high prophet of no profits, indeed, for the entire industry, and his day labor activities are of the sort that tend to dig themselves into the governmental system, deeper and deeper."<sup>75</sup> Another contractor complained to New Mexico Senator Bronson Cutting, "When you consider the part contractors have taken in the development of these United States, it hardly seems square to wipe us off the map." Supporting contractors were the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> "Proceedings Conference of State Administrators. Works Progress Administration," Feb. 12-13, 1937, "100 Jan-Feb 37" folder, box 69, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

<sup>75</sup> "The High Prophet of No Profits," in The Central Constructor, May 7, 1936, "Hopkins Biographical Material" folder, box 2, entry 746, "Division of Information. Publications of the Federal Works Agency and Subordinate Agencies, 1936-1942," RG 69, NA.

building trades workers, who lobbied senators and congressmen as they considered the \$4.8 billion 1935 Emergency Relief Appropriation. One head of a plumbers's union wrote that the bill "will work a great hardship on private enterprise if the government enters the plumbing industry by direct purchase of materials, and employs all labor, disregarding the plumbing dealer, now struggling in each community to carry on business."<sup>76</sup>

Despite the complaints of the contractors, though, it seems clear that they did much better under Roosevelt than they had under the previous Republican administrations. As John Kenneth Galbraith observed, while federal public works spending accounted for 21.6% of total construction between 1925 and 1929, this figure grew to more than 50% between 1933 and 1939, with the exception of 1937.<sup>77</sup>

### **Measuring employment: Direct and Indirect**

The PWA struggled to collect accurate figures on the number of people employed on its projects, a task that only took on greater importance after the creation of the WPA, an agency whose explicit purpose was generating employment. The Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics actually measured more PWA employment than did the PWA itself. One PWA official thought that this discrepancy was due to the fact that Labor reported "the maximum number of men employed during any one week of the month by each contractor and Government agency doing F[orce] A[ccount] work." The PWA, however, took a weekly average of men employed. If they adopted Labor's methods, the PWA expected they would report a 30 to 40% increase in employment.<sup>78</sup> The PWA

<sup>76</sup> W.G. Ransom to Senator Bronson Cutting, Jan. 28, 1935, and John Strumquist to Cutting, Jan. 29, 1935, both in "'Public Works Act' and Unemployment Relief Jan-Apr. 1935" folder, box 37, Bronson Cutting Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>77</sup> Galbraith, Economic Effects of the Federal Public Works Expenditures, 36-37.

<sup>78</sup> M.L. Devine to Dan H. Wheeler, Aug. 10, 1937, "Employment, Data on" folder, box 6, entry 30, "Records of the Project Control Division, Subject Files, 1933-1940," RG 135, NA.

considered revamping its employment reporting system, using punch cards and social security numbers to track a worker's employment by job classification, hours worked, wage rate, and total wages earned. This change, a PWA official argued, should be presented not as an attempt to inflate employment figures, but rather as an effort to collect accurate facts.<sup>79</sup> By the time this change was being considered, however, in late 1938, any changes to PWA employment figures would have little potential to change the image of the PWA as a program that achieved little in the area of direct employment, an image that was by this point fixed in the minds of policy makers.

In fact, however, due to the PWA's formula of loans and grants, the average cost per man-hour worked on PWA projects to the federal government was actually less than the cost on WPA projects, which were supported with more federal funds.<sup>80</sup>

While the staff of the PWA continued to maintain that their program was the more efficient and effective option to generate employment, as the WPA became the central focus of the New Deal's public works programs the PWA shifted its tactics. Now, the PWA argued, "it should be emphasized again that in its original conception" the PWA "was an instrument of recovery rather than relief." Blaming the very considerable obstacles to success--the time needed to plan and carry out a vast program of construction, coordinated with state and local governments, along with, as the PWA now put it, "the nature of the organization and of the projects which it was equipped to undertake limited the class of unemployed who would be directly affected in the first stages of the program"--the PWA argued that the WPA should be seen as a supplement to its efforts. "The fact that it was necessary to supplement Public Works," the PWA argued, "with direct relief and work relief is not an indication that the original plan was

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<sup>79</sup> L.N. Beeker to M.L. Devine, Dec. 8, 1938, in *ibid.*, RG 135, NA.

<sup>80</sup> Undated and unsigned memo, "Comparison of PWA and WPA Labor Costs," "Labor" folder, box 2, entry 49, "Records of the Projects Control Division, Research Materials, 1935-1940," RG 135, NA.

unsound in conception or in execution." Indeed, PWA financial officer B.W. Thoron argued,

The program as carried out...together with the revival of private building activity resulting from returning confidence, has absorbed the entire available supply of qualified building labor in many sections of the country. It has provided thousands of needed public improvements in communities of every size. It has stimulated local and regional planning by insisting that each community shall choose its own projects and that they shall be suitable to its needs and shall not conflict with other developments. By its careful supervision of construction and the expenditure of funds it has raised the standard of performance on public construction work and has insured that each community obtains a soundly constructed project worth the money that has been put into it. It has, by the development of legislation and by financial counsel, aided many municipalities, particularly the smaller ones, in improving their financial affairs. It has aided labor, not only by creating employment but by insisting on standards of hours and wages consistent with satisfactory earning power and a good standard of living. It has maintained the idea of joint participation of the federal government and local communities in the financing of projects of local benefit.<sup>81</sup>

In short, Thoron and the PWA argued, the "original plan" of the PWA was to provide well-constructed public works projects while helping debt-ridden municipalities put their financial affairs in order so they could qualify for PWA loans, only incidentally employing "qualified building labor."

Ickes complained about FDR's neglect of the PWA's record on indirect employment to Donald Richberg, his old law partner and the chief counsel for the National Recovery Administration. Ickes wrote that he was "quite surprised" to have been told "that there is no such thing as indirect labor resulting from Public Works's expenditures." While experts debated whether the PWA generated indirect employment in a ratio of 3 jobs off-site to one on-site, two to one, or only one to one, Ickes pressed Richberg to acknowledge that the PWA was making strides in this area, rather than claim

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<sup>81</sup> B.W. Thoron, "Summarizations of Objectives and Accomplishments of PWA," no date, "Non-Federal Projects, Accomplishments of the PWA, Review of PW study, Looking into the Future, History of Time Limitations on PWA program" folder, box 4, entry 49, "Records of the Projects Control Division, Research Materials, 1935-1940," RG 135, NA. Thoron drew on this analysis in his article, "The Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works," The Municipal Yearbook (Chicago: International City Manager's Association, 1937): 455-72.

that all New Deal employment was due to the NRA. "In other words," Ickes wrote, "you have branded every re-employed industrial worker with an 'NRA,' whereas I claim that about 1,000,000 at least of these industrial workers belong in the PWA corral."<sup>82</sup>

Despite all of the complaints from the PWA about the issue of direct and indirect employment, the creation of the WPA signaled a watershed in the development of New Deal public works programs. As Harry Hopkins said of this debate, "You can argue it privately amongst yourselves if you please, but I have heard the argument here for the last four months. I won't say that I am sick of the argument, because it is still good fun, but it is settled. That is one thing you don't have to worry about."<sup>83</sup>

The WPA, however, did have to worry about the impact of its policy. By early 1937, labor unions--particularly the AFL building trades--began to complain more strenuously to the WPA about the federal government undercutting the employment available to skilled craftsmen. Nels Anderson, the WPA director of labor relations and author of The Right to Work, noted that "the labor organizations, especially the skilled trades," were complaining to the WPA "that our rates of pay make it possible for WPA workers to go out and chisel on their [the AFL's] jobs--that is, we have raised the rates of pay for some crafts so high that it is possible for a worker to get in his month's quota of earnings in fifty-six hours or seventy or eighty hours, and then he is free to go prospecting for anything he can get."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Harold L. Ickes to Donald R. Richberg, Oct. 3, 1934, "Construction" folder, box 2, entry 49, "Records of the Projects Control Division, Research Materials, 1935-1940," RG 135, NA. See also Ickes to Richberg, Oct. 10, 1934, "Industrial Emergency Committee. Richberg File" folder, box 57, entry 10, "Minutes of Meetings and Related Records of the Special Industrial Recovery Board, 1932-1935," Records of the Office of Government Reports, Record Group 44, National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>83</sup> "Proceedings Conference of State Administrators. Works Progress Administration," June 17-19, 1935. "100 May-Sept 35" folder, box 67, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

<sup>84</sup> "Proceedings Conference of State Administrators. Works Progress Administration," Feb. 12-13, 1937. "100 Jan-Feb 37" folder, box 69, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA. For more on the AFL during this period, see Christopher L. Tomlins, "AFL Unions in the 1930s: Their Performance in Historical Perspective," Journal of American History 65 (March 1979): 1021-42; and Mark Perlman, "Labor in Eclipse," in John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., Change and

### **A "Dilemma" After All? The WPA and Infrastructure**

The PWA often tried to portray itself as the agency of serious construction, contrasting itself to an image of the WPA as an agency that only incidentally did things while handing money out to the unemployed on the relief rolls. Many, including New Dealers, participated in constructing these impressions of both programs. In 1939, one PWA official summed up what he termed "the difference" between the two agencies:

The WPA (Works Progress Administration) is a work-relief agency: the PWA (Public Works Administration), a reemployment agency. The WPA cooperates with State and local governments in carrying out a variety of needed public improvements and services, in order to provide work and wages for the needy, able-bodied unemployed. The PWA, on the other hand, helps State and local governments to build such things as public buildings, roads and bridges, in order to stimulate reemployment, directly, through contractors carrying out PWA jobs, and indirectly through the stimulation of productive activity in heavy goods industries.<sup>85</sup>

But was the central dilemma of New Deal public works truly a choice between employing people and constructing projects? The WPA, in fact, made significant contributions to the national estate, although few recognized this fact at the time, or in subsequent years. By 1941, WPA chief engineer Perry Fellows told the WPA's regional chief engineers that "the average man in the street, even the average Congressman, little realizes how excellent the WPA program is and what strides we are making in honest-to-goodness employment on projects that are so far above the so-called standard of excellence on which contractors operate that there is no comparison."<sup>86</sup> For this state of ignorance,

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Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The 1920s (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1968), 103-45. For Anderson's work, see his The Right to Work (New York: Modern Age Books, Inc., 1938).

<sup>85</sup> "The Difference Between WPA and PWA," Jan. 10, 1939, "090--Public Works Administration" folder, box 3, entry 746, "Division of Information. Publications of the Federal Works Agency and Subordinate Agencies, 1936-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>86</sup> "Excerpt from Minutes of Conference Chief Regional Engineers Work Projects Administration," May 15, 1941, "F.H. Dryden" folder, box 1, entry 737, "Division of Information. Administrative Speeches, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

Fellows blamed WPA engineers for not doing a better job explaining the program to the press, and blamed the press for neglecting to report the "story" of good work being well done. Subsequently, historians have contributed to the neglect of the WPA's construction, focusing on the art, theater, writing, and music projects run by the WPA and excluding the construction projects that consumed 75% of the WPA's spending. These projects were built by the WPA's division of engineering and construction.<sup>87</sup>

This division solicited plans from local and state sponsors, reviewed them and either approved the projects or returned the plans to their sponsors for revision. For larger or more complex projects, the WPA consulted with the Public Health Service, Corps of Engineers, Civil Aeronautics Administration, Department of Agriculture, and Public Roads Administration in planning.<sup>88</sup>

The WPA classified its construction projects into six categories: municipal engineering projects, airports, public buildings, highway and road projects, conservation projects, and engineering surveys. Municipal engineering projects were traditionally associated with public works carried out at the state and local levels. As the WPA put it,

Municipal engineering projects included construction and repair work on streets, alleys, and sidewalks, water supply systems and purification plants, sewer systems and sewage disposal plants, parks and recreational facilities, and miscellaneous municipal improvements (not including public buildings); they also included the removal of abandoned streetcar rail.<sup>89</sup>

The WPA built over 67,000 miles of city streets. Roughly 30,000 of these miles were paved with what the WPA termed "high-type surface," composed of concrete, bituminous, or some other hard substance.<sup>90</sup> Next to these streets, the WPA added 24,000

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<sup>87</sup> Final Report on the WPA, 47. There is a large literature on the WPA's art, theater, writing, and music projects; the best overview of these programs remains William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969).

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 50.

miles of new sidewalk while repairing 7,000 more; the WPA also built 25,000 miles of curb while repairing 3,000 other miles worth. During winter months the WPA built water and sewage treatment plants, building or improving about 500 water treatment facilities, 1,800 pumping stations, and over 19,700 miles of water mains and distribution lines, making over 880,000 consumer connections. In rural areas, the WPA added 4,000 new water wells, repaired 2,000 more, and added or improved 3,700 storage tanks and reservoirs. WPA workers built or improved over 1,500 sewage treatment plants and 200 incinerators. These workers built over 24,000 miles of storm and sanitary sewer line; they also improved 3,000 miles of sewers. The WPA also built or repaired hundreds of thousands of manholes and catch basins, and built over 2.3 million sanitary privies. The WPA was responsible for improvements to approximately 8,000 parks. Its work ranged from landscaping and tree planting to the construction of swimming pools and even stadiums. Under WPA auspices, about 3,300 stadiums, grandstands and bleachers were built, and roughly 12,800 playgrounds were constructed or improved.<sup>91</sup>

The WPA's airport program built new airports and upgraded older ones. Due to the large amount of grading, drainage, paving, and other ground improvements called for in airport work, the WPA could put large numbers of unskilled workers to work quickly on these projects. While this made airports an appealing project for the WPA, this work was done in consultation with the Civil Aeronautics Administration, and later with the War and Navy Departments. Almost 1,200 new buildings were constructed at airports, and 2,800 were improved or rebuilt. The WPA built 350 new landing fields and enlarged or improved almost 700 others, adding to the nation's runways, taxi strips, aprons, and turning circles. All told, the WPA built more than 480 airports and improved 470 others.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 51; 85. For more on New Deal public works during World War II, see chapter 6, below.



The WPA built a variety of public buildings, including state, county, and city government facilities, schools and recreational buildings, hospitals, prisons, and military and naval facilities. During the depression, following a period when the military had been neglected for a number of years, the WPA was responsible for "prompt, extensive, and continuous construction, reconstruction, rehabilitation, repair, and improvement work...at almost every regular army post and naval establishment in the country."<sup>93</sup> The Army and Navy Register reinforced this point, stating that "In the years 1935 to 1939, when regular appropriations were so meager, it was the WPA worker who saved many army posts and naval stations from literal obsolescence."<sup>94</sup>

The WPA built almost 40,000 public buildings, and made improvements on over 85,000 other buildings. Public schools benefited from WPA work: almost 6,000 new schools were built, 2,170 additions built on to older schools, and 31,000 schools modernized. Over 1,000 libraries were built or improved. The WPA built over 9,300 auditoriums and gymnasiums, and improved 5,800 other buildings. Over 226 hospitals were built, and 156 hospitals improved, by the WPA. WPA workers also built 6,400 office buildings, over 7,000 dormitories, 6,000 storage buildings, 900 armories, 2,700 firehouses, 760 buildings at various penal institutions, as well as a variety of other structures.

The WPA built and improved streets and roads in urban and rural areas. The WPA built roughly 572,000 miles of rural roads, with 57,000 of these miles built with such materials as concrete, bituminous, or macadam paving. The WPA constructed 78,000 new bridges and viaducts while improving over 46,000 structures. WPA workers also built over 1,000 new tunnels. The WPA contributed a number of conservation projects to the nation, including projects dealing with water conservation, erosion control,

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 85.

and the sealing of abandoned coal mines. WPA workers also conducted a number of engineering surveys, improving the quality of maps and compiling data on boundaries, streams, and underground structures.<sup>95</sup>

[table 6 here]

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

Table 6: Per-Capita Expenditures of the WPA and PWA, 1933-1941, in dollars (states listed by PWA region).

| State          | WPA | PWA<br>(total) | PWA<br>(federal) | PWA<br>(non-federal) |
|----------------|-----|----------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Connecticut    | 46  | 29             | 12               | 17                   |
| Delaware       | 30  | 42             | 20               | 22                   |
| Maine          | 27  | 35             | 29               | 6                    |
| Maryland       | 24  | 52             | 22               | 30                   |
| Massachusetts  | 75  | 25             | 12               | 13                   |
| New Hampshire  | 46  | 24             | 6                | 18                   |
| New Jersey     | 65  | 35             | 17               | 18                   |
| New York       | 82  | 36             | 7                | 29                   |
| Pennsylvania   | 74  | 29             | 8                | 21                   |
| Rhode Island   | 6   | 37             | 14               | 23                   |
| Vermont        | 32  | 21             | 11               | 10                   |
| Illinois       | 58  | 32             | 7                | 25                   |
| Indiana        | 20  | 25             | 6                | 19                   |
| Michigan       | 59  | 18             | 5                | 13                   |
| Ohio           | 78  | 26             | 10               | 16                   |
| West Virginia  | 56  | 31             | 16               | 15                   |
| Wisconsin      | 60  | 23             | 10               | 13                   |
| Alabama        | 29  | 18             | 5                | 13                   |
| Florida        | 50  | 40             | 18               | 22                   |
| Georgia        | 28  | 15             | 8                | 7                    |
| Kentucky       | 39  | 18             | 8                | 10                   |
| Mississippi    | 29  | 28             | 10               | 18                   |
| North Carolina | 19  | 20             | 8                | 12                   |
| South Carolina | 32  | 48             | 12               | 35                   |
| Tennessee      | 26  | 19             | 6                | 13                   |
| Virginia       | 20  | 48             | 35               | 13                   |
| Iowa           | 28  | 20             | 10               | 10                   |
| Minnesota      | 64  | 24             | 10               | 14                   |
| Missouri       | 6   | 25             | 11               | 14                   |
| Montana        | 88  | 170            | 132              | 38                   |
| Nebraska       | 45  | 68             | 15               | 53                   |
| North Dakota   | 59  | 22             | 12               | 10                   |
| South Dakota   | 66  | 26             | 15               | 11                   |
| Wyoming        | 49  | 112            | 91               | 21                   |

Table 6, continued:

| State            | WPA | PWA<br>(total) | PWA<br>(federal) | PWA<br>(non-federal) |
|------------------|-----|----------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Arkansas         | 36  | 24             | 12               | 12                   |
| Colorado         | 73  | 43             | 22               | 21                   |
| Kansas           | 45  | 25             | 11               | 14                   |
| Louisiana        | 40  | 25             | 13               | 12                   |
| New Mexico       | 64  | 68             | 50               | 18                   |
| Oklahoma         | 48  | 25             | 9                | 16                   |
| Texas            | 26  | 30             | 11               | 19                   |
| Arizona          | 58  | 133            | 105              | 28                   |
| California       | 60  | 35             | 16               | 19                   |
| Nevada           | 66  | 352            | 325              | 27                   |
| Utah             | 58  | 53             | 35               | 18                   |
| Idaho            | 51  | 46             | 34               | 12                   |
| Oregon           | 60  | 71             | 53               | 18                   |
| Washington       | 64  | 72             | 50               | 22                   |
| Alaska           | --- | 101            | 73               | 28                   |
| Washington, D.C. | --- | 254            | 191              | 63                   |
| Hawaii           | --- | 58             | 45               | 13                   |
| Puerto Rico      | --- | 11             | 2                | 9                    |
| Virgin Islands   | --- | 205            | 198              | 7                    |

Source: PWA figures calculated from Table A-40, July 1, 1941, "Jul. 1 1941" folder, box 2, entry 61, "Statistical Materials Relating to PWA Projects, 1934-1942"; and Table SP-1369, Dec. 19, 1939, "Quota Studies (Population and Distribution)" folder, box 3, entry 30, "Records of the Project Control Division, Subject Files, 1933-1940"; both in RG 135, NA. WPA figures taken from Leonard Arrington, "The New Deal in the West: A Preliminary Statistical Inquiry," *Pacific Historical Review* 38 (Aug. 1969): 315-16. Note: WPA figures run through 1939; PWA federal figures run through July 1941; PWA non-federal figures run through Dec. 19, 1939. Spending per capita calculated using population figures from the 1930 census.

Considered on a per capita basis, it is clear that sparsely populated Western states that were the sites of substantial PWA construction, such as Montana, Nevada, and Wyoming, benefited more from PWA spending than from WPA funds. Previous analyses of New Deal spending have concurred that this most likely stemmed from political advantages (Nevada Senator Key Pittman, for example, was president pro

tempore of the Senate). More directly, though, these Western states were swing states in a political universe where other regions were known quantities. As such, the West could be wooed with a small amount of absolute funds that, per capita, turned out to be quite large, indeed. Nevada, for example, ranked 46th in the absolute allocation of funds, but first in per capita allocation.<sup>96</sup> Heavily populated states with large populations of the unemployed, such as New York, Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio, however, benefited more from Hopkins's WPA than from Ickes's PWA. Interestingly, however, several Southern states emerge from table 6 as rather unlikely per capita beneficiaries of PWA spending, in comparison to the WPA. In such states as Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia, PWA per capita spending nearly equalled or exceeded WPA per capita spending. The South has generally been characterized, in the words of FDR, as "the Nation's No. 1 economic problem," reluctant to accept federal funds and the threat to local control these funds implied.<sup>97</sup> When considering the full range of government expenditures, historian Jordan Schwarz concluded that during the New Deal even with "a sympathetic President and control in Congress, the South missed an opportunity to feed at the federal trough."<sup>98</sup> Comparing just the WPA and PWA, however, indicates that some Southern states had a marked preference for Ickes's public works program, even though that program maintained quotas for Black employment on PWA contracts.<sup>99</sup> In 1956, William Faulkner declared of the South, "Our economy is no longer agricultural. Our economy is the federal government."<sup>100</sup> As early as the 1930s, however, in the realm of

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<sup>96</sup> Reading, "New Deal Activity and the States," 794; and Wallis, "The Political Economy of New Deal Spending Revisited, Again: With and without Nevada."

<sup>97</sup> FDR quoted in Bruce J. Schulman, From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>98</sup> Schwarz, New Dealers, 321.

<sup>99</sup> Marc W. Kruman, "Quotas for Blacks: The Public Works Administration and the Black Construction Worker," Labor History 16 (winter 1975): 37-51.

<sup>100</sup> William Faulkner, "On Fear," in James B. Meriwether, ed., Essays, Speeches and Public Letters by William Faulkner (New York: Random House, 1965), 98.

public works, the federal government was already making important inroads into the South.<sup>101</sup>

### **A Public Works Revolution**

As the WPA and PWA built public works across the nation, transforming the physical landscape of the nation and making the case for the New Deal in cement, mortar, and steel, New Dealers underscored this revolution with their words. Few did it as eloquently as Jerome Frank. Frank, a brilliant lawyer educated at the University of Chicago, served as general counsel to the Agricultural Adjustment Agency, worked as an advisor to Ickes and the PWA on legal matters, and then took over as head of the Securities and Exchange Commission when FDR appointed William O. Douglas to the Supreme Court.<sup>102</sup> In a speech he made to the Harvard Business Club at the close of 1938, Frank demonstrated the central place of public works programs to the New Dealers's sense of history, and to their sense of the New Deal's existence as a political undertaking. Nineteenth-century America, Frank proclaimed, was "an era of the most stupendous pump-priming in the history of the modern world. Our continent was developed by individual private initiative--but that private initiative was stimulated and aided, and its exploits were made possible, by billions and billions of dollars of gifts from the government of these United States." By comparison, Frank argued, "the pump-priming of the last few years is trifling." During the nineteenth century, he continued, public lands, forests, oil wells, and mines were transferred to private hands, spurring the construction of railroads and the growth of domestic industry. "Surely," Frank declared, "a country whose amazing development was based on Nineteenth Century pump-

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<sup>101</sup> For more on the relationship between the South and the federal government in the twentieth century, the key work is Schulman, From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt.

<sup>102</sup> For more on Frank, see Schwarz, New Dealers, 177-94.

priming--on Nineteenth Century gigantic government aid to private enterprise--will not arrest its present development, and stifle its amazing potential future growth, merely because governmental aid to private enterprise must now take on a new form. What has mockingly been dubbed 'spending our way to prosperity' via government aid, is nothing new. It was the technique of Nineteenth Century America." Driving the point home, Frank concluded that this pump-priming "was essentially sound and conservative then, and it is sound and conservative now."<sup>103</sup>

Frank rallied New Dealers to a program of government investment and economic development, including the construction of low-cost housing, express highways, parks and playgrounds, schools and hospitals, reforestation to prevent floods and erosion, railroad modernization, the development of the South "and other parts of our 'internal frontier,'" among other items. "Such projects," Frank argued, "call for many billions of dollars of legitimate government investment over a period of many years, yielding us lasting physical improvements of the highest economic and social value, and unquestionably supplying us with that needed stimulus to private initiative which spells national prosperity." Referring to the dangers of fascism and communism, Frank stated that a program of public works construction, "sustaining our kind of civilization, is the intelligent alternative to dictatorship."<sup>104</sup>

Frank's emphasis on creating a "usable past" for the New Deal and its public works was echoed by a range of New Dealers.<sup>105</sup> Given the ability of programs like the

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<sup>103</sup> Jerome Frank, Address before the Harvard Business Club, Dec. 8, 1938, "Special Files. New Deal Era. Speeches & Writings Files. Speech File. Frank, Jerome N. 1938-1940" folder, box 218, Thomas G. Corcoran Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Historians, too, helped forge this usable past, enlisting Andrew Jackson and Thomas Jefferson into the pantheon of New Deal predecessors. For Jackson, see of course Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Jackson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945); and Schlesinger's acknowledgment that in many ways "The Age of Jackson voted for Franklin Delano Roosevelt" in his memoir, A Life in the 20th Century: Innocent Beginnings, 1917-1950 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 360-63; for a revealing discussion of the creation of the New Deal's relationship to Jefferson see Merrill D. Peterson, The Jefferson Image in the American Mind (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998 [1960]), 330-458.

PWA and WPA to provide public works to the western and southern regions of the nation, however, it should not come as a surprise to find that politicians from these regions shared an affection for economic development. In addressing Virginia's Jeffersonian Democratic Club in 1940, Washington Senator Lewis Schwellenbach outlined for his audience "the philosophy of the democracy of the far West," so that "you good folks in Virginia can find some profit in understanding our political background on the Pacific Coast and why, in that area, there exists such substantial and enthusiastic support for the New Deal Administration of President Roosevelt." The animating spirit of the New Deal, Schwellenbach argued, was "the spirit of the Pioneer."<sup>106</sup> Anticipating objection to this claim, Schwellenbach continued, in a passage he often inserted into his speeches, "I know that right here the doubters and the scoffers will rise up and say that these pioneers had no governmental assistance. They did not get PWA grants. They had not CCC boys to build their trails. There were not any WPA jobs. They could not collect wheat checks or old age pensions. That is absolutely true." However, Schwellenbach argued,

[D]on't let anyone tell you that government bounties were not being given in those days. The difference was that the real pioneers who grubbed and slaved and really developed the country got none of them. The railroads got their sections of land in each township to encourage their efforts. Vast tracts of timber lands were made available for spoilation by the timber operators. The mineral and oil resources were quickly acquired by a greedy few. A protective tariff system was maintained by which hidden taxes were removed from the pockets of everyone who labored in industry or agriculture. A system of financial control was fostered and

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Similarly, during these years the Social Science Research Council sponsored a number of investigations into the history of the relationship between government and the economy, producing accounts that presented a precedent for the New Deal. See, for example, Oscar Handlin and Mary Flug Handlin, Commonwealth: A Study of the Role of Government in the American Economy: Massachusetts, 1774-1861 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1947); and Louis Hartz, Economic Policy and Democratic Thought: Pennsylvania, 1776-1860 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948). For an excellent review of this literature, see Harry N. Scheiber, "Government and the Economy: Studies of the 'Commonwealth' Policy in Nineteenth-Century America," Journal of Interdisciplinary History 3 (summer 1972): 135-51.

<sup>106</sup> Lewis Schwellenbach, Address before the Jeffersonian Democratic Club, May 4, 1940, "1940" folder, box 3, Lewis B. Schwellenbach Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.



protected which resulted in increased cost on everything which was purchased or sold. Government did not bother business in those days. It couldn't. Why? For the simple reason that business wouldn't let it. In those days, business ran government. There were bounties galore. But the people who worked, and who bought and consumed our products never got in on them.<sup>107</sup>

New Dealers, then, framed the public works of the PWA and WPA--as well as the entire New Deal, itself--as following in a long history of using government to foster economic development, with the key difference being that this time "the people" rather than "the interests" would benefit. Focused as they have been on the question of employment, however, historians have concluded that the public works programs came up short, leaving the promise of the New Deal unrealized. The New Deal public works programs, however, have for too long been overrated as employment measures and overlooked as significant contributors to the economic development of the nation. Judging these programs by what they accomplished, rather than by what they failed to do, it is clear that these agencies performed strikingly, bringing roads, schools, courthouses, post offices, airports, and other improvements to almost every county in the nation. Instead, historians such as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., have fixated on the deep and bitter personality conflict between Harold Ickes and Harry Hopkins, portraying the PWA and WPA as pawns in a "battle for relief" rather than as programs that remade the nation.<sup>108</sup> These programs were not simply the backdrop to a clash of egos, nor were they, as another historian recently suggested of the WPA, simply "prozac" that improved the deflated morale of Americans.<sup>109</sup> The public works programs of the New Deal were more than this: they built a public works revolution in the United States.

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<sup>107</sup> Lewis Schwellenbach speech, July 15, 1938, "Speeches & Writings File. 1938" folder, box 3, Schwellenbach Papers, LC. For a recent historical treatment that has much in common with Schwellenbach's analysis, see Elizabeth Sanders, Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1919 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>108</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., The Politics of Upheaval (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 343-61. For a stinging dissent from Schlesinger's account, see Felix Frankfurter to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., June 18, 1963, in reel 62, Felix Frankfurter Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

<sup>109</sup> June Hopkins, "The American Way to Welfare: Harry Hopkins and New Deal Work Relief," in Byron W. Daynes, William D. Pederson, and Michael P. Riccards, eds., The New Deal and Public Policy (New

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York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 241, n. 45. A number of historians have stressed the WPA's role in uplifting morale; see, for example, Barbara Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed: The View from New York City (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 302.

## CHAPTER FOUR

THE WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION AND  
WELFARE AS WE ONCE KNEW IT

What were the significance of the New Deal's public works programs? This simple question has perplexed historians. They have answered it in different ways; some observing that these programs were a failed attempt to end mass unemployment; others arguing that, questions of employment aside, they constituted an impressive effort to develop the undeveloped areas of the nation.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars have termed the public works programs the central policy measure of the New Deal welfare state, while still others point to them as an example of crass political patronage, writ large.<sup>2</sup>

Students of the Works Progress Administration have been instrumental in composing more specific answers to this question. Sociologist Edwin Amenta points us towards the realization that the WPA was the first "welfare" program, with the creation of the WPA constituting what we might call the first attempt at "welfare reform."<sup>3</sup> Historian

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<sup>1</sup> Many works acknowledge the New Deal's shortcomings in reducing unemployment, see for example William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Roosevelt, 3 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957-60); for the contributions of New Deal public works to economic development, see Jordan A. Schwarz, The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993); and see also the literature on the TVA, esp. Erwin C. Hargrove, Prisoners of Myth: The Leadership of the Tennessee Valley Authority, 1933-1990 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Thomas K. McCraw, TVA and the Power Fight, 1933-1939 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1971); and the classic David E. Lilienthal, TVA: Democracy on the March (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953 [1944]).

<sup>2</sup> Edwin Amenta, Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Amenta, Ellen Benoit, Chris Bonastia, Nancy K. Cauthen, and Drew Halfmann, "Bring Back the WPA: Work, Relief, and the Origins of American Social Policy in Welfare Reform," Studies in American Political Development 12 (spring 1998): 1-56. A specialized literature has examined the role of patronage during the New Deal; the key works include James T. Patterson, The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Bruce Stave, The New Deal and the Last Hurrah: Pittsburgh Machine Politics (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970); Charles H. Trout, Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Lyle W. Dorsett, The Pendergast Machine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Dorsett, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, Kennikat Press, 1977); and John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., The New Deal: The State and Local Levels (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Amenta, Bold Relief, 3.

Linda Gordon has echoed this point. In an important working paper written for the Russell Sage Foundation, Gordon has argued that contemporary debates over welfare reform must acknowledge the historical context of the New Deal, and the WPA in particular.<sup>4</sup>

Building on the different elements of this scholarship, in this chapter I argue that the historical legacy of the WPA and New Deal public works is best grasped in the realization that it embraces all of these strands of interpretation, from economic development to local patronage. The WPA merits consideration as the welfare program we once knew, but, like many things we think we "know," upon closer examination things are not as simple as they first appear. Linking the previous chapter's focus on the variety, scale, and distribution of public works projects across the nation with the next chapter's emphasis on the political consequences of economic development, this chapter examines how the WPA forged much of what we think of as the New Deal at the local level, at project sites across the country.

Bringing the states and localities into this story also establishes just why the New Deal was so controversial. Contrary to what we might assume today, the central political debate over the WPA was not an argument about the government using taxpayer dollars to build wasteful "boondoggles." While this debate certainly received a great deal of publicity, at the time the question that eventually dominated the political arena was the connection between the WPA and partisan patronage. Activities at the WPA's project sites led to the Hatch Act--a measure designed to prevent "pernicious political activities"--not to an "Anti-Boondoggling Act." Indeed, arguments against the economic effectiveness of government spending would not take hold until the conservatism of Goldwater and Reagan. In charting the rise and fall of the WPA's fortunes, an

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<sup>4</sup> Linda Gordon, "Share-Holders in Relief: The Political Culture of the Public Sector," Russell Sage Foundation working paper, 1998.

examination of the issue of patronage provides a surer guide to the power and limits of New Deal liberalism.

This examination is possible thanks to the WPA itself. The WPA's division of investigation, an expanded version of the FERA's division of special inquiry, drew on the expertise of the Public Works Administration's investigators as well as upon the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which trained roughly half of the WPA's investigatory personnel. Nicknamed the "W-Men," WPA investigators looked into allegations of fraud, corruption, and the misuse of WPA funds and equipment. Over eight years, it generated reports on 17,352 complaints. Of this total, 8,811 complaints were validated by investigators; 2,215 cases were handed over to the Attorney General; and 4,496 people were dismissed, demoted, reprimanded, or suspended from the WPA. Particulars regarding the outcomes of these investigations aside, however, these investigative reports, themselves, remain a rich source for historians interested in how public works programs literally made the New Deal, across the United States, county by county, precinct by precinct.<sup>5</sup>

Searle Charles, in his 1963 account of Harry Hopkins's career, was the first historian to exploit the WPA investigation records. Charles did not read the original reports compiled by investigators, however. He relied instead on the memos and correspondence generated in response to these investigations, stored in the WPA's general files under the heading "610--political coercion." Subsequent scholars, following Charles's lead, plunged into the National Archives to mine this vein of sources. These historians, however, exploited this material in order to answer a rather narrow question: did the New Deal end boss rule in America's cities? Testing what came to be known as the "Last Hurrah" thesis (after the famous Edwin O'Connor novel), historians such as

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<sup>5</sup> Charles, Minister of Relief, 136-37; Federal Works Agency, Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-1943 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 81-83; Arthur W. MacMahon, John D. Millett, and Gladys Ogden, The Administration of Federal Work Relief (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1941), 212; 236-38; for my use of the PWA's investigations, see chapter two, above.

Bruce Stave and Lyle Dorsett found that federally administered public works programs did not render local political bosses impotent; rather, these politicians capitalized on federal funds to solidify their power.<sup>6</sup> This question answered, these local studies were left to be cited and acknowledged by local historians but, for the most part, sat neglected on library bookshelves, occasionally cropping up in a bibliographic essay.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most well-known example of this sort of reportage are the detailed memos sent by Eleanor Roosevelt's friend and companion, Lorena Hickok, to Harry Hopkins as she traveled around the nation in 1933 and 1934.<sup>8</sup> Unlike Hickok, however, who provided only journalistic impressions based on a quick trip through a state or region, the WPA investigators were empowered to conduct far-reaching inquiries. The WPA's bureaucracy placed agents in all parts of the nation and made them responsible for their assigned areas over the life of the program. Drawing on the original investigation reports made by the WPA in the states of California, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, New York, Texas, and Washington, as well as the WPA internal correspondence used by Charles, Stave, and Dorsett, I explore how the WPA actually functioned. The rich social history uncovered by WPA investigators allows us to take a new look at the making of the New Deal.

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<sup>6</sup> Stave, The New Deal and the Last Hurrah; Dorsett, The Pendergast Machine; Dorsett, FDR and the City Bosses.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, the best of these essays in Anthony J. Badger, The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1940 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 313-64.

<sup>8</sup> These reports are reprinted in Richard Lowitt and Maurine Beasley, eds., One Third of a Nation: Lorena Hickok Reports on the Great Depression (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981). For more on ER and Hickok, see Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt: The Defining Years (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 119-20; 161-69.

### **The WPA: The View from Washington, D.C.**

As the Works Progress Administration swung into action, it was difficult to overestimate the program's importance to FDR and his advisers. Postmaster General and head of the Democratic National Committee, James Farley, noted the mood in Roosevelt's inner circle. Farley wrote in his diary that "The Work Relief Program, if handled advantageously, will of course bring fine results, but if placed in the hands of those who are not in sympathy with the President's program, the results will of course be detrimental. I am satisfied that the President realizes the importance of this. I know that he has instructed Frank Walker, Harry Hopkins and Secretary Ickes about the political features involved."<sup>9</sup> Farley thought that the fate of FDR's re-election depended on the strength of the Democratic party's organization, and the on the ability of the WPA to augment this organization. The President's political future, he thought, "will depend upon the proper handling of the Work Relief Program and the clearing up of existing conditions which cause the failure of our political organizations to properly function."<sup>10</sup>

After dining at the White House with an intimate group that included Felix Frankfurter, Joseph P. Kennedy, Farley's pollster, Emil Hurja, and Harry Hopkins, FDR and company relaxed by watching three reels of movies shot of WPA activities in and around Los Angeles. This footage, Farley noted, "showed the splendid opportunity for propaganda of this kind," and the group discussed the advantages of circulating this material. After the movies concluded, Farley, Hurja, and FDR adjourned to pour over the latest polling figures, and, as Farley put it, "I discussed with him [FDR] the question of the Work Relief Administration and he agreed that if correctly handled, and it can be, it will be very helpful to the Administration."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> James A. Farley diary, May 15, 1935, "Private File 1935 May-June" folder, box 38, James A. Farley Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Farley diary, June 18, 1935, in ibid.

Farley consulted regularly with Hopkins and his assistants at the WPA, such as Aubrey Williams and Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, on a range of issues. Westbrook, Farley recorded, "understands the political side of the situation" and "will render, I am sure, a real service to Hopkins and the Administration."<sup>12</sup> Farley clarified what he meant by "the political side" when he recorded his thoughts on Hopkins:

At the outset I think [Hopkins] talked too much and paid too much attention to the social viewpoint rather than the political side. However, he gradually changed and now takes the political viewpoint into consideration which he must do in order to successfully carry out the performance of his duties. It is necessary in administering the affairs of an organization such as Hopkins['s] to cooperate with the members of our own party. I don't mean that he should be guided by a political basis only, but I mean he should not do anything to antagonize those who are instrumental in the success of the party. In his recent appointments he has been working with the state leaders and the Governors and is making a good start...<sup>13</sup>

Farley further explained himself to journalists, after going off-the-record at a press conference to answer questions about the WPA in New York state.

Talking right in the room,--and this I denied publicly,--I am talking frankly to you folks,--I think the WPA organization is, we will say, 90 per cent political North of the Bronx line as far as the foremen, sub-foremen are concerned; but not the men on the jobs. There is no discrimination as far as a man's politics are concerned if he is duly accredited by the proper authorities, but the bosses are all Democrats recommended by the Democratic organization. In many places they have been fired because they weren't efficient. We told [head of the WPA in New York State, Lester] Herzog to take Democrats off any time he found they were not doing their jobs, and never to keep a fellow who didn't deliver. I don't want anybody around me who can't deliver. That order was given North of the Bronx line and referred to those on the Federal payroll. It is safe to assume we have more workers of that kind than committee workers,--10,000 or 20,000.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, in New York state Farley thought that the supervisory personnel on WPA projects such as foremen and timekeepers could be counted on to help the Democratic

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<sup>12</sup> Farley diary, July 23, 1935, "Private File 1935 July 19-31" folder, box 38, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>13</sup> Farley diary, July 23, 1935, in *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Press Conference minutes, Oct. 10, 1936, "Subject File Pres. Campaigns 1936. Press Conferences 1936 Sept. 26-Oct. 10" folder, box 55, Farley Papers, LC.



party. While some of these workers were, as Farley put it, "peeved" because they thought they were underpaid, he noted that "if it wasn't for the WPA they wouldn't have a job."<sup>15</sup>

For this perceived use of the WPA, conservative newspaper columnist Frank Kent nicknamed Farley "Jobmaster Farley," and, in similar fashion, termed Pennsylvania Senator Joseph Guffey "WPA Guffey." Guffey felt that roughly 70% to 80% of the WPA workforce could be counted to vote for FDR and the Democratic party, but other party officials urged Farley to be even more active.<sup>16</sup> One party official wrote from Springfield, Illinois, informing Farley that "quietly, I think the WPA should intensify their political activity the last two weeks of the [1936] campaign amongst their non-relief workers because we are getting the blame for the WPA being in politics, anyway."<sup>17</sup> Another Democrat, Chester Atkinson, the mayor of Troy, New York, stressed that FDR needed to make his case to WPA employees, as "WPA workers, I have found, are inclined to be chronically discontented and, while accepting the work relief, are apt to lay all their real or imagined grievances to the Federal Government and it is only with argument that they become aware that they would be a lot worse off without President Roosevelt."<sup>18</sup>

The political impact of Hopkins's WPA and Harold Ickes's Public Works Administration stretched well beyond the advantages the organizations might provide the Democratic party, however. As Farley himself noted, as the 1936 election approached Ickes would be able to "go in every state and point with pride to the accomplishments of

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Guffey quoted in Press Conference minutes, Oct. 14, 1936, 3 p.m., "Subject File Pres. Campaigns 1936 Press Conferences 1936 Oct. 11-25" folder, box 55, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>17</sup> John Stelle to Farley, Sept. 26, 1936, "Subject File Pres. Campaigns 1936 State Reports Del.-Ill. (Emil Hurja Papers)" folder, box 55, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>18</sup> Chester J. Atkinson to Farley, no date [early October, 1936], "Subject File Pres. Campaigns 1936 State Reports N.Mex-N.York (Emil Hurja Papers)" folder, box 56, Farley Papers, LC.

his Department."<sup>19</sup> The tangible results of the public works programs--the projects, themselves--were physical advertisements for the New Deal, just as explicit as the signs next to the projects that proclaimed "Built by the WPA" or "Built by the PWA." Indeed, FDR's 1936 campaign schedule was designed to showcase the President before the New Deal's public works projects. After one strategy session for the campaign, Farley noted that FDR had planned to make one journey that "would be taken up in visiting Federal projects," visiting a dam in Vermont, Federal buildings in New Hampshire, and public works projects in New York City.<sup>20</sup> Farley's approach to Connecticut could be extrapolated across the country: the administration felt that "there isn't a county in the state where the PWA, the WPA, etc., haven't done a great deal of good, and that the people should be made to realize this." Or, as the minutes of another meeting put it,

Mr. Farley advised that material would be compiled giving the amount of money spent on the various projects in each state, and that if speakers can get up night after night and present these facts and figures to the people, they can be made to realize what this Administration has done for them. Mr. Farley said, "we have a bill of goods to sell and it is just a question of selling it."<sup>21</sup>

Farley thought this bill of goods gave traditionally Republican voters a reason to vote for FDR, too. As Farley told a number of journalists, at one campaign stop a man approached him and told him that he was going to vote for FDR because he was able to refinance the mortgage on his home, thanks to the Home Owners's Loan Corporation, and his community was building a new school, thanks to the WPA.<sup>22</sup>

As the 1936 election approached, Farley began to increase his emphasis on the importance of the infrastructure built by the New Deal's public works programs, going so

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<sup>19</sup> Farley diary, March 24, 1936, "Private File 1936 March" folder, box 38, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>20</sup> Farley diary, June 1, 1936, "Private File 1936 June" folder, box 38, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Farley diary, Aug. 12, 1936, "Private File 1936 August 1-15" folder, box 38, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>22</sup> Press Conference minutes, Oct. 10, 1936, "Subject File Pres. Campaigns 1936. Press Conferences 1936 Sept. 26-Oct. 10" folder, box 55, Farley Papers, LC.

far as to tell Hopkins that "I thought it was a mistake to do much talking on relief." Farley preferred that Ickes be the public face of the administration when it came to the subject of public works.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Problems of Publicity and the Politics of "Boondoggling"**

The importance of unfavorable publicity was not lost on WPA officials. Victor Ridder, the head of the WPA in New York City in 1935 and 1936, had a clear sense of the power of the press, on occasion picking up the phone to complain to Hopkins's assistant Aubrey Williams about unfair coverage of the WPA by the city's papers. When the New York Times and other newspapers proclaimed that graft was pervasive in the operation of the WPA, Williams declared that "we ought to kill the story that fraud amounting to so much exists in New York," instructing Ridder, "You can deny it and put them right." Ridder, a former publisher, was more skeptical, noting that the press was relying on selective reading of the WPA's own internal reports:

You can do the best you can [to correct the press]. I have, but what is the use? It [WPA internal reports] shows 99% inefficiency and 1% dishonesty, and when it gets in the papers it is 100% dishonesty. You can't do anything. I told the press this report was a report of inefficiency and not dishonesty, that it was no suggestion of anything more than a lack of organization which would be natural in the speed with which this organization was built up. We are increasing efficiency as it goes along. But tomorrow they will probably say I admitted gross inefficiency.<sup>24</sup>

Williams asked Hopkins what action the WPA should take to counter the press. Hopkins thought that "If that is bad enough in the New York papers, why not make a complete statement and really tell the whole story. Use your own judgment about it." Williams

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<sup>23</sup> Farley diary, Aug. 22, 1936, "Private File 1936 Aug 16-31" folder, box 38, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>24</sup> "Telephone call to Victor Ridder from Aubrey Williams," Feb. 20, 1936, "610 N.Y. Jan. 1936" folder, box 2001, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. New York City 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

agreed, but informed Hopkins that "It looked positively terrible. Really gives ground to what a lot of people are charging."<sup>25</sup>

Ridder's successor in New York City, Colonel Brehon Somervell, took a more aggressive stance toward the press. When the Washington Post criticized the WPA for not rooting out internal corruption with greater vigor--two Brooklyn men had been arrested for selling places on the WPA payroll--Somervell fired off a furious response:

You state that I confess that is a severe shock to me to discover instances of job-selling by an official of this organization. I don't confess it, I proclaim it. It is impossible for a WPA Administrator to know everything that is going on in this organization just as it is impossible for you to know everything going on in connection with the Washington Post.

You would be the first to admit that you do not know everything that is going on in your paper, though you have a relatively small number of employees as compared to the 170,000 on the rolls of the WPA in New York City. Is it a fair inference from the editorial that the Washington Post would discontinue publication if you should discover that one or two of your employees had betrayed your confidence?

.... It is of course your province to object to the WPA as an institution. It is not your province to throw mud at thousands of employees in this organization on the basis of wrong-doing of two or three people. There has been crookedness in the WPA in the past, and there will be in the future. We have found persons who have stolen or misappropriated property. We have found persons who have connived with vendors in the sale or acceptance of materials. We have found persons who have padded payrolls. And we shall probably find more. These things have been going on for thousands of years and will probably continue to go on.... I will be very grateful if you will furnish me the name of any organization of a size at all comparable to the WPA in New York City, including the church, in which there has not been at some time some crookedness. Also, please advise whether you would like to have the church abolished because of this discovery.<sup>26</sup>

Somervell's response reflected the vehemence of public debate over the WPA.

This debate generally revolved around two extremes, with the WPA's supporters promoting the notion that the WPA had truly accomplished a great deal through putting

<sup>25</sup> "Mr. Hopkins called Mr. Williams back," Feb. 20, 1936, in ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Brehon Somervell to the Editor of the Washington Post, March 24, 1939, "610 N.Y. Feb.-Mar. 1939" folder, box 2003, in ibid.

people to work on public works projects of genuine worth, and with the program's detractors and critics charging that these projects were pointless or unnecessary. As the program wound down, however, even the WPA's critics acknowledged the many valuable contributions it made.

Local papers, across the country, were filled with tributes to the useful infrastructure built by the WPA. In Decatur, Illinois, one paper opined that "Few persons...seem to know about the astonishing permanent benefits this city, and county, are gaining through the operation of WPA. The uninformed continued to talk about 'boondoggling,' the supposed squandering of public funds, the idleness of men employed upon federal projects." In Decatur, however, "property owners and taxpayers for years to come will receive dividends upon the work done this year by the men and women who are happy to work for the relief they receive." The proof? "As a starting point, to check the statement for yourself, drive to the far eastern sections of the city, or to the far western sections adjacent to Grand avenue. In either locality will be found miles of streets--formerly mud lanes, rutted and unsightly, impassable during much of the year and always a discouragement to civic pride--now made over into well-graded streets, curbed, drained and cindered for year-around use."<sup>27</sup>

The Kentucky Courier Journal noted that "in the casual public eye" the WPA has been "the most maligned New Deal organization," the only one "to acquire a standard joke of its own--the joke about WPA told in a million sets of circumstances." However, the paper continued, "WPA has done a job of slugging that would have worn private enterprise to a frazzle. Spending billions distributed in every corner of the Nation, WPA

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<sup>27</sup> "Value Received," clipping from the Decatur Sunday Herald, May 24, 1936, "610 Illinois March 1, 1936" folder, box 1182, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Illinois 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

has never had an appreciable scandal. Local sore spots have been treated promptly." Indeed, "they can laugh at the WPA joke, but the WPA record speaks for itself!"<sup>28</sup>

With the coming of war, the WPA's utility was praised with renewed vigor, and from unlikely corners. Even the staunchly conservative Boston Herald, for example, conceded that while the WPA "has been the butt of many jokes and the subject of considerable criticism" in the past, "during the past year or even during the past few months, however, the situation, in this state at any rate, has changed markedly. It would be difficult, indeed, to prove any substantial charges of 'boondoggling' today."<sup>29</sup>

One New York paper also noted the stereotype of the WPA in comparison to its actual achievements. "The cruel, grossly unjust myth of the Great Shovel-Leaner has stuck" to the image of the WPA worker "like mud, despite the accumulating evidence of his first-rate contributions to the betterment of American life." The paper ticked off some of the WPA's triumphs: building and improving one-fifth of the nation's road mileage; building 30,000 public buildings and improving or enlarging 50,000 more; one million kids learning in schools built by the WPA; 73,000 new bridges and viaducts and 44,000 rebuilt; over 35,000 miles of water and sewer lines; and 875 civilian and military airports built, improved, or expanded. General George C. Marshall himself offered praise, stating that "In the great task of preparing for national defense the WPA has proved itself an invaluable aid."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Richard Renneisen, "WPA Has Done Its Job Well," clipping from the Kentucky Courier Journal, Feb. 16, 1942, "Ky. 610 Jan 1941, Jan 1942" folder, box 1377, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Kentucky 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

<sup>29</sup> "WPA in Time of War," clipping from Boston Herald, April 30, 1942, "610 Mass. 1942" folder, box 1494, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Massachusetts 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Deutsch, "WPA's Record as an Investment is Better than Its Reputation," clipping from unidentified New York newspaper, Nov. 9, 1941, "610 Mass. 1940-1941" folder, box 1493, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Massachusetts 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

The WPA's increased focus on national security and defense public works were indeed notable achievements. But for all of its many triumphs, however, the WPA's accomplishments were often lost in an increasingly vicious debate over the utility of the infrastructure built by the WPA. At stake in this public debate over the efficiency of the WPA was the political power of the New Deal, itself. Critics, including Republicans, organizations such as the American Liberty League, and newspapers such as the New York Sun, tried to undermine public approval of the program. They accused the WPA of waste, graft, and tarred it with the term "boondoggle." The New York Sun made particularly effective use of this notion, publishing a daily column decrying "Today's Boon-Doggle." This term merits close scrutiny. Not only did it carry heavy ideological freight for the opponents of the New Deal, it has shaped the historical legacy of the WPA.

The WPA's division of information kept close track of these charges, with one WPA employee, Amy MacMaster, researching the validity and substance backing each allegation. Her work provides the historian with a rare chance to compare the rhetoric deployed against the WPA alongside the reality it sought to undermine. The Sun's column was especially troubling to the WPA, as, as MacMaster noted, it "has come to be used by opponents of the Works Program as their chief source of information about WPA projects." Many pamphlets, speeches, and articles that attacked the WPA "as silly and wasteful" rested "on no better authority than the New York Sun's column."

The Sun relied on a common formula in its columns on boondoggling. The paper assumed that all projects approved by WPA would go into operation immediately. This assumption permitted the Sun to claim that a seemingly huge number of projects were being built in an apparently isolated area. The WPA's policy of approving such large numbers of projects reflected instead the program's desire to create a reserve (or, as WPA officials put it, a "reservoir") of projects ready to be constructed if unemployment shot up in a specific area. The Sun liked to pick sparsely populated areas for its columns, in order

to portray the New Deal as spending an extraordinarily large amount of money, when viewed on a per capita basis. This strategy had the added benefit of rendering useful projects (roads, dams, and the like) seem ludicrous, as they were seemingly being built in the "middle of nowhere." The Sun also tended with regularity to ignore the sponsor's contribution to the project, thus eliminating evidence that a locality wanted (and, indeed, had proposed) the project being built with WPA funds.

In short, as MacMaster put it, "The New York Sun has been knocking down a series of straw men." To illustrate her conclusion, she examined The Sun's column from March 13, 1936. Here, the Sun examined the WPA projects planned for Clayton, New Mexico (population 2,512):

[Clayton] is served by two railroads, has an express agency, a post office, a bank, a telegraph station and even an airport.... Yet President Roosevelt has approved the following WPA projects for Clayton: Construct farm-to-market road, \$121,408; construct farm-to-market road to Hayden (A road linking Hayden and Clayton already exists), \$16,337; construct road, \$42,218; construct farm-to-market road, \$26,788; improve three farm-to-market roads, \$142,354; improve roadway and move fence, \$26,486; improve state road No. 58, \$29,458; improve streets, \$15,783; construct culverts, spillways and drains, \$20,629; move bridge, \$6,753; replace water service lines, \$24,890; improve distribution system, \$24,937; improve park, \$1,050; construct five school buildings, \$12,252; and construct community center, \$12,555.

The total authorized expenditure is \$522,893, or \$209 per inhabitant. The question arises how the citizens of this little metropolis managed to eke out an existence prior to the advent of Harry Hopkins and the adoption of boon-dogging as a national pastime.

In response to this array of projects, MacMaster assembled what she simply termed as "The Facts." MacMaster argued that this list reflected projects that were approved, not necessarily projects being built. "Everyone conversant with the workings of the WPA knows that more projects have been approved than will be operated. It is essential that a reservoir of approved projects be available at all times to be placed in operation as unemployment conditions demand." She next quoted the Clayton City Manager, who stated that the actual per capita expenditure on WPA projects currently being built was



less than \$22, not \$209 as the Sun had claimed. Further, the farm-to-market roads would benefit Union County, with a population of 11,036, not simply Clayton's 2,512 inhabitants. In fact, less than 1/6 of the projects the Sun ticked off would take place inside Clayton's city limits. The entire county needed these projects, given the that it was "a part of the 'dust bowl' and many of the inhabitants can do nothing but wait for a return of enough rain to irrigate their lands. For the present they are on relief." Indeed, the Clayton News attacked the Sun's charges:

The Sun is merely trying to make the citizens of the East believe that the citizens of the West and Union county in particular, at least in this one editorial, are trying to profit at government expense when the truth is that the very projects they are deploring are not only worthwhile but are the only means of feeding more than a thousand families suffering not from depression but drouth [sic].<sup>31</sup>

MacMaster performed a similar analysis of projects attacked by the Sun in Phoenix, Arizona; Hardin, Montana; Eufaula, Oklahoma; Grand Forks, North Dakota; Boulder, Colorado; Arcadia, Missouri; and Adelino, New Mexico.

Even MacMaster acknowledged, however, that in its efforts to generate employment the WPA approved some projects that readily lent themselves to attack. One WPA project, spending \$423,126 to "measure and compute the areas and cubic contents of buildings in Allegheny county, Pennsylvania," was excoriated by the Sun in verse:

How blue is the ocean? How red is the rose?  
 We have a notion that nobody knows.  
 And how many trees border those thoroughfares?  
 We would suppose that nobody cares.  
 But we must find jobs that require no labor  
 To win us the vote of our destitute neighbor.  
 So what if this project does look kind of funny?  
 Pittsburgh's a place where we ought to spend money.  
 We'll measure the content both cubic and square  
 Of all of the buildings in that county there.  
 About half a million we think would be right.

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<sup>31</sup> Amy MacMaster, "Analysis of New York Sun 'Today's Boon-Doggle' Column," "36-5-16--Wright--Boondoggling" folder, box 2, entry 732, "Division of Information. Records Relating to Boondoggling Charges, ('Attacks on WPA'), 1936-1939," RG 69, NA.

Merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night.<sup>32</sup>

The sponsor of the project--the Board for the Assessment and Revision of Taxes of Allegheny County--wanted to get accurate information in order to determine a uniform basis for assessing property size, construction cost, and condition. As MacMaster wrote in her rebuttal, "It is believed that the scientific revaluation of property resulting from this project will tend to stabilize real estate values, offer greater safety to investors and property owners, and place municipal finances on a sounder basis."<sup>33</sup> The Pittsburgh Press echoed this point, noting that the WPA survey "reveals that at least 100 buildings in the city and county escape taxation because they are not carried on the assessor's books." The Press, noting that "tax assessing in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County long has been done in a haphazard, hit-miss system," concluded that "The present survey provides the basis for an equitable revision of the entire list and for the elimination of all loop-holes by which some property owners escape taxation or pay far less than they should."<sup>34</sup>

The Republican National Committee and the American Liberty League both kept up the barrage of boondoggling charges. In addition to questioning a project's utility or location, these critics also took on the easy target of the WPA's white-collar projects. One such project, employing out-of-work professionals to work as library aides, was attacked in the following language:

Pressing on to new pinnacles of paternalism, the Roosevelt administration has decided to guide the untutored minds of the residents of Stockton, California, in the selection of reading matter. From its \$1,700,000,000 boondoggling fund the WPA has decided to spend \$1,300 to maintain a corps of literary advisers in the Stockton Public Library to help the patrons select "appropriate material for reading." Thus far, however, the Brains Trusters have overlooked the opportunity

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<sup>32</sup> New York Sun, Nov. 4, 1935, quoted in ibid.

<sup>33</sup> ibid.

<sup>34</sup> "Untaxed Buildings" editorial in Pittsburgh Press, May 4, 1936, "Republican Attacks on Penn." folder, box 1, entry 730, "Division of Information. Statements and Related Papers Relating to Boondoggling Charges and Answers ("Attacks on WPA"), 1935-1936. Alabama-Wisconsin," RG 69, NA.

of allocating additional funds to psychoanalyze the readers in order to determine accurately what books will or will not be appropriate to their particular needs.

In fact, the WPA spent \$924 and Stockton put up \$384 to employ a graduate of the University of California Library School to compile bibliographies of library materials. "Without the WPA contributions this work could not be done, one less person would have a job, and the citizens of Stockton would get that much less service at their library at a time when it is especially needed because of the greater attendance occasioned by enforced leisure," one WPA official observed.<sup>35</sup> The head of the California WPA pointed to the WPA's response to the charges of boondoggling as an example of how well the WPA's publicity department functioned.<sup>36</sup>

The New York Sun also attacked projects seemingly built in the middle of nowhere, such as the construction of airports in Taft, Mojave, Susanville, Johnsonville, Chester, Palo Alto, Dunsmuir and Maryland, California, noting that the U.S. Bureau of Air Commerce "reports that none of these fields is on any existing air lines," and, "It will be nice, nevertheless, for the taxpayers who can come down to the field, if they wish, and wave to the planes as they pass overhead."<sup>37</sup> The WPA retorted that the program was planning for the future, and that these airports would serve as emergency landing fields and for private aircraft until they were incorporated into expanding airlines.<sup>38</sup>

The WPA's anti-boondoggle campaign provided evidence directly to its political friends. The majority leader in the Senate, Arkansas's Joseph T. Robinson, drew directly on this material when he took to the Senate floor in March 1936. The "gentlemen in the opposition party," he declared of the Republicans, "have a new talking point which they

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<sup>35</sup> WPA notes on Stockton Public Library project, no date [prob. Feb. 1936], "Republican Committee Attacks, California" folder, box 1, in ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Frank Y. McLaughlin to Harry Hopkins, May 1, 1936, in ibid.

<sup>37</sup> New York Sun, Nov. 14, 1935, in ibid.

<sup>38</sup> WPA notes on airport projects, no date [after Nov. 14, 1935], in ibid.

hope to build up into a big national issue. They are loosing a terrific national campaign against what they call 'waste and inefficiency' in the work-relief fund."<sup>39</sup> Robinson turned to this campaign's calling card, noting that "those who are seeking to make this a national issue have discovered a word pronounced 'boondoggling.' By distorting its meaning they hope to perform a feat of political magic and by constant repetition of the word to distract the attention of the American people from the real picture of the Works Progress Administration."<sup>40</sup> Robinson read from a press release from the National Republican Congressional Committee:

"Boondoggling" is a comparatively new word on the American tongue. It is "frankly destructive"--Roosevelt's pet way of wasting money. It turns the so-called New Deal into an ordeal. "Boondoggle" means gadget. In that respect, it is synonymous with the New Deal. It was born of it. It may well die with it; in fact, its demise is certain. Sheer waste is killing it.<sup>41</sup>

Robinson, drawing on information supplied by the WPA, presented a different etymology: "The word 'boondoggle' means a useful work, and it had its origin in the name of that sturdy American woodsman, Daniel Boone, who certainly knew as much about practical, useful things as the advertising writers now employed by the Republican National Committee and the miscalled American Liberty League." Boone had apparently made a "toggle" out of leather straps in order to tie his rifle on his head when swimming across a stream, thus keeping his powder dry.

Drawing on the research done by WPA personnel, Robinson proceeded to scrutinize the charges of boondoggling. Robinson noted that the Liberty League and the RNC had isolated 100 projects from a possible 170,000, or, as he put it, "just one-seventeenth of 1 percent." Second, Robinson noted that charges of boondoggling relied

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<sup>39</sup> Clipping of Congressional Record, March 10, 1936, "Boondoggling Interpretation and Defence [sic]" folder, box 2, entry 732, "Division of Information. Records Relating to Boondoggling Charges. ('Attacks on WPA'), 1936-1939," RG 69, NA.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in ibid.

on brief and partial descriptions of WPA projects. "These Republican spokesmen and Liberty Leaguers," Robinson said, "go about the country crying over what they call the break-down of local responsibility and local self-government. As a matter of fact, this report [of the WPA] shows that every project undertaken by the Works Progress Administration was first sponsored by local authorities." Projects accused of being boondoggles, he jabbed, "have been made the target of ridicule by the humorists employed by the Republican National Committee and its corporate affiliate, the DuPont Liberty League."<sup>42</sup>

Like Robinson, FDR also realized that the way to rebut the opponents of the WPA on this point was to establish how much localities wanted WPA projects. Early in 1936, FDR wrote to Harry Hopkins:

I think it would be interesting and instructive if you would have someone look up the following: Thousands of projects which come under you have been asked for by municipalities or private organizations and endorsed by the local Chamber of Commerce.... I think if you would put one person on this and let me have a list of endorsements by local Chambers of Commerce, business men's organizations, merchants' associations, etc., it would be helpful and I believe that the total would run to several hundred million dollars. At the same time you might get a check of hostile newspapers in certain sample communities, such as, Boston, Providence, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, Chicago, Detroit, Omaha, San Francisco and Los Angeles, in order to prove what I believe to be true--that many of these hostile papers cry aloud against the use of government funds (especially the \$3,300,000[,000] and the four billion dollar appropriations) while at the same time they are demanding the construction of public buildings, etc., in their own locality out of these fields. A dozen good examples in each of these fields will be useful.<sup>43</sup>

The WPA found that roughly 79% of all WPA projects, in terms of value, were sponsored by municipalities, townships, or counties; 18% by state governments; and 3% by various

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> FDR to Harry Hopkins, Jan. 21, 1936, "Chamber of Commerce" folder, box 2, entry 732, "Division of Information. Records Relating to Boondoggling Charges, ('Attacks on WPA'), 1936-1939," RG 69, NA.

Federal governmental agencies.<sup>44</sup> This strategy of defending the WPA by noting its local support culminated in the U.S. Community Improvement Appraisal. This national survey of the WPA's accomplishments that found that 90% of the responding communities (the Appraisal assessed 42 states and included 2,101 rural communities, 1,201 small cities, 266 mid-sized cities, and 154 large cities) declared that the WPA's work "was of permanent value."<sup>45</sup>

In his defense of the WPA, Robinson did not employ every talking point proposed by the agency. In responding to Republican charges that the WPA had wasted \$500,000 in Queens, New York, on making bridle paths "more attractive" for horseback riding, Robinson concentrated his defense on the points that, in fact, only \$20,000 was allotted, and of that amount, only \$10,000 was spent. The WPA, in its efforts to thoroughly defend the project, also argued that "Horseback riding is not limited to the few. Hundreds of people of moderate means rent horses by the hour from nearby riding academies to ride on the paths for exercise."<sup>46</sup> Robinson, however, declined to employ this argument.

Perhaps the most sensational boondoggle Robinson dealt with in his speech on the Senate floor was a \$25,000 dog pound built by the WPA in Memphis, Tennessee. As Michigan Senator Arthur Vandenberg dryly observed, this project "put the 'dog' in 'boondoggling.'"<sup>47</sup> The New York Times was the first to publicize the project, printing, across three columns, an architect's rendering of the dog pound's facade, with the caption "A \$25,000 boondoggling dog pound for Memphis. An architect's drawing of the

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<sup>44</sup> WPA press release, Jan. 12, 1938, "'Press Releases Jan thru February, 1938" folder, box 3, entry 740. "Division of Information. Press Releases, 1936-1942, with gaps," RG 69, NA.

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Community Improvement Appraisal: A Report on the Work Program of the Works Progress Administration (Washington, D.C.: National Appraisal Committee, 1939), 7.

<sup>46</sup> WPA notes on National Republican Congressional Committee attacks, no date, "Republicans attacks (New York)" folder, box 1, entry 730, "Division of Information. Statements and Related Papers Relating to Boondoggling Charges and Answers ("Attacks on WPA"), 1935-1936. Alabama-Wisconsin," RG 69, NA.

<sup>47</sup> Congressional Record 80, pt. 3 (March 10, 1936), p. 3498.

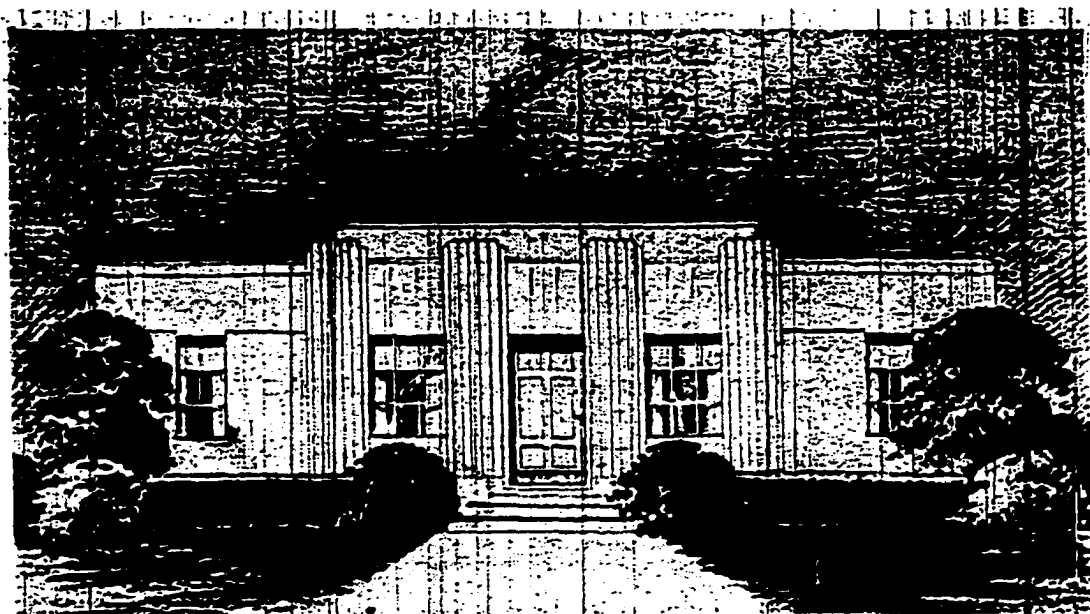
building under construction as a WPA project. It will be equipped with shower baths, outside exercise runways, and pens supplied with fresh straw bedding daily for the dogs. A sealed gas chamber will be used to execute all unclaimed animals after three days."<sup>48</sup>

[figure 1 here]

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<sup>48</sup> New York Times, Feb. 7, 1936, p. 3.

Figure 1. Source: New York Times, Feb. 7, 1936, p. 3.



### A \$25,000 "BOON-DOGLING" DOG POUND FOR MEMPHIS.

An architect's drawing of the building under construction as a WPA project. It will be equipped with shower baths, outside exercise runways and pens supplied with fresh straw-bedding daily for the dogs. A sealed gas chamber will be used to execute all unclaimed animals after three days.

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Responding, the mayor of Memphis complained to the Times, "we deeply resent your biased, partisan, and unfair story in regard to this project." Memphis, its mayor reported, needed the dog pound: over the three previous years 827 Pasteur treatments had been administered to those (mostly children) bitten by "mad dogs." More than 1,500 people had been bitten by dogs; 362 of the dogs involved had rabies; and at least six people had died of rabies over the previous three years.<sup>49</sup> Senator Robinson, noting these facts, proclaimed, "Can one imagine the haunting fear of the people of Memphis over such conditions? Can one imagine any better way to expend Federal funds." Robinson's defense, however, paled against the terrific image the dog pound provided the WPA's critics. One Republican congressman joked, "I certainly wish I could live in as handsome a building as the Memphis dogs will occupy. The dogs will have individual pens with fresh bedding every day, exercise runways, shower baths, and every imaginable comfort of home."<sup>50</sup>

The New York Sun hopped on the dog pound bandwagon, predicting "If the WPA keeps up its present rate of pound-building, every dog will have his shelter as well as his day. The idea of a \$25,000 Federal aided refuge for stray curs in Yonkers has been approved by regional authorities, so Memphis, with its fine dog hotel, needn't be so snooty." While plans for the Yonkers's pound had not yet been drafted, "undoubtedly they'll include showers, like those in the model in the South."<sup>51</sup> In response to critics' fascination with the dog showers--a point that was being repeated over five months after the New York Times first ran its picture of the Memphis Dog Pound--the WPA's Amy

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<sup>49</sup> New York Times, Feb. 10, 1936, p. 16.

<sup>50</sup> Clipping of Congressional Record, March 10, 1936, "Boondoggling Interpretation and Defence [sic]" folder, box 2, entry 732, "Division of Information. Records Relating to Boondoggling Charges, ('Attacks on WPA'), 1936-1939," RG 69, NA.

<sup>51</sup> New York Sun, Feb. 18, 1936, in "New York" folder, box 1, entry 730, "Division of Information. Statements and Related Papers Relating to Boondoggling Charges and Answers ('Attacks on WPA'). 1935-1936. Alabama-Wisconsin," RG 69, NA.

MacMaster observed, by way of defense, "In regard to the 'special shower baths,' it should be noted that washing dogs by shower bath is very much cheaper and more sanitary than washing them by hand; and if the dogs happen to have rabies, it is much safer for the person that does the washing."<sup>52</sup>

FDR, himself, undertook defense of the WPA and the public works it built. In the course of making some informal remarks to the New Jersey State Emergency Council, Roosevelt observed that "There is a grand word that is going around, 'boondoggle.' It is a pretty good word." In fact, FDR continued, "If we can 'boondoggle' ourselves out of this depression, that word is going to be enshrined in the hearts of the American people for many years to come." The WPA's public works projects, FDR argued,

spring from a necessity, a definite human need, a need of this generation, a need of the year in which we live and of last year, and the year before. In carrying out this work, we are filling a current need, but, in addition to that, we are trying to do it in such a way that it is going to be useful in some way to the community next year and the year after and for generations to come.<sup>53</sup>

On another occasion, while dedicating a new stadium built by with Federal money in Detroit, FDR declared that "Some people in this country have called it 'boondoggling' for us to build stadiums and parks and forests and to improve the recreational facilities of the Nation. My friends, if this stadium can be called boondoggling, then I am for boondoggling, and so are you."<sup>54</sup>

By the end of 1938, the WPA was shifting to the offensive in its battle with its critics. "Seldom is the word 'boondoggle' heard these days with respect to projects of the Works Progress Administration," the WPA declared. "This catchy phrase, quickly seized

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<sup>52</sup> Amy MacMaster, "Boondoggling: Answer to Charges in South Jersey Independent," June 5, 1936, "Greatest Show on Earth now in Fourth Year in this Country (South Jersey Independence)" folder, box 2, entry 732, "Division of Information. Records Relating to Boondoggling Charges, ('Attacks on WPA'), 1936-1939," RG 69, NA.

<sup>53</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938), 5:58, 59.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

upon and taken out of the testimony of a Scoutmaster in New York under the Civil Works Administration early in 1934, had a rather remarkable run for many months."

Distinguished lexicographers stayed awake nights seeking its origin, two large national organizations, both amply financed into the hundreds of thousands, got out booklets describing in sarcastic language many alleged individual boondoggles of the WPA; the United States Senate had at least one memorable debate on the subject of alleged WPA boondoggles; one metropolitan newspaper ran daily a short two column head entitled "Today's Boondoggle"; and even President Roosevelt used the word in one of his speeches.<sup>55</sup>

What happened? The principle explanation, the WPA asserted, was that "many projects called boondoggles by hostile critics, when completed, turned out to be the reverse; they were found to have been sound, sensible projects, fully warranted both because of the primary employment opportunities they offered and because their operation at this time goes on entirely unquestioned by anyone." Revisiting the most famous of boondoggles, the Memphis dog pound, the WPA noted that since the pound opened the number of persons bitten and the number of people treated for rabies had dropped dramatically. "And so it goes," the WPA concluded.

Libels travel infinitely faster than denials, even when the denials are proved beyond peradventure, and most of the agencies which were responsible for the boondoggling articles, pamphlets, etc., did not bother even to look into the work on, or the completion of, the projects they so scornfully and satirically criticized. They took surface glances at specifications for projects but did not bother to get the facts either from the WPA State Administrator or the local authorities responsible for projects. It is no wonder then that the words "boondoggle" and "boondoggling" have practically passed from the lexicon so far as the WPA is concerned.<sup>56</sup>

The WPA proudly quoted one publication, the Magazine of Wall Street, which stated "Perhaps the most inspiring achievement of the Roosevelt Administration is its widespread reconstruction of the physical surface of America." Indeed, in a brief essay

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<sup>55</sup> "Boondoggle's Puppies," Dec. 2, 1938, "1938 Material on Boondoggling" folder, box 2, entry 732, "Division of Information. Records Relating to Boondoggling Charges, ('Attacks on WPA'), 1936-1939," RG 69, NA.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

titled "Boondoggling: It's Always Somewhere Else," the WPA noted the difficulties involved in pinning down boondoggles.

The willingness of each community to defend its own WPA work springs from the localized nature of the program. The community officials planned that work and specifically requested it. It represents their best judgment, both as to the needs of that community and the abilities of its destitute people. The community is backing its judgment with an average of 20 cents of its own money to supplement each Federal dollar expended.

That is why the US Conference of Mayors, representing executives of 100 great American cities with a total population in excess of 25,000,000, unanimously indorsed [sic] the WPA plan of work-relief, and gave ringing testimony to the usefulness and community value of its projects.

It is why hundreds of similar indorsements [sic] reach WPA each week from city, county, school and park officials in all parts of the country, swelling the thousands already on hand. They come from officials of all political faiths, because this great question is not one of politics, but of the basic needs of human beings.<sup>57</sup>

Although the term "boondoggle" has remained in the American political vocabulary, at the time New Dealers were able to counter effectively critics who charged that the New Deal's public works projects were wasteful and inefficient. Despite the emphasis they placed on such projects as the Memphis dog pound, opponents of the New Deal were not able to convince the public that all of the New Deal's projects were worthless. This was due, in part, to the national scope of the New Deal public works programs. As the U.S. Community Appraisal and other measures taken by the WPA indicated, localities wanted their WPA projects. When viewed from the perspective of the local level, the boondoggles were always "somewhere else." An examination of how the WPA functioned at the level of the project site, however, demonstrates how New Deal public works did become a controversial political issue. Opponents of the New Deal were able to mount an effective argument against the WPA by charging that the program was being used by politicians to win votes.

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<sup>57</sup> "Boondoggling: It's Always Somewhere Else," in *ibid.*

### **"Politics in Relief"**

The political implications presented by the spending of federal funds on public works projects became a central issue in the public's perception of the WPA. The issue of "politics in relief," as it was often termed, culminated in the debate and passage of the 1939 Hatch Act, an event discussed in greater depth in the following chapter. As this chapter makes clear, however, the chain of events that led to the Hatch Act was a complex and deep one. WPA administrators, local and state politicians, interested businessmen and citizens, the unemployed, and those employed on public works projects, confronted with increasing frequency the politicization of the WPA. This politicization often took place at the project site itself.

These sorts of activities reflect the messy way that the WPA worked across the country, in urban and rural locations. These activities, however, were not new, and nor were they exclusive to the WPA. Indeed, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), run by Harry Hopkins from 1933 until it was phased out in 1935, confronted a number of similar incidents. In Kentucky, for example, a county judge, a mayor, and members of the local relief committee misappropriated \$122,500 in federal funds; state FERA personnel were regularly selected via patronage instead of by professional qualifications; and often federal funds were spent in a way that benefited businessmen and politicians rather than the poor and unemployed.<sup>58</sup>

Paul Kellogg, the well-known editor of Survey, reflected on what was at stake in such an environment for supporters of the WPA. In a speech entitled, "Social workers in a Campaign Year," given to the New York State Conference of Social Work, Kellogg argued that when public welfare "is drawn into politics we must follow it there, and stand

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<sup>58</sup> "Kentucky Investigation Final Report of Special Investigations," no date [probably after Nov. 19, 1934]; "Kentucky" folder, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration. Miscellaneous State File ("New File"). Iowa--Kentucky," RG 69, NA.

for the right as we see it and the well-being of those concerned." During an election year, Kellogg noted, "there is the huge bulk of grouching" regarding the "partisan manipulation" of government spending. "With so much smoke these days along the political horizon, far be it from me to say there are not running fires under the smoke," Kellogg acknowledged. However, he thought, "if we look closely, we see that for the most part [these fires] run where civil service standards are lax locally, where the natural order of political machines is still to live on spoils--and this holds for cities, counties, states."<sup>59</sup>

While Kellogg and other liberals objected to politics entering into the selection of WPA administrative personnel, the real potential for politics to enter into the operation of the WPA was at the level of the project site. Foremen and timekeepers, as people like Jim Farley were well aware, were the key players in this process.

For example, in 1936 the WPA received complaints that WPA foremen in Hart County, Kentucky, had been urging WPA workers to vote Republican in the 1936 election. Stokes A. Baird, the chairman of the Democratic Party in Hart County, wrote to George Goodman, the state director of the WPA in Kentucky, that he suspected seven WPA foremen in his county of coercing WPA workers to vote the Republican ticket. These foremen supervised about 200 workers on WPA Farm-to-Market road projects in Hart County. Even though the WPA investigating agent interviewed over 100 WPA workers, he could not find one who would confirm that his foreman had tried to influence his vote while he was on the job site. Ten citizens of Hart County, however, did submit affidavits stating that they thought the Republican foremen were responsible for decreasing the Democratic majority from 1400 votes in 1932 to 194 in 1936. All of the

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<sup>59</sup> Paul Kellogg, "Social Workers in a Campaign Year," no date [October, 1938], in "610 N.Y. Political Coercion A-Z" folder, box 2003, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. New York City 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

Republican foremen hauled voters in their cars to the polling places on election day, but they avoided soliciting men for their votes at the project sites.<sup>60</sup>

More noteworthy than this, however, was the role played by the county's "fiscal court." Composed of four Republicans and three Democrats, the court sponsored WPA projects, named candidates for local supervisory positions in the WPA, and gave political considerations some weight in appointing personnel. Republican County Judge Harry Wilson, the head of the fiscal court, told a WPA investigator that "he had instructed every Republican connected with the WPA at the time of the recent and all past elections to steer clear of politics and to build roads." That all of the foremen on farm-to-market road projects in Hart County were also Republican (and, in some cases, party officials) is less a coincidence than it is an indication of how the WPA functioned at the level of the county and project site.<sup>61</sup>

In Clinton County, Illinois, Delmont Schaeffer, the chair of the county's Democratic Committee, and Clarence Beckemeyer, the WPA engineer in charge of the county, formed a WPA "social club." Schaeffer and Beckemeyer then proceeded to threaten WPA employees with dismissal if they failed to support Democratic candidates for political office. One WPA laborer, Irvin Chester Moffatt, told investigators what happened as he worked on a county-wide road improvement project sponsored by the WPA.

About February, 1939, Dan Dermody, WPA foreman, came to me on the said project and told me that Delmont Schaffer [sic], Cashier of the Farmers Bank, Trenton, Illinois, and Clinton County Democratic Chairman, wanted the WPA project workers to form a political club under the guise of a social club and that

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<sup>60</sup> WPA investigation report, Jan. 26, 1937, "2-KY-97 Kentucky Hart Corr. File" folder, box 380, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Kentucky," RG 69, NA.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, and see also the WPA investigation reports in "5-KY-98 Kentucky Johnson Corr. File" folder, box 380; and "1-KY-223 Kentucky Union Corr. File" folder, box 383; both in entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Kentucky," RG 69, NA.

he, Dermody, was to be president of that club and that he wanted me to act as its secretary. I refused to accede to that request until I had further information. Accordingly, I went and talked to Delmont Schaffer at the Farmers Bank and he advised me that Dermody's statements were correct and that I should do as Dermody requested if I wanted to retain my WPA job. He said that the proposed club was to be political and that if I would help him he would help me; that the Township offices must be kept within the Democratic ranks and that whomever he endorsed he would expect the members of the said club to support.<sup>62</sup>

At the first club meeting Moffatt and Dermody collected fifty cents in dues from the WPA workers who attended, using the money to purchase beer and other refreshments.

While a number of WPA workers attended the club, six workers refused. As Moffatt recalled,

Delmont Schaffer did not attend any meetings of the said club but he discussed the meetings with me and on one occasion told me that he had heard that several of the WPA employees refused to join the club or to support his candidate for election. I told him that there were a few who had not joined the club and he requested that I submit their names to him; he said that he would call Clarence Beckemeyer and have those men dismissed from WPA employment. I refused to divulge the names of these men and evaded Schaffer's request.<sup>63</sup>

At Schaffer's urging, however, Moffatt and Dermody mobilized WPA workers to vote for J.H. "Zip" Quitmeyer for Township Road Commissioner:

On instructions of Delmont Schaffer and under his threats of having us dismissed from WPA employment, Dan Dermody and I made short political speeches to the WPA workers at the meetings of the WPA Social Club, and we advised the membership to vote at the said township election for "Zip" Quitmeyer, and a straight Democratic ticket, or lose their WPA jobs. The election was duly held and J.H. "Zip" Quitmeyer was elected by a majority of about one hundred twenty-five votes (125); the WPA Social Club had a membership of about forty (40) WPA project workers at the time of the said election, most of whom were married men with families.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Statement of Irvin Chester Moffatt, Oct. 4, 1939, "7-IL-1136" folder, box 342, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration. Illinois," RG 69, NA.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.



These sorts of cases were common in WPA investigations. WPA investigators, however, realized that a remedy was not entirely clear, outside of discharging the personnel in question from the WPA. As one WPA investigator wrote to the director of investigations for the WPA, regarding this WPA "social club," "past experience has indicated the difficulty of obtaining convictions in cases of this nature."<sup>65</sup>

In states such as Pennsylvania, the WPA's upper tier of administrators was all too aware of the extent that political forces permeated the WPA at the local level. As late as 1940, Howard Hunter, who had served in the New Deal since the early days of FERA, advised Hopkins's successor as head of the WPA, Colonel Francis Harrington, that the WPA needed to take care when deciding what activities merited investigation. "We could conceivably have the entire Division of Investigation in just the state of Pennsylvania," Hunter cautioned, "if we formalized all the charges which are likely to come in."<sup>66</sup>

Indeed, opponents of the New Deal in Pennsylvania sought to capitalize on the resentment WPA workers might feel toward their foreman or timekeeper for putting political pressure on them. One group, identifying itself only as the "Americanism Committee," mailed one-cent postcards during the 1938 campaign:

**WPA OR PROJECT WORKER, READ THIS:**

You are at work right now, but after Election, WHAT? Until now you have been like a slave--pleading and begging to Foremen, Timekeepers, Inspectors, Bosses; then when you were placed, you were assessed and maced for a big part of your scanty wage, to pay for Sign Boards, Graft and Lying Propaganda. Under Little New Deal Rule the same thing is before you for some years, if you can ever get a job at all. New Deal Rule has driven many Industries, big and little, out of the State and that is why you can get no real Man's job. On November 8th is your one and only chance to win back your American Freedom, by voting STRAIGHT REPUBLICAN. The sure and sacred promise of the REPUBLICAN candidates is

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<sup>65</sup> WPA investigation report, Jan. 8, 1940; Statement of Irvin Chester Moffatt, Oct. 4, 1939; and Richard Thompson to Roger J. Bounds, July 10, 1940; all in "7-IL-1136" folder, box 342, in *ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Howard O. Hunter to Col. Francis Harrington, April 3, 1940, ""610.3 PA. K-Mc" folder, box 2395, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Pa. 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

that you get real jobs, and be FREE MEN again. Do not fear that your Bosses will know how you vote--they have no way of finding out; so VOTE AGAINST LITTLE NEW DEAL SLAVERY.<sup>67</sup>

Although the 1930s are remembered today as the Age of Roosevelt, Democrats by no means held a monopoly on the control of the WPA at the local level. In fact, the WPA was flooded with complaints about the politicization of the WPA in Republican-controlled areas of the country. One WPA worker, Frank Bukowski of Momence, Illinois, wrote to Harry Hopkins to complain that "before the WPA went into effect here this county of Kankakee was 85 percent Democratic, and now it is 85 percent Republican." The reason for this shift? Bukowski thought it was simple: "the foremen on these WPA jobs tell the laborers that if they dont [sic] vote the Republican ticket they will lose their jobs. And they do vote the Republican ticket because they are working under Republican foremen."<sup>68</sup>

Timekeepers and foremen were not the only people responsible for soliciting political support from their workers; WPA supervisory personnel were themselves subject to coercion from their superiors. In 1939, William R. Garrison, a WPA superintendent in Joplin, Missouri, met with about fifty WPA timekeepers and foremen at the county courthouse and collected one-half of a month's pay from them in order to pay the debts of the Democratic Central Committee of Newton County. Ruth Williamson, the treasurer of the Democratic Central Committee, received the money and was told that it was given by the "boys down at the courthouse." Williamson added that the chairman of the

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<sup>67</sup> Americanism Committee to Edwin B. Zeiser, Nov. 4, 1938, in "610 PA. Charges of Sen. Davis (P.C.)" folder, box 2388, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Pa. 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

<sup>68</sup> Frank Bukowski to Harry Hopkins, June 28, 1938, "Illinois 610 Political Coercion A-L" folder, box 1181, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Illinois 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

committee, Phil Graves, told her that if she served as treasurer she would receive employment as a WPA sewing project supervisor.<sup>69</sup>

John Harris, a WPA timekeeper, showed investigators a letter from Graves advising him that he had been "assessed" for political funds for the committee. Graves's letter read in part:

You are now working because the Democratic Party is in power. It is your Party and you owe your present job to YOUR PARTY. The time has come when your financial help is needed. We must have money to conduct a successful campaign. That money must come from those who are receiving the benefit of jobs.<sup>70</sup>

Graves acknowledged that WPA employees were sent letters under his signature, but blamed his secretary for using a list of addresses of WPA employees and sending the letters out on her own. Graves's secretary, however, produced the list--in Graves's handwriting--and stated that he instructed her to use it. While Garrison was fired from his WPA position as supervisor, the case languished in the judicial arena for nearly three years--what one WPA administrator termed "a shining example of the lack of cooperation we have received in a number of cases on the part of United States Attorneys."<sup>71</sup>

The difficulty in securing prosecution--much less conviction--in cases involving allegations about WPA personnel was clear in other cases as well. Lewis B. Hoff, the prosecuting attorney in Stockton, Missouri, charged John William Farmer, a WPA foreman from Jerico Springs, with violating Missouri's law against bribing people for their vote. Specifically, Farmer allegedly offered WPA jobs to people in return for them voting for the Democratic slate, which included Farmer's candidacy for Democratic County committeeman. In addition to this charge, the WPA also investigated Farmer for rarely making an appearance at the WPA project he nominally was supervising, spending

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<sup>69</sup> WPA investigation report, May 6, 1939, "5-MO-305 Missouri Newton Corr. File" folder, box 480, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Missouri," RG 69, NA.

<sup>70</sup> Phil H. Graves to John Harris, Sept. 30, 1938, in *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> WPA investigation report, May 6, 1939; Leo Simonton to Frank, Feb. 12, 1942; both in *ibid.*

part of nearly every weekday in Stockton, Missouri, about fifteen miles from Jerico Springs. While the WPA investigator received oral confirmation of these incidents from over ten WPA workers, these men refused to sign affidavits.

Farmer pulled out all the stops to beat the prosecution. Farmer's attorney notified the prosecutor that if he failed to drop the case, Farmer would file a complaint of bribery against him. Only after a preliminary hearing on this matter was the prosecutor able to get this allegation dismissed and finally bring Farmer himself to trial. At this point, however, the obstacles for a conviction only increased. As one WPA agent summarized the matter, the prosecutor

related that several days before the commencement of the trial he had heard that the witnesses were not going to tell the truth and he had visited them, in company with witnesses, and they had reaffirmed the truth of the affidavits but had stated they were afraid to tell the truth on the stand. He specifically charged that Farmer had used pressure on his witnesses, that through fear they had perjured themselves when placed on the stand, and that after all the testimony had been given the presiding judge directed a verdict for Farmer.<sup>72</sup>

While the WPA investigated charges that both Republicans and Democrats tried to take advantage of the WPA, there is some evidence to suggest that they took more care in looking into allegations that Republicans were using the WPA to their political advantage. Kentucky Congressman Fred Vinson raised the issue with Aubrey Williams, spurring an investigation into Kentucky's Fourth and Fifth WPA districts, covering Lawrence, Lewis, Morgan, Rowan, Wolfe, Powell, and Breathitt counties. The two WPA officials in charge of the investigation division, Dallas Dort and Roger Bounds, discussed their approach to the investigation over the phone. Following discussion of the need to select an investigator who "has lots of guts and wouldn't be afraid and let them [local Republicans] push him around," Dort argued that their investigator

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<sup>72</sup> WPA investigation report, Oct. 31, 1936; and Thomas E. Stakem, Jr., to Roger J. Bounds. April 2, 1937; both in "4-MO-95 Missouri Cedar Corr. File" folder, box 474, *ibid*.

should go around and talk to the Congressman's friends on the side before he comes out in the open there. The Congressman said that Goodman [state director of the WPA in Kentucky] sent people down there several times and that they have never been able to get the dope. Vinson knows what is going on down there. Nine out of ten people there are Republicans. He has affidavits that people have signed [complaining about Republican influence].

Dort emphasized his dissatisfaction with previous efforts to ascertain what was going on.

"Everybody who has investigated there has whitewashed it."<sup>73</sup>

WPA agent N.E. Marshall telephoned Bounds nine days into his investigation to report his sense that the WPA would not be able to prove any wrongdoing, even though it appeared that Republicans were firmly in charge. "Take Breathitt County," Marshall reported, "it has a 3500 Democratic majority and yet all of the administrative employees are Republican. That condition seems to exist in most of these counties. However, none of these people who have been writing Mr. Vinson have any proof. I have not been able to get any direct proof because all these people have to say is 'I appointed that man because he was the most efficient.'" Bounds urged Marshall to look into the personnel files of local administrative personnel and "try to find out endorsements, Republican or Democratic, that appear in the file of those who have been employed." Bounds also advised Marshall to "take some of these Republicans who are holding down these foreman and supervisor jobs, etc., and see if it is true that they are qualified for the job they hold. See if you can prove any cases where they are not qualified and put them on the spot as to why. Also, you want to have available some foremen who were qualified and who were turned down."<sup>74</sup>

While Marshall was unable to substantiate any of the allegations, his report sheds light on the way the WPA functioned in eastern Kentucky:

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<sup>73</sup> Notes of phone call between Dort and Bounds, Sept. 29, 1936, "5-KY-92 Kentucky Sto Of Corr. File" folder, box 380, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Kentucky," RG 69, NA.

<sup>74</sup> Notes of phone call between Bounds and Marshall, Oct. 13, 1936, in *ibid.*

I was unable to prove discrimination on the part of Area Engineers in Congressman Fred Vinson's congressional district, and none of the persons interviewed by me in these districts could furnish any proof of discrimination except to point out that most of the key positions in these counties were held by Republicans; the area Engineers in most instances are Republicans; and all of the County Judges are Republicans.<sup>75</sup>

The connection between the County Judges and WPA functions were particularly important, Marshall argued.

These County Judges recommend to the Area Engineers the appointment of persons as Superintendents and Foremen on jobs. I could not prove it, but from the investigation conducted feel certain in my own mind these County Judges recommend persons who are personally friendly and their political allies. In Lawrence and Rowan Counties the feeling on the part of the Democrats is very bitter; and in Rowan County I feel, though I could not prove it, that the Area Engineer and the County Judge are very close and work together in the appointment of the supervisory officials.<sup>76</sup>

Marshall recommended the dismissal of several WPA engineers and supervisors after discussing his findings with Congressman Vinson. "Mr. Vinson advised it was his opinion that actual proof of discrimination could not be obtained, but in his own mind he is certain from his knowledge of the people and conditions that such discrimination is going on and that he felt with the removal of one or two of these people whom it was felt were indulging in political discrimination, the conditions in Eastern Kentucky would be improved."<sup>77</sup>

Other WPA officials disagreed with Marshall's assessment of the situation, however. One investigator wrote to Bounds that if these Republican supervisory officials in eastern Kentucky were "playing partisan politics that they would undoubtedly have some evidence to point out to Agent to substantiate their belief." This WPA administrator thought the Kentucky investigation revealed not so much mischief on the

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<sup>75</sup> Marshall to Bounds, Oct. 21, 1936, in ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

part of Republicans, but rather a power grab by local Democrats. "The reason I believe most of the persons who were contacted [in the investigation] stated that all Democrats holding positions in the WPA are weak and all Republicans strong, is because these people wanted control of the WPA in order that they themselves might play politics."<sup>78</sup>

George Goodman, head of the WPA in Kentucky, wrote to Aubrey Williams just days after the 1936 election, reassuring him that the situation in eastern Kentucky was under control.

Don't be too concerned about political complaints in Eastern Kentucky. I haven't the faintest idea that we are in any sense perfect, either there are [sic] in any other part of the State, but personal contact with complaining local politicians enabled me, almost without exception, to put them on the right track.

Except for the complaints from Democratic leaders in counties where the Party is a very definite minority, we have no political complaints in this State to speak of. The very occasional complaint from a Republican that he has been discriminated against because of his Party comes so seldom that it is usually shown to all State Division heads as a sort of a curiosity.

I shall be glad to talk with you about these matters, as suggested in your letter, and congratulate the WPA organization in general over the very material part it has played in helping to build a solid foundation for our great President.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, the WPA helped to build this solid foundation across the country. In Montana, the WPA's administrative and project supervisory personnel mustered the organization's employees to back Congressman Jerry O'Connell's 1938 reelection campaign. WPA foremen lined up their workers and distributed O'Connell's campaign literature to them; WPA workers could make up hours lost campaigning on the project site; projects were "over-loaded" with rodmen, foremen, and project clerks just before the election (and then 195 of 222 rodmen, foremen, and clerks were laid off right after the election); WPA workers were forced to listen to radio broadcasts made by O'Connell

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<sup>78</sup> Martin to Bounds, Oct. 21, 1936, in *ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> George Goodman to Aubrey Williams, Nov. 4, 1936, *ibid.*

during project working hours; and WPA telephone and stenographic equipment was used in O'Connell's campaign. Several WPA supervisors who opposed O'Connell were called into the state WPA administrator's office and falsely accused of working against O'Connell. WPA investigators, however, concluded that there was not enough tangible evidence to warrant prosecution, recommending only the dismissal of four WPA supervisors, the demotion of one WPA foreman, and a reprimand of another.<sup>80</sup>

While the WPA helped O'Connell, congressman did not always benefit from the program. Texas congressman W.D. McFarlane complained to Harry Hopkins that "I was not allowed to have anything to say or do about the set-up of any of the WPA employees in my District from Supervisor, up or down. This political patronage has been and is now in the control of my political enemies."<sup>81</sup> McFarlane provided as evidence the letter of a former WPA project foreman who had worked on WPA school projects in Wilbarger County. This foreman wrote to McFarlane, explaining that

In August, I was placing sticker [sic] on cars in your behalf, and Mr. Coffee asked me on the street why I was fighting a home boy, I explained to him that the way Gossett [McFarlane's opponent] had treated me that I should not support him. Mr. Coffee said don't you know this is making all your friends sore at you? I said well I don't know any reason why it would, I said you are out here working for home boy and maybe you are making people sore, and he said well you better cut that out as it is liable to make it worse for you. The next day over at Court House Judge Poteet said I understand that you are working in McFarlane's behalf, and we was trying to get you on one of these next jobs here, I am afraid it might have some effect in holding you from getting the next job. I explained to him that I was in my rights and showed him a letter to that effect from Mr. Hopkins.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> WPA investigation report, Aug. 17, 1939, "1-MT-146 Montana Silver Bow Corr. File" folder, box 490, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Montana," RG 69; NA.

<sup>81</sup> W.D. McFarlane to Harry L. Hopkins, Nov. 13, 1936, "610 Texas Oct. 1, 1936" folder, box 2600, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Texas 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

<sup>82</sup> F.W. Grogan to McFarlane, Nov. 9, 1936, in *ibid.*



Since that incident, F.W. Grogan was unable to obtain any WPA work while he watched former colleagues return to WPA labor and receive promotions. McFarlane complained to the state director of Texas's WPA, "Of course, it probably doesn't mean anything to you, but I had to fight this political machine throughout the District in the last campaign. Your entire organization was against me. In spite of this handicap, I won. I see no reason why I should continue to be thus treated."<sup>83</sup>

Other Texas congressmen were less adversarial to the WPA. One, congressman Wright Patman, actually wrote to the head of the Texas WPA with what he thought was a simple request:

I would like to have a list of the names and addresses of our WPA workers in my District. I understand from Mr. Stafford that these names and addresses will have to be obtained from the area offices. If I ask for them, it will attract some attention and possibly excite my opposition to seek similar information.... Your splendid cooperation is very much appreciated, and you may rest assured that I shall be glad to reciprocate when the occasion arises.<sup>84</sup>

This request, however, violated WPA regulations and was politely refused.

Sometimes the corruption uncovered by the WPA was not linked to party politics at all. The WPA's division of investigation often found incidents where local and state WPA administrators worked with local politicians and businesses in providing infrastructure that benefited private industry. For example, in 1940 the WPA and Washington's Skagit County worked together to build an access road between an established county road and the Pacific Nickel Company's mine. Over 75% of the road, however, was constructed on Pacific Nickel's property. Although the WPA's district director and project engineer objected to the building of the road, the project was approved by the WPA's state planning engineer over these objections. WPA investigators

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<sup>83</sup> McFarlane to H.P. Drought, Nov. 13, 1936, in *ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Wright Patman to H.P. Drought, June 6, 1938, "Texas 610 1938" folder, box 2601, "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Texas 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

came to a clear conclusion: "The circumstances surrounding the transaction reflect a clear-cut and well-planned scheme to evade regulations and defraud the Government through the cooperation of the company and county officials with at least the tacit assent or obeisance on the part of Ralph O. Robinson, Director of Operations Washington WPA." Without any evidence of money changing hands, however, the WPA agents did not recommend criminal prosecution. Rather, they advised the WPA to seek financial reimbursement from Pacific Nickel for the \$3156.74 spent by the WPA on the road.<sup>85</sup>

Perhaps the most significant public works project built in the state of Washington was the Grand Coulee Dam. Again, however, the difficulty in documenting evidence suitable for taking criminal or administrative action proved too great. The findings of WPA investigators, though, sheds light on the daily texture and difficulty of obtaining work at the Grand Coulee Dam. Begun in the fall of 1933, the dam was built by the Mason-Walsh-Atkinson-Kier (MWAK) company. By February 1936, the WPA sent investigators to look into allegations of misconduct. Specifically, residents of the surrounding area alleged that men had been unjustifiably fired by the MWAK company, that workers were forced to live in company-owned housing, and, most seriously, that men who were ineligible for work on the dam "purchased" their jobs at fees of \$10 to \$20. On this charge, WPA investigators concluded,

Verbal statements from persons interviewed indicate that there is considerable foundation for the rumors which prevail in the communities that many men secured work on the dam project who were ineligible from a residential standpoint, through the practice of paying sums of money ranging from ten to twenty dollars to certain individuals connected with the NRS [National Reemployment Service] office at Mason City. This charge is common gossip among citizens in the communities adjacent to Coulee Dam, in all walks of life,

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<sup>85</sup> WPA investigation report, April 15, 1941, "1-WA-328 Washington Skagit Corr. File" folder, box 766. entry "PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Washington," RG 69 NA.

from City Officials to merchants, private citizens and project workers. These charges have been prevalent for a period of nearly two years.<sup>86</sup>

For all of this support, however, WPA investigators were only able to obtain one written statement establishing that money had been exchanged for employment. WPA agents speculated on why this was the case:

It is claimed by a great number of persons interviewed, representing a cross section of the communities, that there have been numerous investigations by officials of all types and in all capacities, ranging from Union leaders and American Legion executives to state and national government officials. It is common belief among local residents that as a result of these investigations a great deal of "white washing" has been done; and it is even charged that many investigators and officials who came here to check up the charges were promptly taken in two by either the MWAK Company officials or those in charge of the NRS office, and were royally entertained, and in some cases were seen in public places such as dance halls and saloons in the tenderloin districts, in a highly intoxicated condition, on company with local NRS officials.<sup>87</sup>

One of the investigators felt so strongly about what he thought he knew, but could not prove, that he took the unusual step of attaching to his report a statement labeled "INCIDENTAL INFORMATION: Agent's Opinion--Not Evidence."

It is the opinion of the Agent that there was considerable truth to the charges that numerous persons were at one time able to obtain work at Grand Coulee Dam through payment of cash to certain persons who either through position or influence were able to effect the necessary arrangements to place applicants on the work. This opinion is based entirely on hearsay as the Agent was unable to locate persons who could and would give statements that they had obtained their jobs through fraudulent purchase of same. Many names of workers were furnished to the Agent of persons who had openly stated that they had paid for their jobs but when these clues [sic] were traced down it was found that the individuals had long since left town...<sup>88</sup>

These difficulties in pinning down allegations were evident near Chicago as well.

In the last half of 1938, the WPA built over half a million dollars worth of sewer pipes in

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<sup>86</sup> WPA investigation report, March 30, 1936, "2-WA-8 Washington Grant Correspondence File" folder. box 757, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Washington," RG 69, NA.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

an unincorporated part of Niles, Illinois. This area of Niles bordered Chicago on its western and northern boundaries, at Caldwell and Touhy Avenues, respectively.

Although WPA investigators were unable to figure out how this odd state of affairs came to be, they suspected that a group of developers had manipulated the WPA into building a sewer system on their tract, making it easier to sell and develop the lots on the property. When one WPA investigator and engineer visited the site in October 1939, they found the following:

The evidence of recent sewer work is still quite visible; we walked along a number of the ridges left by the backfill of this sewer construction. It was noted that in addition to installing the main sewers down what would be the center of streets, if there were any streets in the area, WPA has constructed a great many 6-inch and 8-inch stubs, so that the sewer system now extends up to the property line of many of the unoccupied and uninhabited lots in the area. There are a number of signs posted on these premises advertising lots for sale and indicating that FHA terms are available.<sup>89</sup>

The foreman on the project testified as to the undeveloped conditions of the area. "The area in which the men working under me laid these stubs and catch basins was a prairie in which there were no houses, no sidewalks, no streets and no water connections."<sup>90</sup> The 155-acre tract was owned by three trustees of the West Rogers Park Realty Trust, which stonewalled WPA requests for information. "There seems to be no logical explanation for this attitude on the part of the Trustees and members of the Board of the West Rogers Park Realty Trust unless they may have something which they desire to conceal," wrote one WPA investigator. "Their refusal to furnish any information as to the extent of their sales of property tends to support the theory that some lots may have

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<sup>89</sup> Richard Thompson to Roger J. Bounds, Oct. 26, 1939, "3-IL-1221" folder, box 344, entry PC-37, 23. "Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration. Illinois," RG 69 NA.

<sup>90</sup> Thompson to Bounds, Feb. 14, 1940, in *ibid*.

been given or at least promised to those who arranged to secure WPA work in this area," he speculated.<sup>91</sup>

The investigator also suspected that the WPA's services were procured through the influence of Thomas Bowler, a former Chicago alderman and the Clerk of the Criminal Court of Chicago, William Link, who worked for Chicago's Board of Improvements, and William Cowhey, alderman for Chicago's 41st ward. Although WPA officials conducted an extensive investigation, they were "unable to obtain any foundation whatever" to establish this connection. Rather, they concluded, several factors coincided: the pressure for WPA to generate employment, a lack of available projects, and interest on the part of land owners to promote the sewer project all came together "to result in the submission, approval and operation of a series of projects [the sewer construction] which undoubtedly are ineligible."<sup>92</sup>

In other instances, even when the WPA found partisan politics shaping corruption, the politicization of the WPA did not always break down on Democratic-Republican lines. At times, Democrats split over the patronage potential of the public works program. In 1936, in Sedalia, Missouri, a factional dispute broke out between two candidates for the Democratic congressional nomination, Henry C. Salveter and Reuben T. Wood. Investigators for the WPA found several instances of local WPA officials using the power of their positions to back Wood. Several people told investigators that they heard Frank Monroe, the district director for the WPA, proclaim, "You know this [the WPA] is a Truman-Wood set up," declaring that the organization was backing Harry Truman for Senate and Reuben Wood for Congress. Although investigators were unable

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Thompson to Bounds, April 6, 1940, in *ibid.*

to prove any illegal activities, they recommended that Monroe be reprimanded and ordered to cease any political activities.<sup>93</sup>

More seriously, WPA investigators found that the publisher of the Kansas City News-Press, Garrett L. Smalley—who, not incidentally, was also a precinct captain in Kansas City for the Pendergast faction of the Democratic party (known as "The Goats")--had used his influence to get one of his precinct workers, Richard Bowers, a higher WPA wage classification. Bowers had worked for the WPA as either a timekeeper or a foreman, until he was reduced in classification to stock clerk, suffering a wage reduction from \$125/month to \$68.90/month. Smalley intervened on Bowers's behalf to get his reduction reversed. In return, Smalley demanded \$25 from Bowers. Smalley confirmed this chain of events for WPA investigators, adding by way of defense that Bowers was almost always drunk, unreliable, and not "worth shooting." While the WPA took action to prevent future wage interventions, instructing the WPA district manager to disregard attempts to influence employment and wage matters, no measures were taken against Smalley or Bowers.<sup>94</sup>

Owners of heavy equipment used on WPA projects were often grateful for the work. This gratitude, however, was at times taken advantage of by WPA employees. In Los Angeles, Byron G. Karn, a heavy equipment owner, was told by a group of WPA equipment inspectors that he needed to "kick thru with some money" in order to keep his steam shovels employed on the project site. Eventually, these inspectors were charged with extorting \$200 from Karn. At the time, even the conservative Los Angeles Times praised the efficiency of the WPA in clearing up this incident. While "the local organization of WPA appears to have clean hands in the matter," the Times opined, "the

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<sup>93</sup> WPA investigation report, Aug. 19, 1936, "4-MO-78 Missouri Pettis Corr. File" folder, box 473, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Missouri," RG 69, NA.

<sup>94</sup> WPA investigation report, Nov. 26, 1940, "2-MO-432 Missouri Jackson Corr. File" folder, box 484, in ibid.

development of such scandals is an almost inevitable concomitant of such circumstances as, in general, surround the lavish expenditure of public funds with more attention to giving employment than to getting full value for the money laid out. A dozen eastern States have already furnished examples of the tendency of this free and easy money to stick to various fingers in transit; it would be a miracle of human nature if it were otherwise."<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the WPA found itself investigating issues revolving around the use of heavy equipment and kickbacks in a number of states, including Illinois, New York, Pennsylvania, and Missouri.<sup>96</sup>

Congress also took steps to regulate the operation of the WPA, at times adding to the legislation governing the WPA's appropriation. Reflecting a growing concern with national security, the 1940 Emergency Relief Appropriation Act banned Communists and Nazis from the WPA's rolls and required that WPA employees swear their loyalty to the United States. As a result, the WPA's investigation division began to focus increasingly on the politics of individual workers. Often, WPA investigators found Communists on the Federal Writers Project and Theater Project, and supporters of the Nazi regime (musicians of German descent) employed on the Federal Music Project.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> WPA investigation report, Jun. 11, 1936; Los Angeles Times editorial clipping, May 26, 1936, both in "11-CA-58 California Los Angeles Correspondence File" folder, box 235, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. California," RG 69, NA.

<sup>96</sup> For Illinois, see WPA investigation report, June 30, 1937, "2-IL-437 Illinois Cook Corr. File" folder, box 328, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration. Illinois"; for New York, see "WPA Press Digest," Feb. 20, 1936, "100 Dec 35 - Feb 36" folder, box 68, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration"; for Pennsylvania, see Aubrey Williams to Senator James J. Davis, Feb. 14, 1938, no folder, box 2388, "Central Files: State 1935-1944. Pa. 610 Special Litigation"; for Missouri, see WPA investigation report, Sept. 11, 1937, "1-MO-151 Missouri Clinton Corr. File" folder, box 475, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-1943. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Missouri;" all in RG 69, NA.

<sup>97</sup> The WPA regularly conducted extensive investigations into the political affiliations of the most low-level of WPA employees, prefiguring, in many ways, the focus on loyalty more commonly associated with the post-World War II national security state. For an example of these continuities, see Ellen Schrecker, Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America (Boston: Little, Brown, 1998), 86-115; for examples of the WPA's investigations, see boxes 347-353, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration.

Requests for investigations came from a variety of sources. In Northern California, the editor and publisher of The Labor Crusader, Joaquin de Menezes, Jr., wrote to provide the WPA with an affidavit signed by a WPA laborer who lived in Berkeley.<sup>98</sup> This laborer, J.B. McAnear, worked on a WPA road project at the intersections of Shasta Road and Grizzly Peak Boulevard. As McAnear related in his affidavit,

Wiley Stagg, timekeeper on WPA Project Number 2576 at Shasta Road and Grizzly Peak Boulevard, Berkeley, California, came among the men working on that project and asked them to contribute money to the Roosevelt Birthday Ball. Mr. Stagg neither presented any tickets nor made mention of any. Some of the men said that they did not have any money. To that Mr. Stagg said, "Well, if you have none then you don't have to contribute." Mr. Stagg passed a hat which contained in my estimation about forty dollars in coins from a penny to a dollar. Most of the men on my gang contributed, many of them under protest.<sup>99</sup>

Stagg sat down with a WPA investigator and answered his questions while a stenographer recorded their conversation. Stagg explained how he came to collect money from his men:

A man named Mr. Hugh Myers, [WPA] project inspector, came out on the project and asked me to help him raffle off tickets for the President's Ball. Mr. Myers handed me several bunches of tickets and I went among the men asking them if any of them wanted to take a chance on tickets for the President's Ball. A number of men asked what the contribution was for and I explained that it was for the purpose of raising funds to support the infantile paralysis fund which was being

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Illinois"; boxes 383-84, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Kentucky"; boxes 715-717, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Pennsylvania"; and boxes 766-767, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. Washington," all in RG 69, NA. Of course, this is not to imply that everyone working for the Federal Writers Project, for example, was a Communist; rather, it is to state that WPA investigators generally found more Communists working for the FWP than, say, on construction projects such as road work.

<sup>98</sup> Joaquin de Menezes, Jr., to I.M. Goranson, Feb. 6, 1936, "8-CA-32 California Alameda Correspondence File" folder, box 234, entry PC-37, 23, "Work Projects Administration. Records of the Division of Investigation, 1934-43. Work Projects Administration Investigative Cases. California," RG 69, NA.

<sup>99</sup> Affidavit of J.B. McAnear, Feb. 6, 1936, in ibid.



raised throughout the country by a series of balls. Then I passed my own personal hat among the men and each contributed amounts varying from ten cents to twenty-five cents, and possibly more. When collections were large enough to pay for a number of tickets, I left those tickets with each group and the workers raffled them off among themselves. A number of men who didn't care to attend the ball and refused to take tickets.... I did not ask anyone on the project to make contributions to this fund, but rather I made it understood they were taking chances on tickets, although a number of men did voluntarily contribute various small sums, who were not interested in attending the ball. There are approximately fifteen or twenty groups whom I contacted, totaling probably around 1500 or 2000 men. I should judge that it took about an hour and a half, during the noon hour, to cover these groups. I, personally, counted the money collected and found it to total \$36.96, which money I turned over to Mr. Hugh Myers...<sup>100</sup>

Myers confirmed to the WPA investigator Stagg's account of events, adding that his superiors in the WPA, Captain Walter R. Bethel, supervisor of the WPA division of labor management, and Walter J. Paul, the WPA office manager, had asked Myers to sell 141 raffle tickets. "I stated [to them] that the only place I knew where such tickets could be sold was on [WPA] projects and they said to go ahead," Myers claimed.<sup>101</sup> Walter Paul likewise confirmed this scenario.<sup>102</sup>

While the investigation disclosed that nothing that could be classified as "intimidation" took place, the Northern California division of the WPA nonetheless issued a directive to all WPA supervisory personnel that, "effective immediately, there will be no solicitations of any kinds for funds, or otherwise, permitted by anyone among project workers on WPA projects."<sup>103</sup> Despite this prohibition in Northern California, however, this practice continued in other states. In Pennsylvania, for example, in 1938

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<sup>100</sup> Clarence P. Harper interview with Wiley E. Stagg, Feb. 24, 1936, in *ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Clarence P. Harper interview with Hugh W. Myers, Feb. 24, 1936, in *ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Memorandum of Statement of Walter J. Paul, Feb. 24, 1936, in *ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> Walter P. Koetitz to All WPA timekeepers, foremen, project inspectors, supervisors, project clerks, materialmen, Feb. 1, 1936, in *ibid.*

between 1,000 and 1,200 WPA employees sold 46,000 tickets to WPA employees for a Young Democrats of Pennsylvania picnic held in Hershey.<sup>104</sup>

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Although the term "boondoggle" has remained in the American political vocabulary, between 1935 and 1938 New Dealers were able to counter effectively critics who charged that the New Deal's public works projects were wasteful and inefficient. Despite the emphasis they placed on such projects as the Memphis dog pound, opponents of the New Deal were not able to convince the public that all of the New Deal's projects were worthless. This was due, in part, to the national scope of the New Deal public works programs. As the U.S. Community Appraisal and other measures taken by the WPA indicated, localities wanted their WPA projects. When viewed from the perspective of the local level, the boondoggles were always "somewhere else." An examination of how the WPA functioned at the level of the project site, however, demonstrates how New Deal public works became a controversial local political issue. While today we easily associate words such as boondoggle with the WPA and many doubt the ability of the Federal government to intervene in the economy, these rationales did not emerge during the Great Depression as effective arguments against the WPA. As the next chapter will demonstrate, opponents of the New Deal were able to mount an effective argument against the WPA by charging that the program was being used by politicians to win votes. The criticism of the WPA that eventually did stick in the public arena was that the WPA was the "Wild Politics Administration."<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> J. Banks Hudson to F.H. Dryden, Sept. 1, 1938, "610 PA. Political Coercion (Hershey Park)" folder, box 2391, "Central Files: State 1935-1944. P. 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

<sup>105</sup> WPA Press Digest, Feb. 20, 1936, "100 Dec 35 - Feb 36" folder, box 68, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

## CHAPTER FIVE

PARTY BUILDING AND "PERNICIOUS POLITICAL ACTIVITIES":  
THE ROAD TO THE HATCH ACT

As the New Deal entered its sixth year, its centerpiece, the Works Progress Administration, was ranked by Americans both as its "greatest accomplishment" and as the "worst thing the Roosevelt administration has done." This dramatic difference in public opinion only begins to indicate the central--and very controversial--presence of the WPA in American life. As one contemporary critic noted, "Whether one thinks well or ill of the WPA or its program, there can be little question about its being a vast and complex organization and its program one of innumerable ramifications." Indeed, one WPA official remarked that the WPA was

more than 3,000,000 workers earning...wages and their 10,000,000 dependents, it is another 3,000,000 workers who have been on WPA rolls, but have gone on to other work. It is also 125,000 engineers, social workers, accountants, superintendents, foremen and timekeepers scattered in every state and community. It is in part all the public officials of all the sponsoring bodies in all the communities of the United States. It is in part 800,000 storekeepers who get most of the money paid to WPA workers.... It touches intimately the lives of more than fifty million people.<sup>1</sup>

Just how all of these workers, engineers, social workers, accountants, superintendents, foremen, and timekeepers came to symbolize the "worst thing" about the New Deal is a complex matter. Of course, historians have long pointed to the persistent strength of an anti-statist political culture in the United States as part of the explanation

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<sup>1</sup> Donald S. Howard, The WPA and Federal Relief Policy (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943), 105; and "Work Relief or the Dole?" WPA Press Release, Sept. 8, 1938, quoted in Howard, WPA and Federal Relief Policy, 105-106. The most recent argument for the central place of the WPA in the New Deal state is made by Edwin Amenta; see his Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and Amenta, Ellen Benoit, Chris Bonasitia, Nancy K. Cauthen, and Drew Halfmann, "Bring Back the WPA: Work, Relief, and the Origins of American Social Policy in Welfare Reform," Studies in American Political Development 12 (spring 1998): 1-56.

for opposition to the expansion of the federal government.<sup>2</sup> To explain the vehemence of opposition to the WPA, however, we must look beyond culturally based arguments.

While important, culture must be supplemented with politics. This chapter focuses on the connections between the WPA, the volatility of the "politics in relief" issue at the state and local levels of government, and the implications that this issue held for the federal administration of public works. This focus reveals that opposition to the WPA was less the product of a trans-historic cultural mistrust of the national state and more the concrete outcome of specific political decisions and institutional developments.

These decisions and developments are explored through a case study of Kentucky's 1938 primary election, investigating the relationship between public works, state building, and party building at the federal, state, and local levels. This seemingly unremarkable event merits extended notice for several reasons. The 1938 electoral cycle, although lacking the presence of a presidential race, attracted national attention as FDR, with the support and advice of such New Dealers as Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins, and Thomas Corcoran (informally known as the "elimination committee"), sought to expel conservative elements from the Democratic party. Domestic critics, inspired by the conduct of Joseph Stalin in Russia, quickly labeled this a party "purge." What might otherwise have been a comparatively uneventful series of midterm elections, then, became a referendum on the Democratic party, the New Deal, and FDR, himself. While Roosevelt campaigned vigorously in several states against conservative Democratic

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<sup>2</sup> Particularly useful on this cultural strain are Barry D. Karl, *The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); David T. Beito, *Taxpayers in Revolt: Tax Resistance during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Alan Brinkley *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage, 1983); and James Holt, "The New Deal and the American Anti-Statist Tradition," in John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., *The New Deal: The National Level* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 27-49.

candidates--most notably, in Georgia, South Carolina, Maryland, and New York--Kentucky was different. If anything, even more was at stake for FDR in this contest.<sup>3</sup>

This campaign pitted the new Democratic Senate majority leader, Alben Barkley, against the state's Democratic governor, Al "Happy" Chandler. With Barkley's stature in the Senate--he had become majority leader in 1937, selected with FDR's backing--his fate was a key barometer of the New Deal's fortunes. Would the people of Kentucky return Roosevelt's hand-picked majority leader to the Senate? As with political campaigns in other states, the Kentucky contest featured charges that each candidate was attempting to use public funds to build a political machine, in Barkley's case using the WPA and in Chandler's case using state highway funds. Unlike other states, however, this aspect of the Kentucky race commanded nationwide attention after a series of newspaper stories written by a committed New Dealer, syndicated columnist Thomas Stokes, exposed the role of the WPA in the campaign. Stokes won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting, and his stories led to an extensive investigation of the WPA by both the Senate and the House.

Stokes was not the only person to propel the WPA into the spotlight, however. In this task he was ably assisted by WPA head Harry Hopkins. During the 1938 campaigns, Hopkins made a particularly ill-timed expression of the political philosophy of the New Deal while relaxing at the race track: "We shall tax and tax, spend and spend, and elect and elect," he reportedly declared when asked to define the New Deal. Most historians--David Kennedy is the most recent--have concluded that this story was apocryphal, relying, as Kennedy has, on Hopkins confidant Robert Sherwood's account, Roosevelt and Hopkins.<sup>4</sup> I take this statement seriously, however, not only showing that Hopkins

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<sup>3</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 266-74; Anthony J. Badger, The New Deal: The Depression Years, 1933-1939 (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 268-71; James T. Patterson, Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939 (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 250-87.

<sup>4</sup> Kennedy terms Sherwood's book the "definitive account of what Hopkins did not say." David M. Kennedy, Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945 (New York:

probably did say this, but demonstrating that it was a striking (if instrumentalist) expression of how the New Deal's public works programs were not only good for generating infrastructure and providing employment, they were also effective politics.<sup>5</sup>

Hopkins's statement, along with the activities of the public works programs, made a robust case for what became referred to (often derisively) as "tax and spend liberalism." While contemporary critics of the New Deal accused the WPA of reaping political gains by letting people benefit from their government, subsequent historians have tried to answer this charge by minimizing its importance or denying its veracity. Continuing to deny that Hopkins ever connected the taxing and spending functions of government with a politics based on government-sponsored economic development and employment makes it difficult to understand how New Deal liberalism was once so effective and so controversial. By demonstrating why we should take Hopkins at his word, this chapter intends to recapture the power, appeal, and controversial place of the New Deal in American political history.

Most historians have concurred with Hopkins that the WPA was not responsible for the organization's involvement in local politics, blaming instead the constraints on federal administrators and the determination of congressmen, senators, and local politicians to capitalize on the WPA's presence in their states and localities.<sup>6</sup> For

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Oxford University Press, 1999), 349, n. 53; and Robert Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History rev. ed. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1948), 102-104.

<sup>5</sup> For a classic study that argues for the importance of viewing the New Deal as a political project, see Ellis W. Hawley, The New Deal and the Problem of Monopoly: A Study in Economic Ambivalence (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> Searle F. Charles, Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1963); Howard, WPA and Federal Relief Policy, 746-51; Arthur W. MacMahon, John D. Millett, and Gladys Ogden, The Administration of Federal Work Relief (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1941), 282-89; Jasper B. Shannon, "Presidential Politics in the South: 1938, I," Journal of Politics 1 (May 1939): 146-70; Shannon, "Political Behavior in Kentucky, 1930-1940," in Shannon, et al., A Decade of Change in Kentucky Government and Politics (Lexington: University of Kentucky Bureau of Government Research, 1943), 3-15; Shannon, Money and Politics (New York: Random House, 1959), esp. 54-63; and John Henry Hatcher, "Alben Barkley, Politics in Relief, and the Hatch Act," The Filson Club History Quarterly 40 (July 1966): 249-64; Leuchtenburg, FDR and the New Deal, 269-70. While biographer George McJimsey follows this interpretive line in his Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of

example, Searle Charles concludes "Harry Hopkins should have had a clearer conscience about politics in the Works Progress Administration than many local officials and several senators and congressmen," writing as if the most interesting thing about this whole matter is that we can conclude Hopkins was relatively innocent. In taking this approach, though, Charles and others missed the chance to explore the full legacy of the New Deal as a political movement that legitimized taxing and spending by the federal government on a dramatic scale.<sup>7</sup> The real reason behind this interpretive move, however, is less political than it is historiographic. These historians and political scientists were, if not in the first wave of scholarship on their subject, not far removed from it. Charles's study, for example, was the first solid work on the WPA since Donald S. Howard's work for the Russell Sage foundation appeared in 1943. This notion of Hopkins's guilt or innocence animated the debates of the day, so it is hardly surprising to find that they animated Charles's inquiry as well. As the profession moved away from the subject matter of political history and towards social and cultural topics, though, the study of the WPA's politicization remained relatively neglected.<sup>8</sup>

One benefit from these shifts in intellectual emphasis, however, is that today we do have a very wide-ranging set of studies of the New Deal's impact at the state and local levels. What emerges quite clearly from this literature is the extent of the WPA's effect on state and local politics. As Anthony Badger put it, "Far from sounding the 'Last Hurrah' of the machines, the New Deal consolidated the power of some and helped create

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Democracy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 120-24; June Hopkins does not even treat this aspect of the WPA's operation. See her Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Charles, Minister of Relief, 205.

<sup>8</sup> For this shift, see Mark H. Leff, "Revisioning U.S. Political History," American Historical Review 100 (June 1995): 829-53; and Alan Brinkley, "Prosperity, Depression, and War, 1920-1945," in Eric Foner, ed., The New American History, rev. and enl. ed., (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 133-58.

the power of others."<sup>9</sup> While historians such as Badger have mustered this literature to drive home the point that the New Deal did not signal the end of machine politics in urban America, they have not followed the implications of this argument and asked what all of this information about local politics in the Age of Roosevelt tells us in turn about the New Deal itself.<sup>10</sup>

Portrayals of the late New Deal as a time of the Supreme Court-packing debacle, the "Roosevelt Recession" of 1937-38, FDR's decreasing popularity and political effectiveness, and the abandonment of statist reform for Keynesian economic expansion, are incomplete. In contrast, this chapter draws attention to how concern over the role of public works programs--the New Deal featured the largest number of pure patronage (i.e., exempt from civil service) federal government employees in history--grew after the Kentucky primary and government investigations, leading Congress to write (and FDR reluctantly to approve) the Hatch Act.<sup>11</sup> This measure, intended to prevent "pernicious political activities," ratcheted back the federal government's control over what had been a striking feature of the New Deal order, the political use of public works projects at the state and local levels. While currently neglected by historians, the Hatch Act reflects several important and overlapping features of the late New Deal: the growing strength of

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<sup>9</sup> Badger, New Deal: The Depression Years, 249.

<sup>10</sup> Badger comprehensively reviews this literature in his New Deal: The Depression Years, esp. 348-49; see also Badger's essay "The New Deal and the Localities," in Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones and Bruce Collins, eds., The Growth of Federal Power in American History (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1983), 102-115. Key works include James T. Patterson, The New Deal and the States: Federalism in Transition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969); Bruce Stave, The New Deal and the Last Hurrah: Pittsburgh Machine Politics (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970); Charles H. Trout, Boston, the Great Depression, and the New Deal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Lyle W. Dorsett, The Pendergast Machine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968); Dorsett, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, Kennikat Press, 1977); and John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., The New Deal: The State and Local Levels (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975).

<sup>11</sup> Ronald N. Johnson and Gary D. Libecap, The Federal Civil Service System and the Problem of Bureaucracy: The Economics and Politics of Institutional Change (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 70.



conservative opposition to the New Deal, the often blurry line between the "political" and the "economic" in the public works programs, and the long tradition of what historian Barry Karl has termed the "uneasy state" of American attitudes towards a powerful federal government. In addition to reflecting these strands of the political culture, the Hatch Act marks a pivotal moment where the history of public works intersected with the history of what we today term campaign finance reform, while also delineating the final passing of the last remnants of a distributive "party period" in American political life.<sup>12</sup>

### **"In Old Kentucky:" Party Building and the New Deal**

In June 1938, Carl Hatch of New Mexico rose on the floor of the Senate to put forward an amendment to a relief and recovery appropriation bill, proposing that the government forbid employees of New Deal relief programs from standing as candidates or "interfering" in any primary or general election. Hatch, a supporter of the New Deal, had firsthand experience with the issue of politics in relief. Over the previous year the other senator from New Mexico, Dennis Chavez, was embroiled in a WPA scandal that eventually saw seventy-three people--including several of Chavez's relatives--indicted for conspiracy to use the WPA in state politics.<sup>13</sup> Hatch's desire to clean up New Mexican politics meshed with his long-standing tendency to "consistently inject moral standards into government service."<sup>14</sup>

Opposing Hatch's amendment, though, was the Senate's majority leader himself, Kentucky's Alben Barkley. Responding to Hatch, Barkley made what political

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<sup>12</sup> On the "party period," see the classic work of Richard L. McCormick, The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Roy Lujan, "Dennis Chavez and the Roosevelt Era, 1933-1945" (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1987), 219-90.

<sup>14</sup> David Porter, "Senator Carl Hatch and the Hatch Act of 1939," New Mexico Historical Review 48 (April 1973): 152.

commentator Raymond Clapper called an "impassioned speech against this proposal to take WPA out of politics." Clapper, who located himself on the political spectrum as a progressive Republican or a "seventy-five percent New Dealer," generally supported the aims of Roosevelt and the New Deal.<sup>15</sup> He was not, however, moved by Barkley's proposal:

[Barkley] explained that it wasn't fair to hog-tie WPA workers this way when state highway employees were free to play politics. "We all know," Barkley said, "that there is not a state in the Union in which the political organization which is in control of the state does not prostitute for its own political purposes the employment of men and women on the highway, and within the offices constructing and conducting the highways.".... "They are at liberty," Barkley said, "to roam around at their will, or at the will of their boss or their organization, and indulge in politics to their heart's content; but we are proposing that anybody connected with a job under WPA or PWA, or CCC or the AAA, or any other activity for which we appropriate money in this joint resolution, shall be tied with a rope to a tree so that he is helpless and cannot even speak, unless he can whisper in the ear of somebody what his convictions are, while all these others who draw pay out of the Treasury of the United States are free to roam at will and play the political game to their heart's content."<sup>16</sup>

Since, as Barkley thought, Chandler and other state-level politicians had ready access to patronage through state highway offices, New Dealers could not afford to unilaterally disarm.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the general tenor of the Kentucky campaign was captured nicely by the Washington Post in a political cartoon entitled, "In Old Kentucky." Barkley is portrayed sitting on top of one barrel (helpfully labeled "pork"), proclaiming "If you want to keep on getting what you're getting, and get some more too, then vote to keep me

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<sup>15</sup> New York Times, Feb. 4, 1944, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Raymond Clapper, "A Disturbing Speech," June 6, 1938, "Clapper Columns" vol. 1, scrapbook, box 60, Raymond Clapper Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; New York Times, June 3, 1938, p. 1; June 4, 1938, p. 1; and June 5, 1938, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> The connection between state highway spending and patronage was widespread and long-standing: see, e.g., T. Harry Williams, Huey Long (New York: Vintage, 1981 [1969]), 486-88.

in the Senate." Chandler, lounging on the other barrel, states, "I'll get more for you in six years than ol'Alben got you in twenty-six years."<sup>18</sup>

Of Barkley's speech rejecting Hatch's amendment, Clapper wrote, "the New Deal leader of the Senate, the official floor spokesman of this Administration, lays bare as cynical a picture of democracy as Hitler could paint, and makes a mockery out of five years of fireside chats. It was a disturbing speech, and those who will be most disturbed are the real friends of Roosevelt." Hatch's amendment failed, though, voted down in three separate roll call votes. It was supported, generally, by Republicans, anti-New Deal Democrats, and long-time progressive Republicans such as George Norris and Robert La Follette; and opposed by New Deal supporters.<sup>19</sup>

One notable exception to this pattern, however, was conservative Democrat Millard Tydings of Maryland. Tydings, an ardent opponent of the New Deal and a prime target of FDR's purge of conservative Democrats, joined with Barkley and the New Dealers even as the Baltimore Sun was praising him effusively for his principled opposition to FDR. Tydings's reasons for forging this strange alliance to vote down Hatch's amendment were clear to all, however. "Tydings...controls WPA in Maryland," reported Clapper, and he "went along with Barkley and the Administration in killing off this attempt to keep WPA out of politics, thus lining up with the Administration the one time above all others when he should have fought it."<sup>20</sup> Most Republicans, however,

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<sup>18</sup> Cartoon in Washington Post, Aug. 6, 1938, Kentucky section of Clipping Binder, box 339, Jesse Jones Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Clapper, "A Disturbing Speech," June 6, 1938; and "Relief Minus Politics," April 26, 1938; both in "Clapper Columns" vol. 1, scrapbook, box 60, Clapper Papers, LC.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond Clapper, "Battling for Lewis," Aug. 17, 1938, in "Clapper Columns," vol. 2, scrapbook, box 61, Clapper Papers, LC. Harold Ickes took more than a passing interest in the relationship between Tydings and the WPA and PWA; see AF 636, box 26, entry 85, "Case Files Relating to Investigations of Personnel, 1933-1941," Records of the Public Works Administration, Record Group 135, National Archives; Aubrey E. Taylor to Harold L. Ickes, Aug. 31, 1938, "Political 33) 1938 April-June" folder, box 231, Harold L. Ickes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; and "Confidential Memorandum regarding Senator Millard E. Tydings," no date, "ND Era Subject File. Campaign File. Tydings, Millard E." folder, box 247, Thomas G. Corcoran Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

quickly perceived that the issue of "keeping politics out of relief" could prove to be very good politics for the Republican party. Senator Charles McNary, the minority leader, immediately stated that "The implication" of the Barkley-led Democratic opposition to Hatch's measure "is clear...that a portion of these relief funds will be used for political purposes, thereby depriving those in need of relief from a free exercise of their opinions."<sup>21</sup> McNary's proposition would be tested soon.

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It was no secret that the Barkley-Chandler battle for the Democratic Senate nomination was freighted with national significance. The New York Times political columnist Arthur Krock observed that "Every prospective element in the impending contest between Senator Alben W. Barkley and Governor Albert B. Chandler unites to provide an unmistakable test of the President's political leadership."<sup>22</sup> In February 1938, Carl Saunders, the editor of the Kentucky Post, thought that his state was "to be the scene of the hardest-fought and probably the most important political battle in the United States this year." Roosevelt had tried to avert this battle, Saunders reported, by offering to appoint Kentucky's junior Senator, Marvel M. Logan, to a federal judgeship, thus clearing the way for Chandler to join Barkley in the Senate. (Chandler would be appointed to fill Logan's seat; Barkley could then run unopposed.) Logan, however, declared that he would not take the judgeship because it had the appearance of a "deal."<sup>23</sup>

Barkley, the son of a tenant farmer, had served as a congressman from 1912 to 1926 before joining the Senate. Before this, he had practiced law in Kentucky and had been a county prosecutor, and then judge. With the death of Senate majority leader

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<sup>21</sup> New York Times, June 6, 1938, p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Krock quoted in Polly Ann Davis, Alben W. Barkley: Senate Majority Leader and Vice President (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 55.

<sup>23</sup> Scripps-Howard Newspaper Alliance copy of Carl Saunders story, Feb. 17, 1938. "Reference File Kentucky 1938" folder, box 160, Clapper Papers, LC.

Joseph Robinson of Arkansas in mid-July, 1937, Barkley and Pat Harrison of Mississippi emerged as the main candidates to replace him. The more liberal of the two, Barkley won the post by one vote, nervously biting his pipe stem in half as the ballots were counted. Roosevelt, while trying to appear above the fray, had worked hard on Barkley's behalf and had invested a great deal of political capital in seeing the Kentucky senator elected majority leader, signaling to all the importance of Barkley to his legislative agenda.<sup>24</sup>

As the chair of the Democratic party, Postmaster General James Farley later recorded in his diary, "Of course the President is very bitterly opposed to Governor Chandler and is fearful that if Senator Barkley loses the fight, Senator Pat Harrison will become Leader. He is afraid that Senator Harrison will not go along on liberal legislation." While Farley tried to reassure FDR that Harrison would be a loyal Democrat if he became majority leader, nevertheless, he recorded, "The President is very much concerned about the Kentucky situation and wants to have us put everything we have into it, even though we lose. I told him that at the present time it looks as if Governor Chandler was in the lead. He said he realized that, and that is the reason why he wants us to put forth all our efforts in behalf of Senator Barkley."<sup>25</sup>

Investigating the contest between Barkley and Governor Chandler for the 1938 Senate nomination, journalist Thomas Stokes took a winding, 1400-mile tour through the state of Kentucky and reported his findings in an eight-part series of articles. Stokes was not a conservative hack. In fact, the WPA's own investigations confirmed much of what Stokes uncovered while disagreeing with him about the WPA's responsibility. Exploring what he described as "a grand political racket in which the taxpayer is the victim," Stokes traveled from the bluegrass country of Lexington to the Tennessee-Kentucky border,

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<sup>24</sup> Patterson, Congressional Conservatism, 147-48; Davis, Alben W. Barkley, 8-33.

<sup>25</sup> James A. Farley diary, Feb. 9, 1938, "Private File 1938 February" folder, box 42, James A. Farley Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

visiting the mining region of Harlan county, the eastern Appalachians, and the western tobacco-growing part of the state. "Through the WPA organization, which is loyal to the President and therefore interested in his Senate floor leader," Stokes reported, "there exists a political consciousness which is expressing itself actively." Stokes found that political activism was most evident on the part of local directors and project foremen who lived in southern and eastern Kentucky. "WPA foremen are passing out Barkley buttons, instructing their workers that they must vote for the Senator, and, in numerous cases, making support of him a prerequisite for jobs." Workers who supported Chandler were dismissed from their WPA jobs, in several cases, and others (perhaps more than 300) had been "induced" by WPA officials to re-register as Democrats. While low-level WPA officials were clearly engaged in this activity, Stokes ventured onto shakier ground in reasoning that "the trail leads back from the bottom to higher-ups in such a way as to indicate that the local officials and bosses directly involved have received the 'go' sign from those above to whom they are responsible." Stokes inferred that the absence of opposition to political activity by the head of the WPA in Kentucky, former newspaperman George H. Goodman, meant that Goodman sanctioned this behavior. "Testimony on all sides," reported Stokes, "is to the effect that the WPA under Mr. Goodman has kept its hands off politics in previous elections, which leads to the assumption, common in Kentucky, that word has come from still higher up than the state director--from Washington."<sup>26</sup>

Stokes devoted one of his dispatches to exploring this theory in greater depth. On March 14, 1938, while Governor Chandler "began to warm up for his campaign, and started shaking hands and slapping backs all over Kentucky," Garland H. Rice, the WPA's director of employment in eastern Kentucky, spoke to his staff. Rice announced

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas L. Stokes, "WPA & Politicians Victimize Taxpayer in Kentucky Battle," Washington Daily News clipping, no date, "Reference File Kentucky 1938" folder, box 160, Clapper Papers, LC.

that he was changing his political registration from Republican to Democrat in order to vote for Barkley in the primary, and stated that he anticipated that his staff would do the same, and that they would contribute two percent of their salaries to the Barkley campaign. Stokes found Rice's registration change in records at the county clerk's office and asked Rice to comment on his meeting, which Stokes had heard about from one of Rice's employees. "I'm afraid I can't go into that," Rice replied. "I can't get involved in that. It might cause some talk." Stokes found similar examples in other parts of Kentucky, including a WPA director near Lexington ordering his engineers to be "100 percent for Sen. Barkley" and to contribute money to the campaign, and a district supervisor of WPA women's projects who was called to the WPA state headquarters to be "told by a woman official" who had just arrived from Washington "that they were expected to work for Sen. Barkley." The most striking explication of the intersection between the WPA and the Barkley campaign, however, was pointed out to Stokes by James B. Boddie, a WPA official in charge of western Kentucky, who commented on reports that he had leaned on the school board in Madisonville--most of its members supported Chandler--to support Barkley, in exchange for additional federal funds to complete building a school. "What happened," Boddie said, "was that [the school board] came to ask me if they should go to Sen. Barkley to help them get the money. I told them that I thought if they went to a politician for a favor it was only fair that they should support him. Isn't that fair and logical?" After holding up a copy of Harry Hopkins's general letter to WPA employees--enclosed in every worker's pay envelope--that proclaimed no one would be fired from the WPA based on how they voted, Boddie said "there's been no politics here and there'll be none in connection with any projects, nor has anybody been fired nor will anybody be fired on account of politics." Gesturing to the WPA headquarters, though, Boddie declared "Of course I'm for Barkley....We're all for Barkley here. We're for President Roosevelt and anybody for President Roosevelt is for Sen. Barkley. But we're not trying to get WPA workers to be for Barkley. That's none of

our business. No pressure or intimidation is being used in this district." With the WPA building a new courthouse, a stadium and gym for the high school, and the new school building, in a city of 8,000, the need for outright intimidation seemed unlikely.<sup>27</sup>

Stokes gathered affidavits from WPA supervisors, timekeepers, and project foremen, documenting the incursion of politics into the works program. This incursion took place in a variety of ways, including "lecturing WPA workers about support of the Senator, threatening them with dismissal, actual firing in some few cases that have come to light, discrimination in type of work, and promoting re-registration of Republican WPA workers as Democratic so they can vote for the Senator in the primary." E.T. Rich, a sixty-five year-old foreman, swore in his statement that he was dismissed from the WPA because he would not actively recruit other workers for Barkley. About a week after he was fired Rich spoke with Zack Taylor, the WPA engineer for Pulaski and Russell Counties. Rich recalled that "he asked me if I wasn't pretty mad at him for firing me, but I said I wasn't mad because he fired me but I didn't like it because he didn't have the nerve to come up and tell me why he did it. Then he said I haven't a thing in this world against you personally or nothing against your work, and I said Zack what made you fire me and he said I fired you because you was for Happy Chandler and I had to do it to save my job." In Russell County, Alvin Flanagan, who had worked for the WPA for three years, stated, "Before I was laid off the foreman called me off and said that I have a paper here that I would like for you to sign pledging your support to Sen. Barkley, and I told him that I would rather not sign a petition supporting anyone. I refused to sign the paper pledging my support to Sen. Barkley, and I was dismissed from the payroll. I

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas L. Stokes, "WPA Clients Told 3 Months Ago They Must Back Barkley," Washington Daily News clipping, June 7, 1938, ibid.



honestly believe that my refusal to support Sen. Barkley was the cause of my dismissal from the WPA."<sup>28</sup>

In Knox County, James Disney swore in his affidavit that Paul Bain, a timekeeper, passed out Barkley campaign buttons to workers at the project site. Disney told Bain that he did not support Barkley and would not wear a button. Bain then replied, "By God, are you for Happy?" Disney voiced his belief that Chandler had been a good governor and that since he was a Republican, he could not vote in the Barkley-Chandler primary, anyway. Bain told him that he "had better go to the county clerk's office" and change his registration to Democratic so he could vote in the primary. Disney, angered, responded that he was not going to be compelled to vote for anyone, and that he "had a right to be for whoever he pleased." The following day the project foreman made Disney work by himself in a hole filled with muddy water up to his knees, even though Disney did not own any work boots.<sup>29</sup> Other WPA workers spoke of threats from Pike County attorney J. Amos Runyon, who said that he would find out how they voted, and if they voted for Chandler he would make certain they would lose their WPA jobs.<sup>30</sup>

Russell Williamson, the Barkley campaign manager in the Republican stronghold of Martin County, obtained a list of addresses for all the WPA workers in the county and sent each one a Barkley campaign button and a letter. In the letter, he urged each "Dear Voter" to register (or re-register) for the Democratic primary. Barkley, Williamson wrote,

has been a friend to us, furnishing year-'round jobs to the unemployed, and he has power in Washington to do things for us because he is majority floor leader, and a great friend of the President..... Don't be satisfied with just seeing you are properly

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas L. Stokes, "Fired for Refusal to Back Barkley, Say WPA Workers," Washington Daily News clipping, June 9, 1938, ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Scripps-Howard Newspaper Alliance copy of Thomas L. Stokes story, June 11, 1938, ibid.

registered to vote for Mr. Barkley, but see that your family, neighbors, and friends are. Make yourself a committee of one to see that everyone is properly registered and then see that he is at the polls to cast his vote for Sen. Barkley on Aug. 6.<sup>31</sup>

As Stokes later recalled, "To me it was another job of reporting" that he had done, "one that I did not particularly relish when I discovered the facts, for it was a keen disappointment to find that the WPA was being exploited for politics and to ponder the ultimate effects to our Democracy if such a large group, dependent upon the administration in power, should be hereafter utilized and organized politically." While he supported Barkley, FDR, and the New Deal, Stokes "could not, however, condone such tactics." Distributed by the Scripps-Howard news service, Stokes's stories appeared in the nation's capital in the Washington News and generated a buzz in the Senate, which had just rejected Hatch's amendment banning such activity. Hopkins and the WPA did not react to Stokes's stories immediately, however. As Stokes remembered, it took the interest of the Senate to prod Hopkins and the WPA into releasing a fifteen page, point-by-point rebuttal of his stories.<sup>32</sup>

By late May 1938 Eleanor Roosevelt had taken an interest in the Kentucky situation, asking her friend, deputy WPA administrator Aubrey Williams, if he could arrange "an unbiased investigation," as she had "been told that in Harlem [sic] [County] there is a great deal of graft in the WPA. A great many people are taking WPA checks and paying the people who gave them a certain percentage and, at the same time, they are holding jobs." Williams declined to act, though, asking if ER had more specific information for him. "As you know," he wrote to the First Lady, "it is pretty difficult to get at this sort of thing without some fairly definite leads to start on."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas L. Stokes, "WPA Used as Lure for Republicans in Kentucky Vote," Washington Daily News clipping, June 14, 1938, ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas L. Stokes, Chip Off My Shoulder (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940), 535-37.

<sup>33</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt to Aubrey Williams, no date; Aubrey Williams to Eleanor Roosevelt, May 31, 1938; both in "Kentucky 610 (Political Coercion) (Adm) (June-July 1938)" folder, box 1377, entry "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Kentucky 610 Special Litigation." Records of the Works Projects Administration, Record Group 69, National Archives.

Some more specific information had been provided the WPA, however, by Brady M. Stewart, Chandler's campaign manager. During the last week of May 1938, Stewart released to the press his letter informing FDR that "It has become common talk among our people that the State Administrator of the Works Progress Administration in Kentucky has openly and boldly stated that he and his organization will leave nothing undone to achieve the re-election of Senator Barkley; and, accordingly, every federal relief agency in Kentucky, is frankly and brazenly operating upon a political basis." Stewart charged that "definite instructions" were made by WPA administrators that "no one should be placed on federal relief except upon the advice of Senator Barkley's campaign managers in the respective counties" and that WPA workers had been tapped for donations to the Barkley campaign, after being "sharply informed that if they did not give the amounts demanded, they would be discharged immediately from their job."

A system of espionage has been established which constantly checks up on the political loyalty of federal employees in the Works Progress Administration. Works Progress Administration trucks are being used openly to haul relief workers to the County Court Clerk's office to register. In at least one county in Kentucky, commodities are being distributed by relief officials to the needy in paper bags upon which are printed these words: "Paper Bags Donated by Friend of Sen. Alben W. Barkley."....Practically every federal project is top-heavy with foremen, part of whom confine their time and attention to keeping certain men definitely in line for Senator Barkley, part of whom spend their time checking up on the loyalty to Senator Barkley of men already placed on the Works Progress Administration, and part of whom spend their time going from one section of the State to another on definite political missions.

Stewart, no doubt with an eye toward a broader audience, concluded that "The Works Progress Administration in Kentucky has been converted into an out-and-out political machine dedicated, over and above all other considerations, to re-electing Senator Barkley. Those with starving mouths to feed are forced to surrender their one remaining privilege of choosing for whom they shall vote, otherwise they and their dependents must

go hungry and naked."<sup>34</sup> A more complete account of these charges, including photos of the "paper bag of groceries," soon appeared in the national press.<sup>35</sup>

Stewart's letter produced an immediate, if ambiguous, statement issued by Goodman: "We have been as free from politics as any public agency in Kentucky."<sup>36</sup> Hopkins, speaking on behalf of FDR, was a bit stronger in his response, challenging Stewart, "If you or any other citizen has evidence that the provisions of this letter are not being observed, I will be glad to receive information of a sufficiently specific nature to permit me to take suitable action."<sup>37</sup> Hopkins, however, had just placed himself in the midst of a political maelstrom by voicing his support for Iowa Representative Otha Wearin in his campaign for the Senate against incumbent Guy Gillette. While the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette termed Hopkins's statement a "glaring example of the low estimate Hopkins puts upon the public intelligence," Missouri Senator Champ Clark (Democrat) characterized Hopkins's announcement as "if you don't vote for Wearin you'll lose your jobs. If you vote for Gillette your families may go hungry." Arthur Krock, the New York Times columnist, summed up the controversy when he noted, "No sensible person can doubt that Iowa WPA workers, serving under many immediate bosses who are politicians, will gather from Mr. Hopkins's words that it will be prudent to vote for Representative Wearin."<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Brady M. Stewart to FDR, May 23, 1938, in ibid; and see New York Times, May 26, 1938, p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> See, e.g., Walter Davenport, "Happy Couldn't Wait," Collier's, July 16, 1938, p. 50, in "Reference File Kentucky 1938," box 160, Clapper Papers, LC; for Hopkins's denial of WPA involvement, see New York Times, July 10, 1938, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> Undated newspaper clipping, "Tales Denied," in "Kentucky 610 (Political Coercion) (Adm) (June-July 1938)" folder, box 1377, entry "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Kentucky 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA; and see New York Times, May 27, 1938, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> New York Times, May 26, 1938, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Clark quoted in Charles, Minister of Relief, 214-15; Krock's column appeared in the New York Times, May 26, 1938, p. 24.

Republicans, too, saw these missteps as a political opportunity and did not hesitate to capitalize on them. In a speech delivered over CBS radio, entitled, "Pumping the Primaries," Ohio Representative Dudley A. White seized on the spending solution proposed by FDR and his advisors to the 1937-38 "Roosevelt Recession." With the beginning of the election season,

a different type of visitor began to descend upon Mr. Roosevelt, visitors interested not in relief but in votes. First one at a time and then in groups the wily political henchmen of the world's greatest vote getting machine sat down in the White House study, bit off the ends of their cigars, and told President Roosevelt that if the depression continued, New Deal voting strength would slip badly next November. At last the warm humanitarian heart of our Chief Executive was touched. "We cannot let this continue," he cried, and sent for his brain trust.

Soon after, White related, the Administration called for government to spend where business would not. "Pump-priming became the order of the day," but White wondered, "Was Roosevelt slipping?" Hardly, White argued. "Roosevelt and his advisers knew exactly what they were doing. They were not priming the business pump. They were PUMPING THE PRIMARIES. The six billion dollars were not intended to revive business--they were intended to revive New Deal majorities and to punish any man who was not subservient to White House dictators."<sup>39</sup>

Turning to the intellectual currency of the day, White presented what he termed a "typical affidavit" from a WPA worker, who claimed that his foreman said to him, "I know you are a registered Republican; to be frank with you we cannot do anything for you unless you switch your politics and become Democratic. You certainly cannot expect a Democratic administration to take care of a Republican." "That," White said, "is the story of the six billion dollar pump-priming fund in a nutshell. Even the Democratic floor leader of the Senate now confesses to the perversion of Federal relief for political purposes," referring to Barkley's speech against the Hatch amendment.

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<sup>39</sup> Dudley A. White, "Pumping the Primaries," June 7, 1938, "Reference File Work Relief" folder, box 256, Clapper Papers, LC.

It was against this backdrop that Howard Hunter, Hopkins's assistant, was dispatched to Kentucky to look into Stewart's claims. Hunter announced on June 12 that "I am convinced, after investigation, that the State and district administrative officials of the WPA in Kentucky have repeatedly made it clear to WPA workers that their jobs in no way depend upon whom they vote for in any primary or election. It has been made plain by these officials to all foremen and supervisors of projects that any foreman or supervisor will be promptly dismissed upon any evidence of such threats to project workers."<sup>40</sup> By June 30, Hopkins and the WPA released an extensive rebuttal to Stokes's stories, bringing together their own investigations and sworn statements. "We will deal swiftly and summarily with any proven charge of political coercion," Hopkins announced, "but we will be equally prompt in exposing any accusations trumped up to serve the political ends of those who are opposed to this administration." Every one of Stokes's examples "in which a WPA worker or official was named has been thoroughly investigated and documentary evidence conclusively establishes that out of more than a score of cases in which political activity was alleged, only two instances of improper conduct could be found."<sup>41</sup> Stokes recalled that Aubrey Williams took particular pleasure in handing Stokes this press release, remarking, "We've got you now, Tom!"<sup>42</sup> At the time, though, Stokes observed that it was to be expected that although he was sympathetic to the New Deal, he and the WPA investigators had differed. Stokes saw himself as a journalist first, with a different job than the New Dealers. "It is only human for them to say 'It isn't so,'" Stokes observed.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> New York Times, June 13, 1938, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> WPA Press Release, June 30, 1938, "Kentucky 610 (Political Coercion) (Adm) (June-July 1938)" folder, box 1377, entry "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Kentucky 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

<sup>42</sup> Stokes, Chip Off My Shoulder, 535-36.

<sup>43</sup> New York Times, July 3, 1938, p. E 3; May 2, 1939, p. 20.

The WPA press release presented a thorough examination of Stokes's reporting and deserves extended consideration for what it says--and does not say--about how the WPA operated at the state and local level. Throughout this document, Hopkins and the WPA positioned themselves as the defenders of WPA employees' political autonomy. For example, the letter sent by Barkley campaign manager Russell Williamson to WPA workers was mailed "not to a list of WPA workers alone...but to all the voters in Martin County, according to the sworn statement of Russell Williamson." Hopkins and the WPA argued, "So long as WPA workers have their names on the voting list, and so long as the mails are delivered, we cannot, and in a Democracy, we should not, prevent them from receiving campaign literature urging them to vote for one candidate or another."<sup>44</sup>

Regarding the threats of J. Amos Runyon to have WPA worker Cleve Thacker fired if he did not support Barkley, Hopkins stated flatly "This charge does not accuse any WPA official of anything. J. Amos Runyon, the county attorney, is not employed on WPA and has no connection with this organization. He has no authority to hire or fire Cleve Thacker or any other WPA employe[e]."

Had Mr. Stokes gone to the trouble of interviewing Mr. Runyon concerning this charge, he would have found out that Mr. Runyon has not only never discussed politics with Cleve Thacker, but that he does not even know Cleve Thacker. In a sworn statement Mr. Runyon further sets forth that he has never attempted to coerce, intimidate or improperly influence any WPA employees by threats regarding their jobs in order to alter their political actions or opinions. It is interesting to note that Cleve Thacker is still in the employ of the WPA in Kentucky.<sup>45</sup>

Looking into the case of James Disney, who told Stokes that he was forced to work by himself, without boots, in a muddy hole, Hopkins reported that "Affidavits signed by his fellow workers...his project foreman...[and] his project timekeeper, declare

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<sup>44</sup> WPA Press Release, June 30, 1938, "Kentucky 610 (Political Coercion) (Adm) (June-July 1938)" folder, box 1377, entry "Work Projects Administration. Central Files: State 1935-1944. Kentucky 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA; and New York Times, July 1, 1938, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

that politics has never been mentioned on this job and that Disney has never worked away from the crew in any mud hole. Mr. Disney's fellow workers further swear that they have worked beside him in the same crew, that boots were needed only on rare occasions, and were furnished to the workers, including Mr. Disney, on these occasions." Disney, Hopkins reported, had not reported back to the work site since talking to Stokes.<sup>46</sup>

However, on Stokes's more serious charge--that Garland H. Rice, WPA director of employment in eastern Kentucky, had gathered his office staff and "told them what they were expected to do" to support Barkley--Hopkins had less convincing evidence.

While it is difficult to investigate a charge which is alleged to have been made by an anonymous employee, the fact of the matter is that Mr. Rice and the members of his staff deny that any such statement was ever made. Mr. Rice, under oath, states that he never at any time has attempted to coerce any member of his staff into voting against his or her will and that he has been opposed to political activity or pressure from any and all sources in connection with his department of the WPA. He has never demanded any contribution from any of his employees for any campaign fund or for any political candidate. And his statements are substantiated by the members of his staff.<sup>47</sup>

Basically, Hopkins's case pitted the accounts of Rice's staff against the one staff member who spoke to Stokes. While this raised questions about the veracity of Stokes's source, it might just as well have caused people to wonder about the truthfulness of Rice's staff.

Turning to Stokes's report of how James B. Boddie, WPA district administrator, urged a local school board to support Barkley in exchange for WPA funding for school construction, Hopkins stated that each member of the school board signed a statement that Boddie "has never at any time mentioned politics in his dealings with them on matters pertaining to the Works Progress Administration and that he has never suggested that they support Sen. Barkley." Boddie swore in an affidavit that he had not tried to sway any school board member to support Barkley, and neither did he threaten anyone

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



that he would withhold WPA funds from any of the town's projects unless they would support Barkley. Hopkins continued:

Mr. Boddie further swears that at no time has he permitted the political status of the sponsors of any project to influence him in the discharge of his duties nor has he in any way sought to influence such sponsors for or against any candidate for public office. The facts are that Mr. Stokes interviewed only one member of the Board of Education in Madisonville. This man, Mr. J.C. Riddle, an insurance man and a Republican, according to his own voluntary testimony, states that he assured Mr. Stokes that never had an instance of political favoritism or practice come to his attention in connection with the operation of the WPA program in Madisonville. The signed statement of the members of the School Board compliments Mr. Boddie on the excellent and non-political administration of his office.

Moving from Stokes's reporting to Stokes himself, Hopkins charged, "Had Mr. Stokes lived up to his reputation as an impartial correspondent, he would have at least reported the true facts concerning his conversation with the only member of the School Board whom he saw during his hasty visit to Madisonville."<sup>48</sup>

Hopkins did have to acknowledge directly the veracity of two of Stokes's most serious allegations, however. Regarding a WPA supervisor in Edmonson County who was compiling detailed registration lists of all voters, Hopkins stated that "We have taken steps to see that this man minds his own business. He was told that 'any such activity on his part in the future would result in his being fired.'" Second, with respect to Stokes's report of a WPA project foreman, Cleve Keeney, who allegedly said that "the fellows on the job were going to have to support Barkley if they stayed on the WPA," Hopkins and the WPA found the remark to have been true. "We regard this remark by Mr. Keeney as reprehensible," Hopkins announced, "and State Administrator Goodman has been instructed to take the necessary punitive action."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

Hopkins concluded his rebuttal by observing that "Against the unsupported statements of the reporter and the affidavits of disgruntled workers and party workers, stands the documented evidence and the sworn testimony disproving every important accusation." While Hopkins conceded that "in a far-flung organization" such as the WPA, "covering the 3,300 counties in America, with 64,000 projects and 2,700,000 workers, there will occur indiscretions by over-zealous partisans in the midst of heated campaigns," he argued that "that is a vastly different thing from a planned and organized political campaign on the part of the responsible heads of any government agency." Acknowledging that "the heat of a campaign" can lead advocates of one side or another to "give out misleading and inaccurate information," Hopkins pledged that he would not "permit charges against WPA officials, and employees, in whose integrity I have confidence, to go unanswered and I intend to use every instrument at my command to acquaint the American people with the truth or falsity of such charges."<sup>50</sup>

Subsequently, at Senate hearings on his nomination to be Secretary of Commerce, Hopkins was more frank about the Barkley-Chandler contest. "A political campaign starts, about as hot a political campaign as I have ever seen in America, and it was a hot one, and they threw everything at each other but the kitchen stove," Hopkins told the Senate Commerce Committee, generating laughter. "Now you get down in some of those Kentucky counties, and the local political party fellows started operating on our boys," Hopkins continued, "and our boys caved in. Now that is what happened. Goodman did not like it. I did not like it. But the real heat there was from people not inside of the WPA but outside of the WPA." Dismissing the many affidavits that contradicted his case, Hopkins said that "those affidavits were submitted here by a purely partisan political organization, and I want to repeat that it was one of the toughest political campaigns I have ever seen, and they were dishing them up at--they were a dime a dozen

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

down there."<sup>51</sup> Or as Hopkins put it at another point in the hearings, "After all, one group of investigators might go out and find one thing, and another might go out and find another. These things are not always factual. Somebody says something was done; and another man denies it was done. Then a competent investigator makes up his mind who was telling the truth, and he says it was done or it was not done."<sup>52</sup>

### **The Senate Investigates: The Sheppard Committee**

Despite Hopkins's thorough defense, Stokes's reports on public works sites throughout Kentucky raised more than a few eyebrows in the Senate. Indeed, after Hatch's amendment went down to defeat, one contemporary authority on Congressional power noted that "the upshot of these reversals" would be "a renewed insistence on an investigation" of politics in public works.<sup>53</sup> But while these events were important, it is worth noting that they did not take place in isolation. Surveying the political landscape four days after Hopkins and the WPA released their rebuttal, reporter Turner Catledge observed "Whatever honest doubt any one might have had of a mixing of Federal relief with politics must have been shaken by the events of the past week," events which "undoubtedly have pinned a campaign button on the relief program which will remain there until the smoke clears away from the coming primaries and general election."<sup>54</sup> These events included the abrupt announcement from the WPA's Washington headquarters of large pay raises for unskilled WPA workers, especially in Kentucky and Oklahoma (both hotly contested states), and a speech made by the WPA's Aubrey

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<sup>51</sup> Hopkins statement in U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Hearings on the Nomination of Harry L. Hopkins to be Secretary of Commerce, 76th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 46, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Senate, Hearings on the Nomination of Harry L. Hopkins, 69.

<sup>53</sup> M. Nelson McGeary, The Development of Congressional Investigative Power (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 19.

<sup>54</sup> New York Times, July 3, 1938, p. E 3.

Williams to the union of WPA workers, the Workers Alliance, urging them to vote to "keep our friends in power." In this context, Hopkins's careful parsing of Stokes's twenty-two charges was noteworthy only for Hopkins's acknowledgment that the most serious of Stokes's allegations were found to be true by WPA investigators.

The Senate's Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures and Use of Governmental Funds, chaired by Texas Democrat Morris Sheppard, took on the task of looking into the charges made by Stokes and others. Featuring such conservative Democrats as Mississippi's Pat Harrison, Massachusetts's David Walsh, and Wyoming's Joseph O'Mahoney, the Sheppard Committee was thought by many to herald "another major reverse" for FDR.<sup>55</sup> Of Sheppard himself, however, Drew Pearson and Robert Allen reported that "There were titters in the press gallery when Vice President Jack Garner announced the appointment of Senator Morris Sheppard as chairman," since "Some of the boys thought it was a great joke that the gentle, soft-spoken little Texan should be given the tough job of riding herd on electioneering funds."<sup>56</sup> The Sheppard Committee, although formed in the final hours of the 75th Congress, met immediately and passed a resolution that, in the assessment of one reporter, "said, in effect, that it took its job seriously." The Sheppard Committee, the resolution read, "gives warning now to all candidates for Senatorial office, their friends and aides, that any violation or attempted violation of the laws pertaining to the conduct of the campaign and the conduct of the election...will be fully exposed and publicized with a view to criminal prosecution....[and] that all governmental agencies must keep clear of all primary and election campaigns-- must keep their hands off."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Hatcher, "Alben Barkley," 252.

<sup>56</sup> Pearson and Allen quoted in Escal Franklin Duke, "The Political Career of Morris Sheppard, 1875-1941" (Ph.D. diss., University of Texas, 1958), 463.

<sup>57</sup> New York Times, June 18, 1938, p. 1.

By July 15, the Committee sent an investigator, one H. Ralph Burton, to Kentucky to examine these allegations.<sup>58</sup> Burton later would work for the House's investigation of the WPA, and was then termed part of a "pretty crummy lot" of investigators. Burton, one WPA official observed, "moved heaven and earth to get a job on our staff...at \$100 a month, but was considered incompetent to fill even a responsible clerical position."<sup>59</sup> Questions of Burton's competence notwithstanding, two weeks later the Committee rushed to make a preliminary public report before the primary election occurred on August 6, stating that both Chandler and Barkley shared responsibility for a "deplorable situation" which "should arouse the conscience of the country." These actions, the Committee argued, "imperil the right of the people to a free and unpolluted ballot."<sup>60</sup> Despite the timing of this report, Barkley managed to win the primary with 56% of the vote. Throughout the summer and fall of 1938, however, the Sheppard Committee continued its work. One Kentucky politician wrote to the Committee to praise its efforts, writing "When voters are purchased as slaves with public funds or taxpayers' money out of Federal and state treasuries, and driven like dumb cattle to vote and perpetuate a political aristocracy, that is sapping the life blood of the Republic."<sup>61</sup> Worries about the corrupting influence of centralized power on the body politic are, of course, as old as the nation itself. For opponents of the New Deal, defining federal

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<sup>58</sup> Davis, Alben W. Barkley, 62; New York Times, July 16, 1938, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup> WPA official (possibly F.C. Harrington) to Harry Hopkins, personal, April 23, 1939, "Works Progress Administration (WPA) Investigation--April 1939" folder, box 80, Harry L. Hopkins Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

<sup>60</sup> New York Times, Aug. 3, 1938, p. 10; U.S. Congress, Senate, Report of the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures and use of Government Funds in 1938, Senate Report No. 1, Part 2, 76th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939), 68.

<sup>61</sup> G. Tom Hawkins to the Senate Investigation Committee, Aug. 15, 1938, in Senate, Report of the Special Committee, Part 2, pp. 70-71.

spending on public works programs as "corruption" made for a broad characterization of the New Deal that could be deployed on the campaign trail or in drafting the Hatch Act.<sup>62</sup>

On August 18, 1938, Sheppard forwarded to Hopkins a number of affidavits obtained by the committee. John G. Morton, the WPA official in charge of finance and timekeeping procedures for the WPA's First District (32 counties in western Kentucky), told Sheppard Committee investigators that lists were composed "for the purpose of ascertaining what percentage of the [WPA] workers were eligible to vote in this year's election." Morton noted "We have never made any attempt to in any manner to coerce any of the workers on WPA in District #1," but claimed

we know that the majority of the workers are very much in favor of the works program of which WPA is a part. We naturally expect the great majority of them to vote in support of the administration without any pressure being brought on them on the part of the supervisory personnel. Naturally, if we had a large number of workers who were not eligible to vote, we believe it would have reduced the number of votes materially, which would have reflected in the election returns.

After compiling the lists, they were turned over to the county chairmen of Barkley's campaign. James B. Boddie, the WPA district director, did call a conference to discuss the collecting of the lists, but Morton asserted that "it was explicitly understood that there were to be no questions asked as to the workers party affiliation, nor his preference in the present Senatorial primary." The thinking among the WPA officials was that "the various County Chairmen would follow up the matter of registration" once the lists were handed over to them.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> For the history of republicanism, see Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept." *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 11-38; an effective treatment of its persistence during the New Deal is Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 143-68.

<sup>63</sup> Affidavit of John G. Morton, July 30, 1938, enclosed in Morris Sheppard to Harry Hopkins, Aug. 18, 1938, "Kentucky 610 (Political Coercion) (Adm) (August 1938)" folder, box 1376, RG 69, NA; and Sheppard to Hopkins, Sept. 8, 1938, "WPA Sept.-Dec. 1938" folder, Official File 444c, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

However, these lists, according to S.C. Taylor, a WPA engineer for Pulaski and Russell Counties, were more than a simple list of registered voters on the WPA rolls. They were a systematic survey of the party membership of approximately 18,000 WPA workers. The lists contained columns headed "name and address," "identification number," "mark," "number in family," and "remarks." Taylor recalled that these forms were distributed to every WPA foreman in each county with instructions that they should survey their work crews and, "to put in the column designated 'mark' whether Democrat, Republican or Independent and under the designation 'remark' whether in the opinion of the foreman persons so checked were favorable to the WPA program and to Senator Barkley." Taylor, the investigator reported, said that the WPA officials in charge of his district "generally agreed that without it being known to the certified personnel, all foremen should be selected who were favorable to WPA because otherwise they would not make a suitable man to handle personnel; that if he was a Republican he should be in sympathy with the WPA program and that he, Taylor, has followed that plan."<sup>64</sup> In its formal report, the Sheppard Committee noted that while Taylor subsequently gave a contradictory affidavit to the WPA's investigators regarding these events, when the Committee contacted him again Taylor "sustained his first affidavit to the Committee."<sup>65</sup>

Hopkins fired a detailed response back to Sheppard, releasing the text of this message to the press as well. Although Hopkins took pains to state that "I am wholeheartedly in accord with any action which brings to light any restriction of the freedom of the ballot of our workers, and wish to renew my pledge of full cooperation in tracking down and eliminating such abuses," he was compelled to acknowledge that after much investigation "The charges dealing with alleged irregularities in District No. 1 of Kentucky...have been thoroughly sifted [and] in this instance alone is there evidence of

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<sup>64</sup> Affidavit of S.C. Taylor, July 25, 1938, *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Senate, *Report of the Special Committee*, Part 2, p. 94.

irregularities." Despite this, however, Hopkins claimed that "The truth, as brought out by affidavits, is that no political use whatever was made of the lists showing the party affiliation of workers."<sup>66</sup> Hopkins's protestations, though, could not obscure that the WPA had just admitted its involvement in canvassing the political affiliations of more than a quarter of the WPA workers in the whole state of Kentucky.

By October 1938, the Committee was ready to report on its findings in Kentucky. While it determined that private parties were responsible for soliciting campaign funds from WPA workers, WPA officials themselves were also to blame for this activity, and they were exclusively responsible for the "systematic canvassing of the WPA employees as to preference in the race for the Democratic senatorial nomination." The Committee concluded that Stokes was correct "in a majority of the charges" made in his series of reports, and that Hopkins was justified in his objections "in four instances." In comparing the Barkley and Chandler campaigns, though, the Committee found that Barkley raised \$24,000 from WPA employees, while Chandler raised about \$70,000 from employees who were paid in part or in full by federal funds.<sup>67</sup> This wide disparity in funds strengthened New Dealer arguments against such political restrictions on public works spending as had been proposed by Senator Carl Hatch.

In making its recommendations, the Sheppard Committee focused directly on the intersection of public works, politics, and money, recalling the substance of Hatch's failed amendment and presaging the 1939 Hatch Act against "pernicious political activities." The Committee urged legislation prohibiting any recipient of federal relief funds from making political contributions and advocated placing limits on campaign contributions to

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<sup>66</sup> Hopkins to Sheppard, Sept. 19, 1938, in WPA Press Release, Sept. 21, 1938, "Ref. File--Work Relief" folder, box 256, Clapper Papers, LC; and see "Analysis of Cases Investigated by the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures Which Affect the Works Progress Administration," "Sheppard Investigating Committee--1938" folder, box 80, Harry L. Hopkins Papers, FDRL.

<sup>67</sup> Senate, Report of the Special Committee, Part 1, p. 11-12.



candidates for federal office. Similarly, the Committee recommended expanding the prohibition on solicitation of political contributions in any federal office building to include solicitations made by letter and by telephone. In addition to urging that candidates for the Senate be required to disclose their contributions and expenditures, the Committee even went so far as to advocate the prohibition of "any contribution by any national bank, any corporation organized by authority of any law of Congress, or by any corporation engaged in interstate or foreign commerce of the United States, in connection with any primary or general election." Regarding public works programs, the Committee stated that candidates should be prohibited "from promising work, employment, money, or other benefits in connection with public relief."<sup>68</sup>

Although the Sheppard Committee concluded that there was no evidence indicating that Barkley knew of the actions of WPA employees and officials in Kentucky, correspondence and memoranda in Barkley's collected papers do indicate, in the opinion Barkley's biographer, that "the senator did have knowledge of political activity in his behalf within the WPA and other federal agencies." However, Barkley argued that of the 69,000 people employed by WPA in Kentucky, he probably received only 10,000 votes. Barkley estimated that 50% of WPA employees were Democrats, and only half of these people were registered to vote. Furthermore, he thought Chandler's recent successful campaign for the Governorship meant that many county-level officials in the state (who often had influence over who was certified for relief) backed Chandler in the Senate primary.<sup>69</sup> Hopkins, though, had responded to a journalist who had asked him what percentage of WPA workers would vote for FDR without any active recruiting by politicians, "Oh, at least 90%. Why not? What other outfit have got any program that

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<sup>68</sup> Senate, Report of the Special Committee, Part 1, p. 39-41; New York Times, Jan. 4, 1939, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Davis, Alben W. Barkley, 64-65; 70 n. 80. The best authority on this Kentucky election remains Jasper Shannon; he concluded that the farmer-labor vote and urban voters were more responsible than the WPA for electing Barkley. Shannon, "Presidential Politics in the South," 169-70.

would be of any interest to people who are at a disadvantage or to the people with incomes like ourselves. I just think that is so obvious." Hopkins hedged a bit when asked about how Roosevelt's appeal translated to Barkley's chances with the WPA vote, responding, "Do you mean right now in Kentucky? I think that is a little different situation; a Democratic primary, two Democrats running against each other. I don't think you can tell them how to vote. I think that is a lot of whitewash. You don't tell people how to vote. People vote because they think it is to their interest to vote, one way or another."<sup>70</sup>

Jim Farley, however, recorded a rather different analysis of the WPA's impact on the 1938 elections in his diary, drawing on a survey he had just made of Democratic party county chairmen and, of course, benefiting from hindsight. Farley speculated that WPA workers were "voting against the ticket, and I wouldn't be surprised if this included 50 per cent of them, because they were dissatisfied with their rate of pay." Further trouble was caused, Farley thought, by "Feeling developed against the WPA by interested tax payers and citizens who feel the WPA makes jobs for ne'er-do-wells, making it possible for them to receive an income they could never earn in industry and never did earn even in good times."<sup>71</sup> Farley had discussed these factors with FDR at the close of 1938, presenting these arguments to him:

We discussed the WPA situation at great length. I said the feeling against the WPA on the part of the public generally and workers themselves helped materially to bring about our setback. He agreed with me.... I said I knew in every section of the country, those who could be best termed the ne'er do well, who never worked steadily in their lives and are now on WPA securing a regular monthly wage which is far more than they did in the days before the WPA. Most of them are too lazy and would not work, and if they did, they did not go a good job and were not desirable. He admitted this and said he knew of similar cases in his own town and county. I said I had no answer or suggestion as to how the

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<sup>70</sup> Harry Hopkins press conference, July 21, 1938, no folder, box 6, entry 737, "Division of Information. Administrative Speeches, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>71</sup> Farley diary, Jan. 10, 1939, "Private File 1939 January-April" folder, box 43, Farley Papers, LC.

situation could be rectified but was merely making an observation as to the cause, but I did not have the remedy at the moment.<sup>72</sup>

In his study of this question, however, political scientist Wesley C. Clark found that there was "no evidence to support the hypothesis that the President's popularity varies directly with the amounts of money spent on relief," finding instead that the performance of the economy was a better predictor of presidential standing.<sup>73</sup> While it remains difficult to characterize the relationship between the WPA and the electoral fortunes of FDR and the Democratic party, it is clear that people across the political spectrum--from Democrats such as Hopkins and Farley to Republicans such as Charles McNary and Robert A. Taft, Jr.--thought that a great deal was at stake in these debates.

While FDR and other Democrats were troubled by the controversy surrounding the WPA, in the spring of 1939 a dismissed WPA employee, Ernest Rowe, released to the press correspondence between himself and George Goodman, the state director of the WPA in Kentucky. In these documents, Goodman described how WPA employees were to be solicited for campaign funds for Barkley, telling Rowe to keep records of the contributions. Goodman suggested that workers contribute 2% of their salaries, but that there was to be "no discrimination against any employee who, because of home expenses or other reasons, does not feel able to assist financially in the campaign."<sup>74</sup> Four days later, on the same day that the Sheppard Committee had been authorized to begin its investigation, Goodman wrote to order Rowe to dispose of all correspondence regarding political matters which "carries a meaning which would subject us to criticism by the wrong interpretation."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Farley diary, Dec. 28, 1938, "'Private File 1938 December" folder, box 43, Farley Papers, LC. Farley drew on this section of his diary in his book, *Jim Farley's Story* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1948), 160.

<sup>73</sup> Wesley C. Clark, "Economic Aspects of a President's Popularity," (Ph.D. diss, University of Pennsylvania, 1943), 53.

<sup>74</sup> George H. Goodman to Ernest Rowe, May 23, 1938, quoted in Searle, *Minister of Relief*, 197.

<sup>75</sup> George H. Goodman to Ernest Rowe, May 27, 1938, quoted in Searle, *Minister of Relief*, 197-98.

Despite all of this bad press, Barkley's successful renomination pleased and relieved New Deal Democrats. "Immediately," reporter Thomas Stokes noted, "the inside group of New Dealers who have been active in the party 'purge' hope it will have the effect of stimulating the President to renewed vigor for the second phase of the 'purge' program, the attempt to defeat Senator George of Georgia and Senator Tydings of Maryland, conservatives who have bucked much of the New Deal." The victory also put Barkley into the mix of prospective Democratic presidential candidates for 1940. However, "in the opinion of observers," Stokes wrote, Barkley "did not add to his prestige by the type of campaign conducted on his behalf and by him personally, especially his concluding plea: 'If you want to swap all you're getting now from the Federal Government for a set of balanced budget Government books down in Washington, then vote for Happy Chandler. but if you want to keep on getting what you're getting and get some more, then vote to keep me in the Senate.'"<sup>76</sup> While Barkley's frankness helped him to re-election, Harry Hopkins's variation on Barkley's maxim attracted far more controversy.

### **Tax, Spend, and Elect: Harry Hopkins and New Deal Liberalism**

Near the end of July 1938, during the high point of the Barkley-Chandler campaign and the start of the Sheppard Committee's investigation, Harry Hopkins joined some of his friends and acquaintances in spending a diverting afternoon wagering at a New York racetrack. Among those present were theater producer Max Gordon, newspaper columnist Heywood Broun, and transportation expert Daniel Amstein. There, several journalists later claimed, he regaled his party with an acerbic assessment of the New Deal's political formula for success: "We shall tax and tax, spend and spend, and

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<sup>76</sup> Thomas Stokes clipping, Aug. 8, 1938, "Reference File Kentucky 1938" folder, box 160, Clapper Papers, LC.

elect and elect," Hopkins was reported to have said. In a single phrase, Hopkins had encapsulated the tangible benefits at the ballot box that the New Dealers derived from spending government revenues on public works programs. Hopkins, however, his friend Robert Sherwood later recalled, "stated categorically that he had said no such thing," announcing "I deny the whole works and the whole implication of it." Coming on the heels of Stokes's investigation of the WPA's political activities in Kentucky, though, reports of this incident generated immediate controversy. Subsequent historians, however, have generally accepted Sherwood's assessment that this statement was apocryphal.<sup>77</sup> These "eggs of canards," as Sherwood termed these reports, are "happily hatched out by presumably reputable journalists and, when they have taken wing, the denials seldom catch up with them. This particular one created a great deal of trouble for Hopkins and produced considerable wear and tear on his frazzled nervous system, but it did not greatly affect the course of events."<sup>78</sup>

Sherwood, though, was wrong. While this statement may not have greatly affected the course of events, it does mark an important point in the history of the New Deal. This controversy holds the potential for a more coherent understanding of the salience of such phrases as "tax and spend liberal" in American politics since 1938. The WPA was at the core of the New Deal's welfare state but as Hopkins's statement makes clear, it was also very practical politics.<sup>79</sup>

Arthur Krock, one of the journalists who reported Hopkins's remarks, recalled in his memoirs that he at first hesitated to mention the incident. He had first learned of Hopkins's statement in the Baltimore Sun, reading conservative commentator Frank R. Kent's political column. "I was impressed with the aptness of this capsule of the

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<sup>77</sup> See, e.g., Kennedy, Freedom From Fear, 349, n. 43.

<sup>78</sup> Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins, 103-104.

<sup>79</sup> The most recent case for the central place of the WPA in the New Deal is made in Amenta, Bold Relief.

technique of the regime in power," Krock wrote, "but I made no reference to it until it was repeated in a column by Joseph Alsop."<sup>80</sup> At that point, Krock asked Kent for his sources, contacted them and satisfied himself as to their veracity, and reported the story for the Sunday New York Times. The day the story ran Krock ate lunch in Virginia with Hopkins and several others. "Not only did he make no mention of the article, he gave no indication of any diminishment in our friendly relationship," Krock recalled of Hopkins's behavior. As Krock remembered it, a couple of days later the New York Times received a letter from Hopkins, denying the story and claiming that Krock had not tried to verify it. "It was all quite belated," Krock said. "Someone had told him this story was injuring the administration and probably would interfere with his confirmation as Secretary of Commerce," he speculated. A few nights later, a delighted Harold Ickes--no friend of Hopkins, or of Krock, for that matter--went so far as to joke with Krock at a dinner party, "I see you have Harry by the short hairs."<sup>81</sup> Privately, Krock also told Jim Farley that Hopkins had indeed made his statement, to which Farley replied, "I said I thought Hopkins was foolish to get into any controversy with him on that subject."<sup>82</sup>

"But he did say it," Krock later claimed of Hopkins, "and he would always have stuck by it because he was a cynic in politics, except that it became a burden politically to the administration who wanted him confirmed as Secretary of Commerce. That would have been in his way had he admitted it, so he just said he had never made the statement, which I could understand perfectly, because I understand politicians. But there is no

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<sup>80</sup> Alsop, a New Deal liberal, was a good friend of Hopkins. For more on their relationship, see Robert W. Merry, Taking on the World: Joseph and Stewart Alsop--Guardians of the American Century (New York: Viking Penguin, 1996), 88; Alsop touches briefly on the "tax, spend, and elect" incident in Joseph W. Alsop with Adam Platt, "I've Seen the Best of It": Memoirs (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 120, 128.

<sup>81</sup> Arthur Krock, Memoirs: Sixty Years on the Firing Line (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968), 216-17; "The Reminiscences of Arthur Krock," Columbia University Oral History Project, 68.

<sup>82</sup> Farley diary, Nov. 24, 1938, "Private File 1938 October" folder, box 43, Farley Papers, LC.

doubt at all he said it."<sup>83</sup> Indeed, Krock praised Hopkins's savvy. "That was the magic formula," Krock said of taxing, spending, and electing. Hopkins had "proved it, and it kept working."<sup>84</sup>

In fact, in an interview Hopkins gave to journalist Raymond Clapper three months earlier, the picture Hopkins outlined then did not differ much from the sentiments he expressed in his disputed "tax, spend, and elect" quote. Clapper's raw notes give a sense of Hopkins's political realism:

Re politics. Hopkins says two angles, long range and petty political interference. Re long range--he says that he is conscious that WPA and other developments have far reaching political implications. Government checks of one kind or another are going into about 20,000,000 homes--which with relatives and friends creates vast group of beneficiaries, political group. Says been history in Europe that these benefits are never reduced but on contrary tend to enlarge. Politicians run for election on issue of giving more benefits--used to be tariff or abstract issues but now issue is how large a check will you give me. Few years ago were not ten men in cgs [Congress] who favored social security, now not a one would vote against it.<sup>85</sup>

Hopkins and Clapper then turned directly to electoral politics:

Politicians also work by lining up groups. A Candidate lays out groups and decides how many he needs to add up to a majority and which ones he can likely get and then he schemes to land these grounds [groups] one, by one. IN several northern localities[,] he mentioned Cleveland, negroes control elections, hold banalce [sic] of power and vote goes to which ever side can sell them. Both sides have men designated to find out how candidate can get those groups and does it. In Florida primary this week Senator Pepper, new dealer, also took out extra insurance by advocating Townsend old age pension scheme.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Krock also took issue with Sherwood's account of events in Roosevelt and Hopkins: "In connection with the Hopkins story about 'Tax and tax, spend and spend, elect and elect,' Sherwood used the word 'perjury' in connection with me," Krock wrote, referring to his testimony about the incident during Hopkins's Commerce Department confirmation hearings. "He conceded later that the word he meant was injury--not 'perjury' at all." Krock also threatened legal action regarding Sherwood's description of Krock's "malevolent venality," forcing him to back down and change the wording in the book. "The Reminiscences of Arthur Krock," Columbia University Oral History Project, 61, emphasis in original.

<sup>84</sup> "The Reminiscences of Arthur Krock," 65.

<sup>85</sup> Raymond Clapper diary, May 3, 1938, "RC Diaries 1938 2" folder, box 8, Clapper Papers, LC.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

It was in this sort of political universe that Hopkins located the WPA. As Clapper recorded:

Coming down to more detail, Hopkins thinks that on the whole his show is clean and reason he does is that when there is anything sour they hear about it instantly, so many people have to be in on anything crooked that someone will always squeal.... Hopkins says politicians wont stop at anything to get vote lined up and have no regard for wpa or anything except winning elections. Politicians plant workers just off project site and canvass men, give them slips to sign and turn in at party clubhouse, etc., and in all sort of ways intimate and hint that they better vote right or they might lost jobs etc. Hold meetings just as workmen are leaving project, call on them at their homes, etc., and thus exert pressure which wpa has difficulty in stopping.<sup>87</sup>

This interview formed the basis of Clapper's published analysis of the WPA's problems with politics, reinforcing his conclusion, that "Hopkins can and does crack down whenever politicians actually get into his territory, but the most insidious attempts to gain political advantage out of WPA are beyond his reach, and can be broken up most effectively by local exposure."<sup>88</sup> In his interview with Clapper, Hopkins emphasized the ability of government spending to generate new political coalitions; an ability that the "tax, spend, and elect" remark would seem to have encapsulated nicely.

The growing connections between legislative measures such as the Hatch Act, controversy over the WPA, and the uproar generated by Hopkins's "tax, spend, and elect" remark, though, were on display at the press conference Hopkins held in December 1938. There, journalists peppered Hopkins with questions on these subjects. Hopkins was asked if he favored Hatch's amendment, to which he replied "The stronger, the better. As a matter of fact, I am in favor of it, although people said I succeeded in killing it. I did not know I was ever opposed to the Hatch amendment." After debating if there was any

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Raymond Clapper, "Hopkins Fights Politics," May 9, 1938, "Clapper Columns" vol. 1, scrapbook, box 60, Clapper Papers, LC.



merit to claims that the WPA had inflated the relief rolls immediately before the recent primaries, Hopkins was then asked

Q: This is an old subject. Did you ever talk to the newspaper men around here about this remark attributed to you, outside of a formal statement?

A: I don't know what you are talking about.

Q: This remark you were supposed to have made at the race track--'Tax and tax and spend and spend.'

A: You mean Arthur Krock, the journalist. I am still waiting to hear from that anonymous gentleman who was supposed to have said that and to see him appear in the light of day. He hasn't showed up yet and I presume he is going to remain anonymous.<sup>89</sup>

This story came to a head at the hearings for Hopkins's nomination as Commerce Secretary, with Krock himself called to testify before the Senate Commerce Committee. Krock recounted for the Senators how he had first read of Hopkins's statement in Frank Kent's column on October 14, and, after contacting Kent, used the item himself twice in the New York Times, on November 10 and 13. When asked if he intended to damage Hopkins in publishing the statement, Krock replied "I have not thought of injury. As I say, I made what seemed to me serious efforts to discover whether it was a chance remark, in which event I would not have printed it. It was a most logical statement, it seemed to me, of what Mr. Hopkins might have said."<sup>90</sup> Joseph Alsop concurred with Kent, testifying that "I had no assurance that the story was true and therefore I said that it might be a jocular remark. I have subsequently received assurance that it was true, and we [Alsop and his partner Robert Kintner] printed it, as Mr. Kent and Mr. Krock had printed it."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Harry Hopkins press conference, Dec. 8, 1938, no folder, box 6, entry 737, "Division of Information. Administrative Speeches, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>90</sup> Senate, Hearings before the Committee on Commerce, 57.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 58.

Hopkins, though, took on the task of defending himself to the Senate Commerce Committee. "I simply know that I never made any such statement as that," Hopkins said.

After all, Mr. Krock, in quotation marks, said that I said this. I want to say, first, that Mr. Krock does not say that I said it to him. He says I said it in a moment of relaxation, which might have been, Senator, in your house or in somebody else's home, over a dinner table, or in "playing around." And you know, it struck me funny at the time that a newspaper correspondent in a column would quote me "at a moment of relaxation," because I fancy that if most of the people around this table were quoted at a moment of relaxation it would be a fine looking record.<sup>92</sup>

At the same time, though, Hopkins claimed that

if I had made that statement I certainly would recall it. I want to say, as forcibly as I can, that I did not make it. At the same time I want to say that I think Mr. Krock, Mr. Alsop, and Mr. Kintner undoubtedly used this statement in good faith as newspapermen. I think they were mistaken, and I think they are wrong, and I think it is high time that the person who is alleged to have made that statement comes out and says, "Yes; I made it, and here are the circumstances under which it happened." I assume that if you would ask these gentlemen they would say, "Of course, this is a privileged communication, and we cannot disclose his name."<sup>93</sup>

Hopkins concluded with a blanket denial, one that Sherwood eventually quoted to support his interpretation of events in Roosevelt and Hopkins: "I certainly do not believe in any of the implications of that in terms of spending and spending, taxing and taxing, electing and electing. I deny the whole business. I do not want to quibble, either, about the exact words. I deny the whole works and the whole implication of it."<sup>94</sup>

While it is unclear why the source of Hopkins's remark did not come forward, it seems likely either that Hopkins's companions that day decided they did not want to hinder his chances to become Commerce Secretary and would remain silent, or they were

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 13.

urged by others to refrain from testifying.<sup>95</sup> Krock indicated that this latter possibility might be true when writing to FDR press secretary Steve Early. "The man responsible for circulating" Hopkins's remark "prepared a memorandum of what he remembered Hopkins to have said and was ready to read it to the Senate committee" when "Both [Gerard] Swope and [Bernard] Baruch said to him: 'If you bring that in, it will ruin Hopkins.'"<sup>96</sup>

Perhaps New Dealer-turned-columnist Hugh S. Johnson best captured the dilemma that has vexed those who have pondered Hopkins's "tax, spend, and elect" statement. While Johnson believed that the anonymous witnesses of Hopkins's remarks were not lying, he also professed that he believed Hopkins would not lie, either. "My belief might be something like the aged and doting Kentucky Colonel who accused his young fiancee of embracing a handsome stranger," wrote Johnson. "She indignantly denied it. He protested he had seen it in broad daylight at three yards distance," but the young woman "convinced his fond heart by saying: 'Do yo' believe your honey, or do yo' believe yo' eyes?'" Indeed, Johnson argued, anyone at the race track with Hopkins "could have thought he said what they said he said because it is consistent with everything the Third New Deal has recently done--and inconsistent with nothing Mr. Hopkins has said or ever done," and "For that reason it doesn't make the slightest difference whether he said it or not. The actions to which the misunderstood (?) words seemed to apply say it so much more eloquently than even these quaintly characteristic Hopkinsesque words, the words are wholly unimportant."<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> It is still unclear who was the source of Hopkins's statement. Sherwood declares that it was Max Gordon; this judgment is echoed by Searle Charles. Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins, 103; Charles, Minister of Relief, 216.

<sup>96</sup> Arthur Krock to Steve Early, Aug. 9, 1939, President's Personal File 675--New York Times, FDR Papers, FDRL; Krock, Memoirs, 217.

<sup>97</sup> Hugh S. Johnson clipping from the Philadelphia Inquirer, Nov. 30, 1938, p. 17, "November 30, 1938. Press Clippings. Division of Press Information Room 210" folder, box 30, Hopkins Papers, FDRL.

The day before Johnson's column appeared, the Washington Daily News ran a cartoon entitled "WPA Project Number One!" that confirmed Johnson's reasoning: at this point, words were not important. The cartoon featured a frantic Hopkins, running but unable to escape a tin can rattling on the ground behind him, as this can has been tethered to the bottom of his coat. Hopkins specifies what "WPA project number one" was, crying out, "Quick Somebody--Git that off my tail!" On the can, of course, was the label, "We will spend and spend, and tax and tax, and elect and elect!"<sup>98</sup> As Johnson concluded, "because the saying, whether spoken or not, so aptly and so accurately describes what the Administration and especially WPA has been doing, the denial falls dead and the words become a catch phrase that will haunt Hopkins for years."<sup>99</sup> This catch phrase has also continued to haunt historians of the New Deal as well, as the potential for the WPA to help remake the electoral map has been slighted in favor of seconding Hopkins's denials. Hopkins may not have said exactly what he was reported to have said, but a brief examination of the passage of the Hatch Act indicates that the debate surrounding Hopkins's denials was more important than anything Hopkins had to say.

### **Political Backlash: "An Act to Prevent Pernicious Political Activities"**

While Senator Carl Hatch's amendment to a public works appropriation was voted down in the spring of 1938, he did not abandon the idea of preventing the political use of public works. Hatch revived his amendment and in 1939 presented it separately as "An Act to prevent pernicious political activities." Hatch's bill was intended to prevent solicitation of money from relief recipients and to keep the WPA from denying assistance to people because of their political views. More extreme, however, was section 9(a) of Hatch's proposed law:

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<sup>98</sup> Cartoon clipping from the Washington Daily News, Nov. 29, 1938, p. 16, in ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Johnson column, cited above.

It shall be unlawful for any person employed in the executive branch of the Federal Government, or any agency or department thereof, to use his official authority or influence for the purpose of interfering with an election or affecting the result thereof. No officer or employee in the executive branch of the Federal Government, or any agency or department thereof, shall take any active part in political management or in political campaigns.<sup>100</sup>

This section of the proposed law attracted little attention or opposition, at first. After the Senate approved it unanimously, though, the Roosevelt administration began to study the measure more closely. One New Dealer warned FDR's press secretary Steve Early that the Hatch measure was meant "to hit the President himself," keeping FDR, cabinet officials, and Congress from campaigning.<sup>101</sup> Alarmed, FDR and his advisors arranged for the House to delay debate on the Hatch bill until this huge loophole could be addressed. Hatch finally agreed to the rewrite of section 9(a), acknowledging that

For the purposes of this section the term "officer" or "employee" shall not be construed to include (1) the President and Vice President of the United States; (2) persons whose compensation is paid from the appropriation for the office of the President; (3) heads and assistant heads of executive departments; (4) officers who are appointed by the President, by and with the advice and consent of the Senate...<sup>102</sup>

Even with this problem addressed, FDR was uncertain if he should sign the Hatch bill into law. Illinois congressman Kent Keller notified FDR that Democrats had taken to referring to the bill as "the 'HATCHET' bill," as it so directly assaulted the New Deal.<sup>103</sup> Colorado senator Alva Adams attacked the entire rationale behind the Hatch bill, arguing that "The Hatch Bill is premised on the theory that politics is corrupt and corrupting, and that all those who take an active part in it are tainted." Adams argued that it was natural

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<sup>100</sup> James R. Eccles, The Hatch Act and the American Bureaucracy (New York: Vantage Press, 1981), 298.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in Porter, "Hatch Act of 1939," 155.

<sup>102</sup> Eccles, Hatch Act, 298-99.

<sup>103</sup> Kent Keller to FDR, Aug. 1, 1939, "OF 252a Permitting Government Employees to Hold Elective Office" folder, OF 252-A, FDR Papers, FDRL.

that "those who have been given places under the Democratic Administration are not only political leaders but leaders in the private and public affairs of the state, counties, and cities." If Hatch's measure became law, it would "deprive the nation of the experience and ability of those best qualified to be of help in the public business." Politically, Adams concluded, FDR would be ordering Democratic party activists to commit suicide if he signed the Hatch bill:

It is now proposed that all those who have played a part, no matter how small, in the establishment of the control of the Democratic Party and who believe in it and who wish for it success in the future shall lay down their arms, retire from the field, and cease to battle for the Party and the principles in which they believe. This bill is a command to all the officers, high and low, in the Democratic army except those in General Headquarters to commit hari-kari in the presence off the enemy and on the eve of battle.<sup>104</sup>

These sentiments were echoed by Charles M. Shreve, the executive secretary of the Young Democrats of America, who argued that "There is no justification for making political eunuchs of the future statesmen and leaders of our Democracy. It should suffice to point out that every Republican member of the House present for the vote voted for the Hatch Bill, together with every avowed Democratic enemy of the New Deal." A veto, Shreve proposed, that attacked "the attempt to term all political activity by the Federal employees as 'pernicious,' will be approved by the American people and by over one-third of Congress, while at the same time it will do more to preserve the New Deal from enemies within and without our party than any single thing that could be done."<sup>105</sup>

Longtime progressive Republican George W. Norris, however, urged FDR to resist pressure to veto the Hatch Bill. "I cannot conceive of your opposition to legislation of this kind," Norris wrote Roosevelt. "I know that many politicians, in fact most

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<sup>104</sup> Alva B. Adams to FDR, July 23, 1939, "Hatch Bill urges veto of July-Aug 1939" folder, box 5, OF 252, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>105</sup> Shreve quoted in Sidney M. Milkis, "New Deal Party Politics, Administrative Reform, and the Transformation of the American Constitution," in Robert Eden, ed., The New Deal and its Legacy: Critique and Reappraisal (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 143.

politicians, in both political parties, are bitterly opposed to such a law but I have assumed all the time that you were one hundred percent for it and I refuse to believe any reports to the contrary unless I get it directly from you." Norris, the intellectual father of the TVA, urged FDR to sign the Hatch bill as a sign of his commitment to the cause of good government. "I believe this bill is a great step towards the purification of politics and Government," Norris wrote. "To veto it would be the greatest mistake of your career--the full effects of which you could never overcome." Roosevelt quickly reassured Norris, though, firing back a note, "Wait until you see what I say about the Hatch Bill!"<sup>106</sup>

Despite his bravado, however, Roosevelt was not at all sure of what he would say about the Hatch bill. While relaxing at his Hyde Park estate, Roosevelt conferred with Jim Farley about its implications. Farley urged FDR to get Attorney General Frank Murphy to render an opinion about the legality of the Hatch bill--particularly sections 5 and 9, which dealt with the assessment of relief employees and freedom of political speech for the Executive Branch--and they discussed the possibility of vetoing it. Murphy ventured that he thought the Hatch bill was constitutional. Annoyed, FDR complained that the Hatch bill should have never reached his desk.<sup>107</sup>

Roosevelt faced a difficult decision. In an effort to pre-empt the "politics and relief" issue, he could sign the measure into law. Roosevelt, however, was undecided. Part of him wanted to follow the counsel of advisors--chiefly Thomas Corcoran and Ben Cohen--and veto the measure. In fact, Corcoran and Cohen, along with Attorney General Frank Murphy, went as far as to draft a detailed message for FDR to deliver as he vetoed the Hatch Act. Corcoran argued that they had developed in their veto message "a line of approach which is outside of any speculation in the newspapers, and which seems to us to

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<sup>106</sup> George W. Norris to FDR, July 26, 1939; FDR to Norris, July 28, 1939; both in "Subject File. Hatch Bill: 1939" folder, box 137, President's Secretary's File, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>107</sup> Farley diary, July 23, 1939, "James A. Farley Private File 1939 July" folder, box 44, Farley Papers, LC; Farley to Missy LeHand, July 25, 1939, "OF 252a Permitting Government Employees to Hold Elective Office" folder, OF 252-A, FDR Papers, FDRL.

offer a real chance to turn the tables" on the Hatch bill supporters. "We have also prepared (with a little help to which we were perhaps not legally entitled) a constitutional brief establishing the undoubted power of the Federal Congress to regulate the conduct of any participants affecting a primary or an election in which, among other candidates, candidates for Federal offices are involved," establishing a basis for arguing in the veto message that their objection was not purely political. Rather, they would argue that since the Constitution permits the Congress to regulate elections, the Hatch Act was unacceptable because it did not go far enough in banning state and local officeholders from influencing political campaigns. "The publicity seems to be in good shape for a veto," Corcoran continued, referring to their contacts in the press. "Walter Winchell is tearing at the edges of the exemption of the State political machines (following up the line in Time) on Sunday and Monday, with front page editorials by him in all the Hearst Sunday papers, and two radio broadcasts."<sup>108</sup>

Harold Ickes later recalled that "The Cohen draft, in the preparation of which Tom [Corcoran] had helped, seemed to me to be a brilliant piece of work." Ickes elaborated:

The theory of it was that the Hatch bill should be vetoed and that a much more comprehensive bill should be passed, one which would keep out of active Federal political participation not only Federal but state and county employees. The theory further was that the power of money should be taken out of politics, and so this draft advocated an appropriation by Congress to cover the campaign expenses of all political parties. No other contributions would be allowed.<sup>109</sup>

That Ickes would term this set of steps "brilliant" takes on greater significance after examining the text of the veto message, as well as Cohen's private and frank assessments of how this veto would benefit the Administration. Cohen's message opened with FDR acknowledging that the Hatch Act sought to "free federal elections from the

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<sup>108</sup> Thomas Corcoran to FDR, July 30, 1939, "Benjamin V. Cohen. Subject File. Hatch Act, 1939-56 and undated" folder, box 9, Benjamin V. Cohen Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; and copy in "Subject File. Hatch Bill: 1939" folder, box 137, PSF, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>109</sup> Harold L. Ickes, The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954), 2:689-90.



subversive use of money" and that it "seeks to free federal elections from the subversive use of the administrative personnel of government for purposes of party organizations and the manipulations of elections." In other words, "the objectives are to take money out of politics and take politics out of government." Roosevelt would then heartily agree with such sentiments, and argue that "Of the practical devotion of this Administration to the broad objectives of this bill therefore there can be no doubt." FDR would then point to his government reorganization plans, which "Continually and consistently I have urged upon the Congress" as "the only real remedy for the spoils system which compels government officeholders to act as parts of a political machine, i.e., the extension upward, downward, and outward of the principles of Civil Service." Despite the "whittling down" of these measures by the Congress, FDR would say, "it is a fact that legislation recommended by me, and adopted by the Congress, has succeeded over six years in applying Civil Service principles to a larger number of officeholders and administrative personnel than at any other time in our history, and to a far larger proportion of officeholders and administrative personnel in the federal government than in any state government in the country."<sup>110</sup>

With these bona fides presented, Roosevelt would announce that he was nevertheless vetoing the Hatch Act "because in its present form it is so poorly drawn that it not only fails to carry out those objectives but actually interferes with the progress already made toward them." FDR would then declare that he was sending the bill back to Congress with "specific suggestions as to how it may be revised so that it does carry out those objectives in full and with adequate draftsman's care to avoid constitutional, administrative, and practical difficulties arising from vagueness." The first of these suggestions was that the bill should be expanded and extended "to regulate (organizations

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<sup>110</sup> Proposed veto message, no date, "Special Files. New Deal Era. Subject File. Hatch Act, 1939" folder. box 253, Corcoran Papers, LC.

of) officeholders in those state, municipal, and other local governments...as effectively as federal officeholders are purported to be regulated." Otherwise, the balance of power in elections and campaigning would shift to local and state politicians and officials. "So-called 'political machines,'" FDR would assert, "composed of state and municipal officeholders have given the public no reason to believe that they have a higher regard for the public interest than federal officeholders who are members of national party organizations," adding, "We will not improve the morale of our political life by silencing and intimidating federal officeholders, and by leaving political management to state officials and professional politicians who know how things can be done within the law or who are willing to skate on the thin edges of the law."<sup>111</sup>

While presenting this objection in the name of good government, Cohen and Corcoran were political realists. They were well aware that the Hatch Act would damage the Administration, as the brief memo they attached to this proposed veto message indicates. "The fundamental ideas behind this treatment of the Hatch Bill," they wrote of their proposed veto, included that "By demanding that all state officials and employees be included (as they constitutionally certainly can) the resistance of members of Congress under pressure from state political machines may very well be increased to the point where there will be no bill passed at all." And, in the event that a revised bill that included these new regulations was somehow passed by Congress, Cohen and Corcoran predicted frankly, "If state officials are included in a revision of the bill the political situation will become so mixed up that it cannot help but result to advantage" for the New Dealers.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Untitled memo with penciled notation, "Hatch Bill," no date, "Special Files. New Deal Era. Subject File. Hatch Act, 1939" folder, box 253, Corcoran Papers, LC.

Turning, in the veto message, to the vagueness of the language of the Hatch Act, Cohen pointed to two examples. Section two of the Act forbade all people "employed in any administrative position by the United States to use his official authority for the purpose of affecting the election or nomination" of anyone running for federal office, Cohen noted, without ever defining "administrative position," "official authority," or "affecting." Such linguistic fuzziness, FDR could then argue, might prevent the Chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission from responding to a candidate who criticized the SEC in the course of a campaign. If he did, this could be interpreted as helping the candidate who defended the SEC. "Would that constitute 'affecting' the election of that candidate so that the Chairman of the Commission would go to jail for making an honest effort to educate the public about the scope and nature of his own duties?"<sup>113</sup>

Section 9(a) of the Hatch Act, similarly, forbade federal employees from taking "an active part in political management or in political campaigns," but they could "express their opinions on all political subjects." FDR could then object, asking "When does 'expression of opinion' grow up to be 'an active part' in political campaigns?" Could an employee of the Department of Agriculture tell his next-door neighbor that "Mr. A" is "a good candidate"? What if he were to say this at a country store, or at a lodge meeting, or on the public hustings? FDR could then encapsulate this dilemma in homespun language for the masses, asking rhetorically, "Somewhere the kitten becomes a cat. Where? Under this bill nobody knows." This vagueness, Roosevelt would conclude, had seriously flawed the Hatch Act. "Rarely has there been offered to a President," FDR would say, "for his signature so insidious a law, so poorly thought through, and so carelessly unregardful of the need of high officials to educate the public, and of the need of the common man to be protected in his civil liberties and in his Civil Service status."

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<sup>113</sup> Proposed veto message, cited above.

In its present form the bill strengthens the hands of those with easy political consciences and correspondingly weakens the hands of those public officials who are accustomed to speak frankly and to act openly. The conscientious public official will lean backwards while the less conscientious official will know his way around the law.

Cohen's solution to this dilemma was for Roosevelt to call for further expansion of civil service status, arguing that "the way to take such jobs out of politics is to remove them from the field of political patronage through Civil Service and to provide some sort of security of tenure--not to jeopardize even what security of tenure now exists under Civil Service laws by superseding legislation such as this."<sup>114</sup> This move, Cohen noted in his cover memo, could help distract the press from the reality of FDR vetoing a popular measure. The Administration could try to put the best foot forward, arguing, "Opportunity is given to parade the Civil Service accomplishments of the Administration and its remarkable freedom from scandal and graft."<sup>115</sup>

Cohen's final strategy in his proposed veto message was for FDR to call for greater federal participation in campaign financing, addressing "the growing concern of all decent citizens over the use of money in political campaigns with the great increase of concentrated wealth in this country--and the unmistakable indications that in the coming campaign the power of wealth will be abused as never before." However, the President would argue, "I am convinced that any realistic treatment of the abuse of political funds must reach the disparity between the amount of campaign contributions openly or secretly available to contending political parties."

Just as it is retrogression and not progress to build up and strengthen the political influence of state and local machines by imposing upon federal officeholders restrictions which do not equally apply to state and municipal officeholders; so it may be retrogression and not progress to build up and strengthen the influence of those who contribute to political campaigns in the hope of securing economic

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Untitled memo with penciled notation, "Hatch Bill," cited above.

advantages and privileges by imposing restrictions upon those who contribute to political campaigns in the hope of securing political jobs.

Given this, Roosevelt would then call for Congress to incorporate a system for public funding of elections, stating "It has always seemed to me unimportant whether the political faction with the wrong candidate and the wrong platform had too much money to spend, provided the party with the right candidate and the right platform had enough to spend to put its case fairly before the country. Given a decent advocacy to delineate the issues the American people can be trusted to find the truth." Therefore, FDR called for Congress to appropriate \$5,000,000 to each of the two major parties for the 1940 election, basing this figure on spending during the 1936 campaign. Any "substantial" third party would receive "proportionate sums." While "the entire plan might cost the federal treasury \$15,000,000, one-sixth of the cost of a battleship," this money "would save the American people hundreds of millions of dollars in eliminating trails of corruption in public life which are almost impossible to trace." Likening the American political system to "a seamless web," Roosevelt would conclude by arguing that "you cannot change the pattern of part of it without considering the effect upon all of it," and that the Hatch Act "in its present form...only creates greater evils than it seeks to cure" and "it can be effectively revised along the lines that I have indicated to do a really effective job of reshaping our political technique to the interest of an enduring democracy."<sup>116</sup>

This proposal to publicly fund electoral campaigns, Cohen acknowledged, was not very well thought out. However, it was a chance to introduce into the political debate "for the first time a note which should recur from now on--warning about the use of money by the other side." While government funding of election campaigns "may be sound--depending on circumstances, i.e., by whom it is to be spent, national committee officials or otherwise, and where the control of such officials will lie," Cohen felt that the main value of such a vague and far-reaching proposal was that "it will provide so much

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<sup>116</sup> Proposed veto message, cited above.

discussion that it will red-herring any headlines about the vetoing of the bill." By proposing a bold measure, Cohen argued that FDR could simultaneously claim the mantle of democracy while distracting the press and the public from the fact that he had actually vetoed the Hatch Act.<sup>117</sup>

FDR, however, was not persuaded by Corcoran and Cohen. The President received their veto draft while spending the weekend on his yacht Potomac with Harry Hopkins and the loyal Democratic operative Frank Walker. "These were not the best men to be with him at a time when he was considering such an important matter," Harold Ickes wrote in his diary. "Frank Walker," Ickes's former nemesis when he was head of the Advisory Committee on Allotments in 1935, "has no fight in him and doesn't know any politics," while Hopkins "is more or less licked, especially on the subject of WPA, and the Hatch bill was an outgrowth from WPA."<sup>118</sup> Although FDR's decision to sign the Hatch Act into law most likely was finalized during this weekend vacation with Hopkins and Walker, it makes more sense to view this step in the context of the previous year's controversy over relief in politics, FDR's attempted "purge" of the Democratic Party, and the growing strength of conservative elements in Congress. Indeed, the striking differences between Corcoran and Cohen's proposed veto and the message that FDR sent to Congress upon signing the Hatch Act--on the very last day before it would become law without his signature--capture this turn of events.

Seeking to dispel the "many misrepresentations, some unpremeditated, some deliberate, in regard to the attitude of the Executive Branch" to the Hatch Act, FDR set out in his message to Congress to write a new history of the Hatch Act and his administration's relationship to it. He portrayed the Hatch Act not as a bill that originated from conservative Democrats frustrated with FDR's attempts to expel them from their

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<sup>117</sup> Untitled memo with penciled notation, "Hatch Bill," cited above.

<sup>118</sup> Ickes, Secret Diary, 2:689. For Walker's opinion of Ickes, see Robert H. Ferrell, ed., FDR's Quiet Confidant: The Autobiography of Frank C. Walker (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1997), 99.

own party, but rather as Congress's just response to Roosevelt's own call for greater regulation of politics in relief. Quoting from an earlier message he had sent to Congress requesting more money for the WPA, Roosevelt reiterated that "It is my belief that improper political practices can be eliminated only by the imposition of rigid statutory regulations and penalties by the Congress, and that this should be done." Further, Congress should levy these penalties "not only upon persons within the administrative organization of the Works Progress Administration, but also upon outsiders who have in fact in many instances been the principal offenders in this regard." FDR's only caution was that "no legislation should be enacted which will in any way deprive workers on the Works Progress Administration program of the civil rights to which they are entitled in common with other citizens." This said, Roosevelt welcomed the Hatch Act, remarking that "it is well known that I have consistently advocated the objectives of the present bill" and that he was not worried by assertions that "partisan political reasons have entered largely into the passage of the bill" because "it is my hope that if properly administered the measure can be made an effective instrument of good Government."<sup>119</sup>

To this end, FDR turned in the remainder of his message to explicating his Attorney General's assessment of the rights of those who were covered by the Hatch Act. FDR reassured federal employees that they still had the right to attend political meetings, make voluntary campaign contributions to political parties and candidates, and express their political opinions and preferences publicly, so long as it was not part of a formal campaign. Indeed, FDR had secured reassurance from Hatch himself on these questions, three days before signing the bill into law.<sup>120</sup> Going further, Roosevelt also clarified that citizens who received government loans were not subject to the bill, and neither were

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<sup>119</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: Russell & Russell, 1939), 8:410.

<sup>120</sup> Porter, "Hatch Act of 1939," 160.

government employees who were members of political parties or labor unions, veterans who received government benefits, or recipients of unemployment insurance or old age pensions.<sup>121</sup>

FDR also noted, however, that the Hatch Act did not cover members of Congress or their employees, while it was unclear if the President, Vice President, and Cabinet officials were the only members of the executive branch who could speak freely.

Drawing on the rhetoric of patriotism, Roosevelt argued that

It can hardly be maintained that it is an American way of doing things to allow newspapers, magazines, radio broadcasters, members and employees of the Senate and House of Representatives and all kinds of candidates for public office and their friends to make any form of charge, misrepresentation, falsification or vituperation against the acts of any individual or group of individuals employed in the Executive Branch of the Federal Government with complete immunity against reply except by a handful of high executive officials. That, I repeat, would be un-American because it would be unfair, and the great mass of Americans like fair play and insist on it. They do not stand for any gag act.<sup>122</sup>

FDR then declared that under the counsel of the attorney general he was of the opinion that all federal employees could respond to attacks.

Only in the second-to-last paragraph of his message did FDR get around to discussing a central feature of the Cohen and Corcoran veto draft, what FDR termed "the fact that the bill does not in any way cover the multitude of State and local employees who greatly outnumber Federal employees and who may continue to take part in elections in which there are candidates of Federal office on the same ballot with candidates for State and local office." FDR suggested that a future session of Congress consider extending the Hatch Act so as to cover state and local government employees and concluded that "it is because for so many years I have striven in public life and in private life for decency in political campaigns, both on the part of Government servants, of

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<sup>121</sup> Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of FDR, 8:411-12.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 413-14.



candidates, of newspapers, of corporations and of individuals, that I regard this new legislation as at least a step in the right direction."<sup>123</sup>

While the Congress did take up FDR's proposal in passing a second Hatch Act in 1940, the Hatch Act of 1939 was troubling to many New Dealers. Senator Key Pittman, for example, complained to Jim Farley that Pittman's fellow Nevada Democrats were worried about the Hatch Act. In fact, at their annual Jackson Day dinner held in Carson City, Nevada, federal employees made their contributions to the Jackson Day Committee over the signatures of their wives or sisters, and more disturbingly, others did not attend at all. The presiding officer recognized the state employees by asking them to take a bow, but then said because of the Hatch Act he would not ask the federal employees present to stand and be recognized. "This further emphasizes the necessity for a definite interpretation of the Hatch Act," Pittman complained. "If our Federal employees have got to have their wives contribute to the Jackson Day Dinner it would probably be better for some of us if the Republicans had the Federal employees. When the Republicans get into power they won't permit anything like the Hatch Act to break up their organization."<sup>124</sup>

While some Democrats complained like Pittman, others explored the possibility of legal action. With the passage of the Hatch Act, Democratic lawyer Ernest Cuneo corresponded with the American Civil Liberties Union about bringing a test case of its constitutionality. The ACLU's head, Roger Baldwin, told Cuneo that the organization could not decide if it was worth pursuing this course of action, writing, "The presentation of your project of having a PWA employee make a speech and then sue out a writ to restrain his superior from firing him did not seem enough to go on." Baldwin asked

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 415.

<sup>124</sup> Key Pittman to James A. Farley, Jan. 15, 1940, "Hatch Act" folder, box 13, Key Pittman Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Cuneo for more information, noting that the ACLU "would like to see an outline of actually how you propose to test the law, and what points you would rely on, before we can indicate whether we could take charge of such proceedings."<sup>125</sup> The Hatch Act, however, was not reviewed by the courts until after World War II, with the Supreme Court upholding it by a margin of 4-3 in United Public Workers v. Mitchell and Oklahoma v. U.S. Civil Service Commission.<sup>126</sup>

Historians, when they have examined the Hatch Act at all, generally have followed the interpretation of political scientist E.E. Schattschneider, who in 1942 termed it "a blow struck by the congressional agents of the local bosses against party centralization in the name of presidential leadership."<sup>127</sup> Put simply, Schattschneider argued, "The congressional politicians who invented the Hatch Bill of 1939 as a retort to the purge of 1938 cut off their noses to spite their faces, for it is the local machines that fortify themselves with patronage extracted from the national government."<sup>128</sup> William Leuchtenburg, for example, draws directly on Schattschneider's explanation when he writes "The Hatch Act weakened the hold of factions of federal office holders on the Democratic party, and permitted other groups--local bosses, rural conservatives entrenched in state legislatures, or labor unions--to deal themselves into a share of control."<sup>129</sup> While this is correct, it is seriously incomplete.

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<sup>125</sup> Roger Baldwin to Ernest Cuneo, Aug 29, 1939; and see also Jerome M. Britchey to Ernest Cuneo c/o Drew Pearson, Aug. 18, 1939, both in "Hatch Act" folder, box 25, Ernest Cuneo Papers, FDRL.

<sup>126</sup> Ferrel Heady, "The Hatch Act Decisions," American Political Science Review 61 (Aug. 1947): 687-99; L.V. Howard, "Federal Restrictions on the Political Activity of Government Employees," American Political Science Review 35 (June 1941): 470-89. The 4-3 margin was because Justice Robert Jackson was prosecuting the Nuremberg Trials and Justice Frank Murphy excused himself, as he had previously decided the Hatch Act was constitutional while serving as Attorney General.

<sup>127</sup> E.E. Schattschneider, Party Government (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1942), 166-67.

<sup>128</sup> Schattschneider, Party Government, 167.

<sup>129</sup> Leuchtenburg, FDR and the New Deal, 270. Other important syntheses of the New Deal literature neglect the Hatch Act entirely or treat it in one sentence; see Badger, New Deal: The Depression Years and Roger Biles, A New Deal for the American People (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991), 151.

As this chapter has shown, the debate over the Hatch Act went to the core of questions about the political significance and viability of the WPA specifically, and the New Deal in general. An Irish-American foreman on a Boston WPA project realized this when he called together the one hundred workers under his supervision at the close of the work day. "I want to warn ye fellers against political activity," he said. "There is a bird named Hatch who comes from Texas [sic] and is a Member of Congress. While the other Congressmen were not looking he put through a law that makes it a crime for you or me to talk politics, attend political rallies, wear the button of any candidate or even mention the name of any candidate," he told them. If you do any of these things, "you not only lose your job but you may go to prison and I'm telling yer to watch out." However, the foreman concluded, "Just one more word before dismissing you, if any of you birds come back to work Election Day without having voted for a lame man, well---it will be just too bad."<sup>130</sup>

While the Hatch Act ultimately did not keep that "lame man" from getting elected to two more terms as president, it did signal the growing unpopularity and political liability of public works programs, and it provided a common point-of-reference for both future liberals and conservatives, looking to expand or roll back the welfare state. As historian Anthony Badger has observed, the strength of conservative stereotypes about the WPA can in part explain Lyndon Johnson's refusal to bring back the WPA as part of the War on Poverty. Johnson, who had run the National Youth Administration in Texas for another Southern New Dealer, Aubrey Williams, knew from first-hand experience the political costs and benefits of works programs. Ironically, another president with a less developed sense of history, whose father had led the WPA in Dixon, Illinois, had a rather different view of the WPA. "Now a lot of people remember it as boondoggles and raking

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<sup>130</sup> William H. O'Brien to Margaret LeHand, Sept. 20, 1940, "OF 252a Permitting Government Employees to Hold Elective Office" folder, OF 252-A, FDR Papers, FDRL.

leaves," observed Ronald Reagan, and "Maybe in some places it was. Maybe in the city machines or something. But I can take you to our town and show you things, like a river front that I used to hike through once that was a swamp and is now a beautiful park place built by WPA."<sup>131</sup>

The passage of the Hatch Act signaled a political backlash against the concrete impact that New Deal public works programs had on politics at the state and local levels. Historian Alan Brinkley recently used the phrase "the lost language of contemporary American liberalism" in reference to FDR's famous call-to-arms in the 1936 election.<sup>132</sup> Equally lost, but far less famous, has been Harry Hopkins's assertion that the state's taxing and spending powers can be used to forge an electoral coalition. Restoring this statement to discussions of New Deal liberalism and its fate helps to clarify the power and controversial character of the New Deal state, and of the importance of public works programs such as the WPA to this state. These programs stretched far beyond their well-known impact on the nation's artists in their significance, remaking the political and physical landscapes of the country.<sup>133</sup> While the scale of this spending was new, changing the political map of the country while developing the national estate, in many ways it represents the endpoint of what Richard McCormick has labeled the distributive "party period" in American politics.<sup>134</sup> Although conservative opponents of the New

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<sup>131</sup> Badger, New Deal: The Depression Years, 215. For more on the connection between LBJ and New Deal liberalism, see Schwarz, New Dealers, 264-84, and Anthony J. Badger, "Whatever Happened to Roosevelt's New Generation of Southerners?" in Robert A. Garson and Stuart S. Kidd, eds., The Roosevelt Years: New Perspectives on American History, 1933-1945 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 122-38.

<sup>132</sup> Received with thunderous applause in New York's Madison Square Garden, FDR declared "I should like to have it said of my first administration that in it the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match. I should like to have it said of my second administration that in it these forces met their master." Quoted in Alan Brinkley, "Liberalism's Third Crisis," The American Prospect no. 21 (spring 1995): 34.

<sup>133</sup> There is a large literature on the WPA's art, theater, writing, and music projects; the best overview of these programs remains William F. McDonald, Federal Relief Administration and the Arts: The Origins and Administrative History of the Arts Projects of the Works Progress Administration (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1969).

<sup>134</sup> McCormick, Party Period and Public Policy.

Deal tried to put an end to this period by passing the Hatch Act, New Dealers attempted to recover from this setback. With the coming of world war, these reformers pushed to carve out a more secure place for public works programs in the American state.

## CHAPTER SIX

PUBLIC WORKS AND NEW DEAL LIBERALISM  
IN REORGANIZATION AND WAR

Set against the backdrop of the Supreme Court-packing debacle and the "Roosevelt Recession" of 1937-38, proposals in 1937 and 1938 for the reorganization of the executive branch of government drew concern from an increasingly conservative Congress. This concern quickly turned into a debate over whether too much power was being concentrated in the hands of a dictatorial, king-like president.<sup>1</sup> After an initial reorganization plan presented by the President's Committee on Administrative Management was soundly defeated in 1938, a more limited measure made it through Congress in 1939 and was signed into law. While much of the reorganization controversy revolved around seemingly neutral topics, such as how best to consolidate the planning of budgeting and accounts in the executive branch, surprisingly, the fate of the controversial public works programs was not subjected to serious debate. In 1939 the public construction functions of the government were, "in the interests of economy and efficiency," consolidated in a new organization, the Federal Works Agency. The FWA contained the newly renamed Work Projects Administration (formerly Works Progress Administration), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Public Buildings Administration (formerly in the Treasury Department), the Public Roads Administration (transferred from the Agriculture Department), and the United States Housing Authority.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The trajectory from municipal reform during the progressive era to executive reorganization in the New Deal is best traced by Barry Dean Karl, Executive Reorganization and Reform in the New Deal: The Genesis of Administrative Management, 1900-1939 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963); for the political implications of this administrative reform see Richard Polenberg, Reorganizing Roosevelt's Government, 1936-1939: The Controversy over Executive Reorganization (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); James T. Patterson, Congressional Conservatism and the New Deal: The Growth of the Conservative Coalition in Congress, 1933-1939 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), 214-29; 299-302; Clyde P. Weed, The Nemesis of Reform: The Republican Party during the New Deal (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 179-83; and Alan Brinkley, The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 19-24.

<sup>2</sup> Floyd Dell, draft of "Federal Works Agency" entry for Encyclopaedia Americana, Dec. 5, 1939, "Federal Works Agency" folder, box 1, entry 746, "Division of Information. Publications of the Federal Works

While this consolidation of agencies was presented "in the interests of economy and efficiency," this justification demands to be placed in a broader context. Revisiting these years of executive reorganization and war provides a useful point-of-entry for reconsidering the historical legacy of New Deal public works. For too long, FDR's glib claim that it was time for "Dr. Win-the-War" to replace "Dr. New Deal" has shaped the storyline for most chroniclers of the fortunes of New Deal liberalism in wartime.<sup>3</sup> This interpretive stance has had two results. The first is a succession of accounts that observe how the war distracted FDR from continuing the New Deal and grieve over the "honorable discharge" he issued to the WPA in 1943.<sup>4</sup> While this reading of history, as David M. Kennedy has pointed out, accurately reflects the sensibilities of such contemporary New Deal notables as Harold Ickes, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Leon Henderson, this chapter argues that this approach neglects crucial activities carried out by the New Deal's central enterprise, the public works programs.<sup>5</sup> Rather than quietly accept

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Agency and Subordinate Agencies, 1936-1942," Record Group 69, Records of the Work Projects Administration, National Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Transcript of Dec. 28, 1943 press conference, in The Press Conferences of Franklin D. Roosevelt (Hyde Park, NY: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, 1957), reel 11.

<sup>4</sup> The most important recent treatment of New Deal social policy follows this interpretive tradition; see Edwin Amenta, Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). Synthetic treatments of the New Deal--such as William E. Leuchtenburg's Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 (New York: Harper & Row, 1963)--generally end in 1940, thus avoiding the question. Biographies of FDR, ER, and prominent New Dealers such as WPA head Harry Hopkins and PWA head Harold Ickes, however, cleave to this theme. Among the many works available, for FDR, see Frank Freidel, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990); and James MacGregor Burns, Roosevelt: The Soldier of Freedom (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970); for ER, while Blanche Wiesen Cook, Eleanor Roosevelt 2 vols. to date (New York: Penguin Books, 1992-), has yet to reach 1939 see Allida M. Black, Casting Her Own Shadow: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Shaping of Postwar Liberalism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); for Ickes, see T.H. Watkins, Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes (New York: Henry Holt, 1990); and for Hopkins and the WPA, see Robert Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History, rev. ed. (New York: Gosset & Dunlap, 1950); Searle F. Charles, Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1963); and George McJimsey, Harry Hopkins: Ally of the Poor and Defender of Democracy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> David M. Kennedy, Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 623.

that war and a more conservative Congress meant the curtailment of public works projects, various New Dealers combined--and for a time, quite successfully--the emergency presented by the approach of war with their desire to use public works projects to reduce unemployment and develop the nation's infrastructure. They quickly realized that justifying public works projects as necessary wartime spending provided a powerful rationale for continuing to spend money on programs that were becoming increasingly unpopular. In this chapter, I argue that this reorientation was much more than a mere rhetorical move or political gambit; rather, it drew upon the long engagement of the New Deal with building public works. Indeed, with World War II New Dealers no longer had to rely upon the mere "analogue" of war when building a case for further reforms. They could now point to war, itself.<sup>6</sup> In the name of wartime necessity the public works programs produced substantial infrastructure throughout the nation, building hundreds of airports, housing for defense workers, and improving miles of roads, to name but several of their endeavors. For the first time, they even provided job training for the unemployed, a step that had long been blocked by organized labor. Beginning from the well-founded proposition that, as one historian put it, defense spending during World War II qualifies "by far" as "the largest public works project in the nation's history," this chapter explores the place of New Deal public works programs in the broader defense effort, pre-dating American entry into the war.<sup>7</sup> New Deal public works from 1938 to 1945 were marked by a return to heavier construction and a renewal of the emphasis on efficiency in public works that epitomized Harold Ickes's PWA.

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<sup>6</sup> For the classic account of the widespread use of wartime metaphors by New Dealers, see William Leuchtenburg's essay, "The New Deal and the Analogue of War," revised and reprinted in William E. Leuchtenburg, The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 35-75. An insightful and often-overlooked analysis of the place of World War II in New Dealer arguments for the continuation of reform is found in Richard Polenberg, "The Decline of the New Deal, 1937-1940," in John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., The New Deal: The National Level (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1975), 246-66; esp. 262-63.

<sup>7</sup> James T. Patterson, Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.



The second interpretation stemming from the "Dr. Win-the-War--Dr. New Deal" dichotomy has been presented by historians who seek to downplay the significance of Roosevelt's periodization, usually in order to highlight the potential for reform in a "third" New Deal, variously following 1937 or 1938. These scholars stress that reform did not cease with the "second" New Deal of 1935. Rather, New Dealers continued to make important advances in policy making, such as the passage of the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act in 1937 and the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938, and scored an important victory by expanding the administrative capacity of the American state via the reorganization of the executive branch of the federal government.<sup>8</sup> Alan Brinkley's important work is a less optimistic variation on this "third" New Deal periodization. Following Herbert Stein's The Fiscal Revolution in America, Brinkley argues that the key moment for New Deal liberalism was not wartime, but rather the 1937-38 "Roosevelt Recession." For Brinkley, this historical moment was marked by the New Deal's embrace of expansionary fiscal policy at the expense of a strong regulatory state--the end of reform, in other words.<sup>9</sup> This chapter's analysis of the public works programs lends

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<sup>8</sup> See Barry Dean Karl, The Uneasy State: The United States from 1915 to 1945 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); John W. Jeffries, "A 'Third New Deal'? Liberal Policy and the American State, 1937-1945," Journal of Policy History 8 (1996): 387-409; Jeffries, "The 'New' New Deal: FDR and American Liberalism, 1937-1945," Political Science Quarterly 105 (fall 1990): 397-418; and see also Jeffries, Wartime America: The World War II Home Front (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 145-69.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Brinkley, "The New Deal and the Idea of the State," in Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle, eds., The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); and Brinkley, End of Reform. Brinkley's revision of his essential 1988 essay reinforces the periodization of this shift in New Deal liberalism; see "The Late New Deal and the Idea of the State," in Alan Brinkley, Liberalism and Its Discontents (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 37-62. While Brinkley has alerted us to a significant reorientation within New Deal liberalism, his timeline ignores the multifaceted relationship between New Deal liberalism and the public works programs, failing to consider either their role as producers of state-financed infrastructure, as this dissertation argues and as Jordan A. Schwarz began to do in his The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), or as providers of relief, as Edwin Amenta has asserted in Bold Relief.

Brinkley, though, has acknowledged the importance of Schwarz's position. Reflecting on "The New Deal as Public Investment," Brinkley writes that "one of the New Deal's most important legacies is also one of its least remembered: its far-reaching programs of public investment, which reshaped the nation's economic landscape" and "spent billions in government funds on great public projects that helped not only to alleviate the immediate problems of unemployment and economic stagnation but also to make permanent contributions to the nation's economic development." See Brinkley, "The Economy, the Community, and the Public Sector," in Stanley B. Greenberg and Theda Skocpol, eds., The New Majority:

some credence to this viewpoint, but it also strongly cautions against a wholehearted embrace of this line of argument.

The "Dr. Win-the-War--Dr. New Deal" dichotomy, this chapter argues, has served mainly to obscure the continuities and overlaps between the New Deal and wartime states, continuities that can be discerned by attending to the activities of the New Deal's public works programs.<sup>10</sup> Although the military went through a professionalization and centralization process before and during World War I, on the eve of World War II it suffered from what one historian has termed "years of willful neglect of military preparedness."<sup>11</sup> As a result of this neglect, the American state constructed during wartime had deep and vital roots in the state structure built by the New Deal, with the public works programs providing state capacities essential to the preparedness effort.<sup>12</sup>

Although the reorganized New Deal public works programs did succeed in using the war to justify their continued existence for a time, this victory came at certain costs. Nowhere can these costs be better observed than by looking at the most socially progressive of the New Deal's works programs, the WPA. With the building of wartime public works the WPA increasingly discarded its principle method of construction--force

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Toward a Popular Progressive Politics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 42-56; esp. 44-45; 45-46; see also Brinkley, "Liberals and Public Investment: Recovering a Lost Legacy," The American Prospect no. 13 (spring 1993): 81-86; and Brinkley, End of Reform, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Two recent works that explore the links between the New Deal and World War II are Bartholomew H. Sparrow, From the Outside In: World War II and the American State (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Gregory M. Hooks, Forging the Military-Industrial Complex: World War II's Battle of the Potomac (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Skowronek, Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 212-47; Kennedy, Freedom from Fear, 476.

<sup>12</sup> Over twenty years following the beginning of World War II, Alice O'Connor has argued, precisely the reverse arrangement occurred. Instead of welfare programs providing state capacities to the military, in the 1960s the military provided important state capacities to the government programs fighting the War on Poverty. Alice O'Connor, "Neither Charity Nor Relief: The War on Poverty and the Effort to Redefine the Basis of Social Provision," in Donald T. Critchlow and Charles H. Parker, eds., With Us Always: A History of Private Charity and Public Welfare (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 191-210, esp. 196-99.

account, in which the WPA put people to work directly in order to reduce unemployment—in favor of cost-plus contracting, with its emphasis on timely production and willingness to sacrifice reducing unemployment in order to get the job done. More notably, however, New Dealers within the WPA demonstrated the extent to which they were willing to function in the name of wartime emergency when they played a crucial role in executing Executive Order 9066, interning Japanese Americans in relocation camps on the West Coast. This was not the New Deal's finest hour, but this historical moment merits close attention as it best signifies the consequences of the reorganization and execution of public works programs "in the interests of economy and efficiency."<sup>13</sup>

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Both the WPA and PWA faced significant changes in leadership as executive reorganization became a reality. By the end of 1938, in the midst of the battle over executive reorganization (and following a serious illness), Harry Hopkins had resigned from the WPA and had been nominated by FDR to become Secretary of Commerce. This shift in Hopkins's responsibilities was part of a short-lived process of positioning Hopkins for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1940—in addition to his sincere concern for the poor, Hopkins also possessed, in the words of Eric Goldman, "a highly developed ability to confuse advancing mankind with advancing Harry Hopkins."<sup>14</sup> Hopkins was not followed at WPA, however, by his assistant and fellow New Dealer, Aubrey Williams. Williams, also head of the National Youth Administration and a good friend of

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<sup>13</sup> A more optimistic account of the potential of war to refuel the New Deal is Meg Jacobs, "How About Some Meat?: The Office of Price Administration, Consumption Politics, and State Building from the Bottom Up, 1941-1946," *Journal of American History* 84 (Dec. 1997): 910-41; other, more cautionary treatments include Mark H. Leff, "The Politics of Sacrifice on the American Home Front in World War II," *Journal of American History* 77 (March 1991): 1296-1318; David Plotke, *Building a Democratic Political Order: Reshaping American Liberalism in the 1930s and 1940s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Sparrow, *From the Outside In*; Hooks, *Forging the Military-Industrial Complex*; and John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1977 [1952]), 257.

Eleanor Roosevelt, was too controversial a choice for FDR to make. Before the 1938 elections Williams, a progressive Southerner with a remarkable capacity for making ill-timed remarks, had told a Workers Alliance meeting of WPA workers, "I don't need to tell you. You know your friends well. Just judge the folk who come and ask for your support by the crowd they run with. Vote to keep our friends in power."<sup>15</sup> Reports of this statement in the press caused a firestorm of criticism. Williams was perceived to be blatantly encouraging the members of a national Socialist-Communist organization, the Workers Alliance, to vote as FDR told them in order to preserve their government paychecks. Williams wrote to Senator Morris Sheppard, the conservative Texas Democrat who was chairing an investigation into politics in the public works programs, defending his statement. Claiming that he was misquoted, Williams wrote that he simply "pointed out to them [the WPA workers] that in a democracy it was important for them to keep in office those who had their point of view just as their opponents think it important to remove from office those who have their point of view. There was nothing political in what I said nor were any political implications intended." However, Williams continued, "It does so happen...that there are a few people so steeped in partisan politics that they read insidious political motives into every statement of a public official."<sup>16</sup> This statement did not stop the bleeding. As a result of his ill-timed remarks, after Hopkins left WPA at the close of 1938, Williams did not take his place. Williams recalled that FDR told him, "I can't appoint you to succeed Harry. The situation on the Hill is such that I can't do it." FDR instead named Army Colonel Francis P. Harrington, who had

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<sup>15</sup> John A. Salmond, *A Southern Rebel: The Life and Times of Aubrey Willis Williams, 1890-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 97-98.

<sup>16</sup> Aubrey Williams to Morris Sheppard, June 28, 1938, "310 Cong. Campaign Expenditure Investigating Committee" folder, box 661, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 310 General Correspondence." RG 69, NA.

worked with Hopkins since 1935, to head the WPA.<sup>17</sup> Williams, crushed and disappointed, resigned his WPA position in order to concentrate his efforts at the NYA.

Harrington did not face Senate confirmation since he was an officer in the Army Corps of Engineers, although some members of the House had misgivings over his paucity of experience as a business executive and considered calling for a three-man panel to run WPA instead.<sup>18</sup> Born in Bristol, Virginia, in 1887, Harrington was a young man when the U.S. acquired France's rights to the Panama Canal in 1904. Inspired by this awesome project, he recalled, he decided to attend West Point and join the Army Corps of Engineers. He graduated second in his class in 1909, and subsequently, in 1924, worked at the Panama Canal himself as chief engineer, gaining experience supervising labor on a large scale. In 1935 he was assigned to the WPA for three months to help plan its organization; he soon stayed on as a permanent addition to Hopkins's staff, and was named WPA chief engineer in October 1935. Hopkins, who was at first "cool" to the notion of using military personnel in the WPA, soon warmed to the political advantages that an "apolitical" Army engineer could provide. Harrington, who liked to boast that he had never voted, provided a reassuring counterweight to brash New Dealers such as Williams. A tall man with distinguished gray hair, Harrington--nicknamed "Pink" because of his ruddy complexion--prided himself on his efficient administrative style, and worked with a framed George Washington quotation behind his desk: "Do not suffer your good nature, when application is made, to say yes when you ought to say no--remember

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<sup>17</sup> Salmond, A Southern Rebel, 102.

<sup>18</sup> Alfred F. Beiter to Harold L. Ickes, June 12, 1939, "Public Works 40) 1939 May-Dec." folder, box 255. Harold L. Ickes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; "Proceedings Work Project Administrators. National Meeting. Sevens Hotel, July 12-13, 1939. Chicago, Illinois," "100 Administrative July-Sept 35" folder, box 71, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration." RG 69, NA.

that it is a public, not a private, cause that is to be injured or benefited by your decision."<sup>19</sup>

While liberal supporters of the WPA were concerned by Harrington's appointment--notably the WPA employees union, the Workers Alliance--David Lasser, the Alliance's executive secretary, cautiously tried to work with Harrington. Lasser, reported the New York City Herald-Tribune, "not only refrained from attacking Colonel Harrington, other than as the 'Army type' to be avoided in civilian office, but accepted the President's dilemma which forced the compromise for political reasons, and promised peace with the new WPA administrator." The more gleeful Washington Herald Times, on the other hand, reported of Harrington's appointment that "it came as a horrid discovery to Messrs. Lasser and Benjamin, the patrons of the Workers Alliance, that he could say no even to them, who had never heard the word before in their presence."<sup>20</sup>

At his first press conference as head of the WPA, Harrington faced two major issues. First, he was asked if his military background meant that the WPA would be taking more of a role in national defense. Harrington gave a noncommittal reply, indicating only that to the extent the WPA's projects had previously provided for the national defense, they would continue. "I don't think we are going to be building artillery or anything like that. There are certain phases of things that we have been doing all the time, perhaps the airport program more particularly than any other one." Second, the press queried him on the intersection of public works programs with politics. Harrington answered this question at some length. "That question has got so many implications that

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<sup>19</sup> My portrait of Harrington draws on newspaper clippings from New York Herald-Tribune, Dec. 31, 1938; Hartford Times, March 3, 1939; Washington Times-Herald, Jan. 1, 1939; Washington Post, Oct. 1, 1940; and ibid., Oct. 2, 1940; Washington Times Herald, Oct. 2, 1940; WPA memorandum from Roscoe Wright to Gilfond, Aug. 7, 1939; and "Colonel Harrington" profile, Nov. 16, 1939; all in "Colonel F.C. Harrington Administrator" folder, box 1, entry 736, "Division of Information. Photographs and Biographical Information about WPA Officials, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA; Lawrence Westbrook to Robert Sherwood, "H.L.H. and the Army Engineers," Oct. 13, 1947, "Westbrook, Lawrence" folder, box 94. Isador Lubin Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; and Sherwood, Roosevelt and Hopkins, 75-76; 106.

<sup>20</sup> New York Herald Tribune, Dec. 31, 1938; and Washington Herald Times, Jan. 1, 1939; cited above.

I don't want to give a categorical answer. I told you what I think, that the money should go where it belongs. That obviously means the fellow who is unemployed, whether he is a Democrat or a Republican or whatever he may be."<sup>21</sup>

Six weeks after taking over the WPA, Harrington traveled to the annual national meeting of WPA administrators, held in Chicago. After joking about rumors that he had plans to militarize the WPA, forcing everyone to salute and march in formation, Harrington turned once again to politics and relief. "In the six weeks since my appointment," Harrington reflected, "numerous people have come around and said, 'Colonel, are there going to be any politics in WPA?' It's like the question, 'Have you stopped beating your wife?' Whichever way you answer it is ambiguous. By that I mean that if I say 'Yes,' I make the headlines; if I say 'No,' just categorically, it doesn't mean much of anything. That is because by saying 'No,' I cannot mean you are going to be able to shut this vast organization up in a glass cage and run it without any contact with senators and members of Congress and governors and mayors and county commissioners."

The very essence of our enterprise requires that we do deal with those people, and deal with them in a proper way and gain their confidence, and to that extent there will continue to be political contacts in the WPA, and there must continue to be political contracts. The success of the state administrator, I feel, is measured largely by the fact that he gains the confidence of the people, the influential people, in his community, including the officials of all of the political subdivisions in it. Certainly a senator, a member of Congress duly elected, is entitled to recommend people for positions, and his recommendations should be given careful consideration. If they are based on recommending people that can do jobs, I will be very glad if those people can be given jobs, but if his recommendations are based on paying political debts, or on getting somebody in key positions in the WPA as a representative of the person who recommends

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<sup>21</sup> Colonel Francis P. Harrington Press Conference, Dec. 23, 1938, "Col. Harrington Press Conferences" folder, box 3, entry 737, "Division of Information. Administrative Speeches, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

them, then so far as that can be detected, those recommendations should be thrown into the waste basket.<sup>22</sup>

While Harrington's air of apolitical military efficiency did quiet critics of the WPA's involvement with local politics, it did not please everyone. Six months after Harrington assumed his post, several African-American WPA administrators appealed to him directly, concerned about the WPA's treatment of blacks after the executive reorganization of the program into the FWA. "There is too little opportunity," they wrote, "for skilled employment on construction projects and for foremen and supervisors on such projects. There are far too few non-relief workers. In some states where the Negro population and the WPA workers form a large percentage of the total, the number of non-relief workers is infinitesimal. There are no Negro women employed in Washington by the Federal office above the grade of secretary. Very few clerical workers, to say nothing of professional employees, are connected with the various State Administrations." The authors continued, writing, "In our judgment we need [administrative] machinery, both to get more Negroes on projects, particularly of the professional and service type, and also to assist in evaluating and reducing complaints of racial discrimination." To accomplish this, they proposed that the race relations unit of the WPA be expanded and used to handle complaints or project matters that dealt specifically with African-Americans, and that the WPA move to encourage the employment of African-Americans in state organizations which did not employ blacks.<sup>23</sup> While there is no record of Harrington's response to this appeal, the problems these African-American administrators drew to Harrington's attention were not new. Clearly,

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<sup>22</sup> "Proceedings of National Meeting of Works Progress Administrators," Feb. 6, 1939, "100 Administrative Feb-Mar 39" folder, box 70, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administrative," RG 69, NA.

<sup>23</sup> Alfred Edgar Smith, T. Arnold Hill, James A. Atkins, Sterling Brown, Dutton Ferguson, Eugene Holmes, and John W. Whitten to F.C. Harrington, June 23, 1939, "1939 Letters To: A-Z" folder, box 1, entry 725, "Division of Information. Office File of Dutton Ferguson, 1938-1939. Correspondence and Reports," RG 69, NA.



though, with Hopkins's departure and with executive reorganization changing the shape of the government, they were concerned about the ability of the WPA to address these problems under Harrington's leadership.

### **Scientific Management and Public Works: John Carmody and the Federal Works Agency**

Fast on the heels of the change in administration at Work Projects Administration came changes at the New Deal's oldest public works program, Harold Ickes's Public Works Administration. The story of how John Carmody, one-time engineer with Harry Hopkins's short-lived Civil Works Administration and later head of the Rural Electrification Administration, became Federal Works Administrator--with authority over the WPA, PWA, Public Buildings Administration, the Public Roads Administration, and the U.S. Housing Authority--and dislodged Harold Ickes from the helm of the PWA, is circuitous. The implications of Carmody's appointment, however, were important: FDR chose him to supervise all the public construction functions of the federal government. Placing these functions together in one agency presented the potential for the New Deal to consolidate and establish its emergency public works programs on a permanent basis within the American state.

A long-time advocate of the principles of scientific management and Taylorism, Carmody also traced his intellectual roots back to the great University of Wisconsin labor economist John R. Commons, on one occasion going so far as to assert that "I was among the first to advocate public employment offices in the United States."<sup>24</sup> Carmody had resigned his REA position with a glowing reputation as an efficient and progressive administrator after the agency had been transferred to the Department of Agriculture.

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<sup>24</sup> "Proceedings of the National Meeting of the Works Progress Administration," July 2-3, 1941, "100 Appropriations (Material from Dort) Various Drafts" folder, box 75, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

FDR then offered Carmody a position as head of the Federal Communications Commission, and after Carmody declined, FDR next proposed that Carmody take the chairmanship of the Federal Power Commission. As Carmody later recalled, "I said, 'Mr. President, what I really want is the Administration of Federal Works.'" FDR replied that Ickes had already asked him for that job, but when FDR told him he was not going to appoint him to the position, Ickes had proposed that Oscar Chapman--Ickes's assistant; later Secretary of the Interior under President Truman--be given the job. Carmody interrupted FDR, telling him "Oscar is a lawyer. Federal Works is a big construction operation; I'm a construction man." FDR evidently agreed; Carmody got the job. FDR concluded their conversation referring to Ickes's skill at expanding his bureaucratic reach, noting that "Harold is a hog."<sup>25</sup>

While it remains unclear how Carmody came to the attention of FDR, there are some clues as to how Carmody did not receive his job. Upon receiving a letter from Postmaster General James A. Farley congratulating him on his appointment to FWA, Carmody scrawled on the letter, "Note--this one appointment (among others, I suppose) that Jim didn't have anything to do with."<sup>26</sup> Similarly, after reading an item in the "Periscope" section of Newsweek that asserted that Harry Hopkins was "chiefly responsible" for Carmody's selection as Federal Works Administrator, Carmody noted in the margin "? not so."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as savvy a political operator as Farley was without a clue as to how Carmody achieved his position, noting in his diary that "John Carmody was

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<sup>25</sup> John M. Carmody to Colette Cummiskey, September 12, 1958, "Carmody Book Notes by Catherine from past correspondence. Federal Works Agency" folder, box 261, John M. Carmody Papers, FDRL; see also Carmody marginalia on John B. Haggerty to John M. Carmody, July 3, 1939, "Congratulatory letters 700a (acknowledgments)" folder, box 120, Carmody Papers, FDRL; "Biographical Sketch" of Carmody, no date, "John M. Carmody" folder, box 1, entry 736, "Division of Information. Photographs and Biographical Information about WPA Officials, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA; and Columbia University Oral History Project, "The Reminiscences of John Michael Carmody," 572-75.

<sup>26</sup> Carmody marginalia on James A. Farley to John M. Carmody, June 24, 1939, "Congratulatory Letters," book 2, box 120, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>27</sup> Carmody marginalia on clipping from Newsweek, July 3, 1939, no page, *ibid*.

made Administrator of Federal Works Agency and no one seems to know how he got it."<sup>28</sup> Thomas Corcoran and Benjamin V. Cohen, who reportedly held "more influence at the White House and, through the White House, are more of a force throughout the entire reaches of the government than any pair of statesmen in Washington," had recommended Carmody to FDR not for the FWA position but for the Federal Power Commission vacancy. Carmody later recalled that Jacob Baker, who had worked with Hopkins in FERA and WPA, along with progressive Senator George Norris, had talked him up to the President. Perhaps these recommendations had an impact, Carmody concluded.<sup>29</sup>

Public reaction to Carmody's appointment was positive. Columnists Joseph Alsop and Robert Kitner portrayed the move as part of a broader set of decisions designed to position the Democratic party for the 1940 electoral campaign. While FDR pleased conservative Democrats by choosing RFC head Jesse Jones, a Texan, to head the Federal Loan Agency, he chose Carmody for FWA because Carmody was "a member of the New Deal group, friendly with the leaders and especially known for his enthusiasm for the New Deal policy." Carmody, Alsop and Kitner concluded, is "a 'safe man' from the New Dealers's standpoint, just as Jones is not." Indeed, as evidence of Carmody's New Dealer credentials, the columnists pointed not only to Carmody's work with Hopkins's FERA and CWA, and to Carmody's tenure at the REA, but also to the fact that Ickes, of all people, had recently "signified the New Dealers' faith in Carmody by offering him the place of administrator of the Bonneville dam project."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> James A. Farley Diary, November 30, 1939, "Private File 1939 November" folder, box 44, James A. Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>29</sup> Carmody Oral History, 572-75; reporter's assessment of Corcoran and Cohen quoted in Brinkley, End of Reform, 54-55; and see Schwarz, New Dealers, 138-45.

<sup>30</sup> Clipping of Joseph Alsop and Robert Kitner's column from the Washington Star, June 29, 1939, untitled folder, box 111, Carmody Papers, FDRL; for Carmody's response to Ickes, declining his offer of the Bonneville Project, see John M. Carmody to Harold L. Ickes, March 29, 1939, "I" folder, box 67, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

While Alsop and Kitner touted Carmody's appeal to New Dealers, other journalists noted how his career as a businessman and an engineer with a fierce interest in scientific management and Taylorism neutralized opposition from conservatives.<sup>31</sup> "When utility executives and labor leaders join with members of the Dies committee on un-American activities and the La Follette civil liberties committee," wrote one scribe, "in praise of John Michael Carmody, whom President Roosevelt has placed in charge of the new federal works agency, that is news."<sup>32</sup> Newspapers played up his gregarious personality with headlines such as "Powerhouse John Carmody Gets Job of Handling U.S. Spending: Big and Irish, He's Practical." Journalists described him as "big and ruddy," adding "he has a voice which can be heard in any part of a government building."<sup>33</sup> This booming voice gained a less favorable reception from Ickes, who referred to Carmody's speaking style as "his hog-calling voice."<sup>34</sup> Farley also noted that "Carmody has a very high voice that annoys people," speculating that Carmody's tendency to make himself heard on every last issue might cut into his political clout. When Carmody, Jesse Jones, and Paul McNutt, head of the Federal Security Agency, missed several meetings of the Cabinet, Farley thought that "no doubt Carmody's high voice accounts for their failure to appear at more Cabinet meetings." While McNutt and Jones, Farley wrote, "are very quiet and answered questions put to them regarding their respective agencies.....Carmody was in on everything," adding, "It is funny how a person talks himself out of things." Farley qualified this assessment, though, predicting that "No

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<sup>31</sup> My portrait of Carmody draws on the Carmody Oral History, esp. 296-315; and Bonnie Fox Schwartz, The Civil Works Administration, 1933-1934: The Business of Emergency Employment in the New Deal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 54-56.

<sup>32</sup> Clipping from the Boston Globe, July 18 [?], 1939, untitled folder, box 111, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>33</sup> Clipping from the Louisville Courier-Journal, June 26, 1939; and clipping from the Boston Globe, July 18 [?], 1939, both in untitled folder, box 111, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>34</sup> The Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954) 3:223.

doubt [Carmody] will do a job efficiently and well. He will probably knock everyone out of the way in his path but he will do the job all right."<sup>35</sup>

Ickes, however, did his part to see that Carmody's tenure at the Federal Works Agency got off to a rocky start. A visit from New Dealer-turned-columnist Hugh Johnson led Ickes to conclude that "Johnson is going to express himself on the Carmody appointment in vigorous terms."<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Johnson did just that. On June 26, 1939, in his nationally syndicated newspaper column, Johnson bluntly posed the question, "Who the hell is Mr. Carmody?" and answered it, writing, "That question alone condemns this appointment." Carmody, Johnson argued, achieved his position only because "he is now the best hand-shaker and oiliest yes-man toward the New Deal Camorra that Washington has known."<sup>37</sup> Ickes probably drew on his relationship with journalist Drew Pearson, author, with Robert Allen, of the popular and influential "Washington Merry-Go-Round" newspaper column, to leak additional unflattering stories about Carmody. Thus, between October 1939 and January 1940 Carmody was variously portrayed by Pearson and Allen as firing Hugh Johnson's brother-in-law from PWA as payback for Johnson's harsh attack, as promising a trip to Hawaii for the PWA executive who could eliminate the most staff, and as promoting himself as a potential presidential candidate by "delivering PWA checks in person" to project sites "to the tune of clicking cameras and radio broadcasts."<sup>38</sup> This was a marked change from the duo's earlier treatment of Carmody when he ran the REA; then Carmody was glowingly portrayed by Pearson and Allen as "a husky, two-

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<sup>35</sup> Farley Diary, November 30, 1939, "Private File 1939 November" folder, box 44, Farley Papers, LC.

<sup>36</sup> Secret Diary of Harold L. Ickes, 2:663.

<sup>37</sup> Clipping of Hugh Johnson's column from the New York City World-Telegram, June 26, 1939, untitled folder, box 111, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>38</sup> See, respectively, "Washington Merry-Go-Round" clippings for Oct. 5, 1939; Oct. 9, 1939; Oct. 11, 1939; and Jan. 4, 1940; and John M. Carmody to Drew Pearson, Oct. 5, 1939; Oct. 7, 1939; Oct. 12, 1939; and M.E. Gilmore to John M. Carmody, Jan. 11, 1940; all in untitled folder, box 112, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

fisted Irishman," "one of Roosevelt's chief troubleshooters," "famous for his colorful forthrightness" to his friends and colleagues, blessed with "a fighting man's voice and temper," and "the champion red tape-cutter of the New Deal."<sup>39</sup>

Although embattled, as the head of the FWA Carmody made the case for the federal government's role in constructing public works on three fronts. First, Carmody stressed the deep historical roots of this use of government, observing that "there is some reason to suppose that the heritage of Greece is almost entirely made up of WPA projects, such as the Parthenon." Second, Carmody argued that federal public works were essential for the nation's defense.<sup>40</sup> Third, uniting these points was Carmody's sense that the reorganization of the works programs into the FWA "represents not at all the expression of any new governmental policy, but is simply a normal and obvious step taken in the interests of administrative economy and efficiency." It had only been "the shock of actual practice" that caused public works to be perceived as "to some extent a political issue," Carmody thought. A federal public works program, he argued, was "in practice just as much as in theory, non-political in its essential nature." Indeed, Carmody felt that with reorganization the "brunt of the battle" for the acceptance of public works "is well over."

The parts of this great instrument of Federal works are now assembled, not to be dismantled as of no further use--for they have, aside from depression necessities, a normal use--but to be retained, on whatever scale the times may warrant, as an instrument that will serve to protect us from such a catastrophe as befell us in our unprepared and defenseless prosperity days of 1929. The nation now stands on guard against future depressions. And the Federal Works program now coordinated into a single agency constitutes, as we can see by looking around at

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<sup>39</sup> Clipping of the "Washington Merry-Go-Round," undated [1937], "REA--Morris L. Cooke Administration" folder, box 95, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>40</sup> John M. Carmody speech to the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, California, April 19, 1940, "FWA Speeches April 1940" folder, box 127, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

other nations, the most fully perfected instrumentality of its kind possessed by any nation in the world.<sup>41</sup>

On another occasion, Carmody put his point in terms he thought the average American could understand. "When you re-design an automobile or an airplane wing to cut down wind resistance," he said, "that's streamlining! When you re-design the mechanism of government--that's re-organization! The purpose is the same!...to promote efficiency...to get greater economy, faster, more effective public service, better operating results." In Carmody's opinion, the "coordination" between works agencies allowed by executive reorganization "is just a fancy word for common sense procedures that make for real economy. Coordination simply makes it possible to get greater results from every dollar expended for a given job, and that's the essence of economy--of thrift in business, or government or in private life."<sup>42</sup> By stressing the FWA's commitment to economy and efficiency, Carmody hoped to avoid the sort of charges that had been leveled against the WPA for its involvement in state and local politics.

To this end, Carmody strongly supported focusing federal public works on defense-oriented projects. In August 1939, shortly after he took his position at FWA, Carmody spoke with FDR on this issue and briefed the Department of Justice regarding "the ability of the Federal Works Agency to wheel into war preparations."<sup>43</sup> Carmody also publicized the work of the WPA in building public works for defense, taking to the radio to proclaim that while "our gigantic defense program is just getting underway.... Without palaver or delay, the WPA has swiftly set hundreds of thousands of WPA workers at defense tasks of fundamental importance."<sup>44</sup> In debating the question "shall

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<sup>41</sup> John M. Carmody speech to the North Carolina League of Municipalities, Aug. 19, 1939, "Federal Works Agency Speech File July 1939" folder, box 126, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>42</sup> "Interview. John M. Carmody, Administrator. Federal Works Agency," no date [prob. Aug. 1939]. "Federal Works Agency Speech File August 1939" folder, box 126, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>43</sup> John M. Carmody to FDR, Aug. 31, 1939, President's Personal File 7086, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>44</sup> John M. Carmody untitled radio transcription, Sept. 12, 1940, "FWA Speeches September 1940" folder, box 127, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

relief administration be returned to the states" with Senator Robert A. Taft, Jr., Carmody bragged that "WPA has spent close to a half billion dollars for national defense purposes," building facilities for the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and National Guard, as well as public airports. "The War and Navy Departments," Carmody told the nation, "have found that because WPA is federally controlled, is organized in almost every county in the nation, is experienced and flexible, it can execute many types of important work in the preparedness program."<sup>45</sup>

Carmody cautioned the business community not to expect too swift a return to prosperity with the coming of war. "Instead of dreaming of the benefits of a second World War," Carmody said, "we ought to be considering how to protect ourselves from such disastrous consequences as followed the first World War." While the FWA "stands ready to give every assistance to private industry in releasing workers for private jobs as fast as they are needed," Carmody argued for patience: "let us not expect too much in the way of war purchases from a Europe that is now on the verge of bankruptcy....let us not be tempted to exchange the solid benefits of our own American program of peace and progress for imaginary profits from European miseries....let us not exchange the substance for the shadow."<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Carmody's sense of caution was only reinforced by WPA chief economist Arthur E. Burns, who in 1939 estimated that \$18 to \$20 billion of public and private money would need to be spent each year to ratchet unemployment back to pre-1929 levels. While the effects of war in Europe were difficult to forecast, Burns noted, "A work program double the size of the combined FWA activities would not have been large enough to bring total public and private investment to the necessary

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<sup>45</sup> John M. Carmody radio transcription, Sept. 25, 1940, "FWA Speeches September 1940" folder, box 127, Carmody Papers, FDRL. For more on the attitude of the WPA and FWA to the question of returning relief to the states, see John M. Carmody and Howard O. Hunter to FDR, no date [prob. July 1940], "1940 Misc No Dates" folder, box 5, PPF 1820, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>46</sup> John M. Carmody, "Business and Relief," Sept. 9, 1939, no folder, box 1, entry 737, "Division of Information. Administrative Speeches, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.



level of 18 to 20 billion dollars."<sup>47</sup> With federal spending on public works so far below this estimate, Carmody increasingly relied on national defense as justification for the spending that he could manage.

In December 1940, Carmody attended a conference held by the Bureau of the Budget and the National Resources Planning Board on public works. There, economist Gardiner Means, co-author with Alfred A. Berle of The Modern Corporation and Private Property, noted the development of Carmody's stance on public works. While Frank W. Herring of the American Public Works Association "talks of Public Works," Means jotted, Carmody spoke "of Works including WPA," envisioning a lesser role for this agency. It would perform the "same work" that was "done by business employees but using socially employable but not businessly employable" people, concentrating on older workers.<sup>48</sup> Just a few days before this conference, in fact, Carmody had discussed the fate of the WPA with longtime WPA labor relations expert, Nels Anderson. "I believe the time has come," Anderson told Carmody, "for salvaging WPA and perhaps some of the other member agencies into a united work program which would be the Federal Works Agency," adding, "I can see little place in the Federal Works Agency for several subordinate agencies, each operating under special laws and each operating as if it had an identity apart from the mother agency." Since local communities looked to the federal government "to take the lead in public work," Anderson urged Carmody to fill "the niche that the Federal Works Agency has been created to fill" by consolidating all of the FWA's branches into one organization. "It is important now," Anderson wrote, "because the integration of the various agencies should move slowly and under wise, steady guidance. This will take three or four years. If you don't take the lead, somebody else will, and it

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<sup>47</sup> Arthur E. Burns to John M. Carmody, Sept. 30, 1939, "FWA-Defense (Memos from Arthur E. Burns)" folder, box 110, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>48</sup> Gardiner Means marginalia on Conference Agenda, "Bureau of the Budget and National Resources Planning Board. Conference on Public Works--Work Relief Program," Dec. 4, 1940, "Works Program Conference, 12/4/40" folder, box 14, Gardiner Means Papers, FDRL, emphasis in original.

may not be done as well."<sup>49</sup> With their shift in focus towards national defense, the New Deal's public works programs were making strides toward this possibility of consolidation.

### **The WPA and National Defense**

With this reorientation toward national defense underway, the WPA began to stress its long involvement with preparedness. The threat of war appeared to many liberals to offer the very real possibility of recharging and strengthening the reforming impulse of the New Deal. By making the case for the WPA's usefulness in wartime, the organization no doubt hoped to counter critics who charged that the WPA did little more than provide "boondoggles." Particularly important in this effort were the statements made by the Army Chief of Staff, General George Marshall. Marshall went out of his way to praise the defense work done by both the WPA and PWA since their inception. Senator Austin, the ranking minority member of the military affairs committee, told the New York Times that in testimony before Congress Marshall dispelled the notion that \$7 billion had been "poured down a rathole" of public works spending without obtaining returns in national defense. Austin, for one, the Times reported, "was convinced that the money had been well spent, after listening to General Marshall."<sup>50</sup> Marshall, adept at making political and bureaucratic allies, took pains to provide the WPA with good press. His participation in re-making the WPA's public image extended beyond the occasional statement of support made before Congress.<sup>51</sup> Marshall also participated in radio

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<sup>49</sup> Nels Anderson to John M. Carmody, Nov. 18, 1940, "FWA-WPA" folder, box 115, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>50</sup> Clipping from New York Times, May 19, 1940, "Defense Construction" folder, box 4, entry 768. "Records of the Works Projects Administration. Division of Information. Records Concerning National Defense Projects, 1939-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>51</sup> For more on Marshall's ability to forge bureaucratic alliances in government, see Frank J. Rader. "Harry L. Hopkins: The Works Progress Administration and National Defense, 1935-1940," (Ph.D. diss., University of Delaware, 1973), chap. 5.

broadcasts, such as the "Symposium on National Defense" that was broadcast over NBC radio on October 29, 1940. Marshall, along with Acting Commissioner of the WPA, Howard Hunter, Coordinator of National Defense Purchases Donald M. Nelson, Surgeon General Thomas Parran, economist Stuart Chase, and manufacturer Henry Dennison, discussed the role of the WPA in defending America.

"In the great task of preparing for national defense," Marshall said, "the Work Projects Administration...has proved itself to be an invaluable aid. Already in the field, it has been carrying out work for the Army and Navy for the last five years, and its services in this direction have been rapidly expanded."<sup>52</sup> The WPA was busy building and repairing Army facilities such as rifle ranges, storage buildings, and barracks, as well as constructing and expanding airports. By July 1, 1940, Hunter bragged, "the WPA has already done a half a billion dollars' worth of work on primary national defense projects and an additional billion dollars' worth on projects of secondary military importance."<sup>53</sup> Nelson backed up Hunter's boast, adding that "The work program has indeed been a good business proposition, paying dividends both in economic recovery and in social betterment." Nelson also noted "the valuable services that the army of WPA workers has been able to perform in disaster emergencies--floods, hurricanes, droughts--when help is needed and needed quickly. Today, too, in our great emergency of national defense, the WPA is repeating its record for quick emergency services. As everybody knows, the great problem in national defense is to get things done in a hurry." The WPA, Nelson

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<sup>52</sup> Transcription of "Symposium on National Defense," Oct. 29, 1940, "Interview Program (transcribed)" folder, box 1, entry 706, "Division of Information. Correspondence, Scripts, and Other Records Relating to Special Transcribed Programs, 1940-1941," RG 69, NA. Marshall's praise was often touted by the WPA; see, for example, WPA Press Release, January 15, 1941, "Press Releases 1941" folder, box 1, entry 740, "Division of Information. Press Releases, 1936-1942, with gaps," RG 69, NA; and "The WPA and Private Contractors," March 17, 1941, "Fellows" folder, box 2, entry 737, "Division of Information. Administrative Speeches, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>53</sup> Transcription of "Symposium on National Defense," *ibid.*

claimed, could shift its workforce to defense tasks more quickly than private firms could re-allocate employees to such work.

Stuart Chase, however, made the most wide-ranging case for defense public works.<sup>54</sup> "It is only sensible," Chase argued, "to take into account the actual net value of the construction work done by the WPA all over the country. During the last five years the WPA has constructed and improved many thousands of miles of roads, hundreds of airports, and thousands of public buildings.

It would be good bookkeeping to set a fair value on these public improvements, and, with due allowance for amortization, credit ourselves with the net gain in national wealth. The plain fact is that we have got a great deal of valuable construction work from the unemployed. Incidentally, the WPA has been doing much work for the Army and Navy, and is now being called upon to do a lot more to help along our national defense program. The Army and the Navy know the value of the work done by WPA workers. Our municipalities and counties know the value of that work, and are always asking for more of it. It ought to be counted as a national asset. Public works should be recognized as an important and necessary form of public investment.

Dennison, who had been a member of the unemployment council set up by President Harding, and was a member of the National Resources Planning Board's advisory committee, agreed with Chase, noting that in addition to providing employment, the WPA "has literally changed the face of the nation" through its construction projects and was now "training tens of thousands of its workers in mechanical skills needed in the defense industries."<sup>55</sup>

Hunter tried to capitalize on the remarks of Marshall, Chase, and Dennison, arguing that their comments indicate "that the work of the needy unemployed for their communities and the nation is appreciated." "There was a time when thoughtless people made idle jokes about 'shovel-leaning' and 'boondoggling'," Hunter said, but now, "the

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<sup>54</sup> Chase's vision of political economy is treated in detail in Robert B. Westbrook, "Tribune of the Technostructure: The Popular Economics of Stuart Chase," *American Quarterly* 32 (fall 1980): 387-408.

<sup>55</sup> For more on Dennison's career, see Patrick D. Reagan, *Designing a New America: The Origins of New Deal Planning, 1890-1943* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 111-39.

gigantic scope of WPA accomplishments has put an end, let us hope forever, to that pointless brand of humor." Hunter attempted to synthesize the social concerns of New Dealers with the new imperative for defense. "We all realize now that modern wars are total wars, and that defense against total wars must be total defense."

In our national defense preparations, military armament and training have the first call on the nation's energies. But at the same time we must continue to build up the internal defenses of our nation. We must strengthen our economic and social structure. We must continue our struggle against poverty and misery. We must have a democracy in which the humblest person has a stake. We must have a nation that every citizen will be proud to defend. In the light of these requirements for total defense, we can all look back upon the five years of WPA work with the feeling that the entire program has been a program of national defense. In providing work for the unemployed, the WPA has helped to rebuild the nation's strength for any emergency it may have to meet.<sup>56</sup>

Harrington reinforced this argument, adding in one radio appearance a sharp comparison to Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy. "Many people," he said, "still labor under the delusion that the WPA operates in a bureaucratic manner. They think that some one in Washington calls all the tunes and pulls all the strings." Rather, Harrington argued, while it was federally administered, localities had much say in who was put to work and in what sorts of projects they wanted to sponsor. "The democratic character of our American work program," Harrington said, "can best be shown, perhaps, by contrasting it with the work program of a totalitarian state."

In a totalitarian state one man, or a small group of men, draws up plans for a work program and then orders those plans put into effect without consulting the public in any way. Our Federal work program, on the other hand, was planned by the President and Congress, discussed and voted by Congress, and has been changed from year to year by Congress. Under a dictatorship, it is one man, or a small group of men, at the center of government that decides whether a certain town shall have a new road, a school, or a park. In this country, however, it is the townspeople themselves, through their chosen representatives, who decide what

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<sup>56</sup> Transcription of "Symposium on National Defense," Oct. 29, 1940, "Interview Program (transcribed)" folder, box 1, entry 706, "Division of Information. Correspondence, Scripts, and Other Records Relating to Special Transcribed Programs, 1940-1941," RG 69, NA. Emphasis in original.

they want. They apply for WPA assistance, and agree to cooperate in certain definite ways in the work.

Without these public works programs, Harrington argued, "man cannot retain his self-respect as an individual," and, "Without making it possible for all citizens to retain their self-respect, there can be no democracy."<sup>57</sup>

This sentiment was shared by others in the WPA. Assistant WPA Commissioner Florence Kerr, who had long supervised white-collar and service projects in the WPA, took this argument to Mitchell, South Dakota, making a speech to WPA state staff and community sponsors of WPA projects that was broadcast over the radio. "We must ask ourselves," Kerr said, "why should the Dictators have all the ideas as to how to keep their citizens busy and Democracies deny their citizens work, refuse them training, and offer them only the hope deferred that maketh the heart sick?" The WPA, Kerr argued, "has helped to keep its workers fit for whatever tasks they may be called upon to perform. And it is helping to maintain their faith in the Republic which we may all be called upon to defend."<sup>58</sup>

New Dealers were not the only people who observed these links between public works and defense. Journalists made this connection, too. Just before Hopkins had stepped down from the WPA Time magazine identified three important New Dealers at the heart of FDR's plans for preparedness. "These militarists pro tem," Time announced, "were none other than Janizaries Tommy Corcoran, Harry Hopkins and Aubrey Williams."

What put Corcoran, Hopkins & Co. into the armament business was a chance to hitch New Deal pump-priming to National Defense. In the democratic jitters after Munich they saw a glittering opportunity to butter up and stimulate heavy

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<sup>57</sup> "Agencies Series Program No. 5," Office of Government Reports, Oct. 3, 1939, "Speeches, 1939-1940" folder, box 1, entry 715, "Division of Information, Radio Section. Proposed Scripts of Radio Interviews Between the State WPA Administrator and the State Director of the National Emergency Council, 1938-1939," RG 69, NA.

<sup>58</sup> WPA Press Release, June 7, 1940, "Press Releases, 1938-1940" folder, box 3, entry 740, "Division of Information. Press Releases, 1936-1942, with gaps," RG 69, NA.

industry without surrendering to it on the issues of labor, utilities, regulation. The bright prospect to them was that businessmen who got Government millions in armament orders could hardly object to continued and even intensified regulation, especially if it were in the name of National Defense. Public health, housing, power, all could be tied to Rearmament-for-uplift, and Franklin Roosevelt would have a new touchstone for his general program.<sup>59</sup>

While Army officers such as Marshall were quick to capitalize on the mutual advantage of working with the public works programs, other military officials--much as Time had--voiced some skepticism. One Army officer worried that all road projects suddenly will be deemed "defense related," that small streams "will be named as navigable rivers in the guise of national defense," and politicians will push for every "pet project" to be sheltered beneath the "petticoat of national defense."<sup>60</sup>

By 1940, about twenty percent of WPA projects were "defense activities," with the War and Navy secretaries certifying specific projects, including airports, access roads for military bases, national guard and ROTC facilities, and "strategic" highways, in order to give them priority status, exempting them from WPA rules regarding wages, hours, and relief labor.<sup>61</sup> By the end of 1941 the WPA Division of Research reasoned that "an expanded WPA defense program may be the best medium of absorbing displaced workers dammed up in non-defense localities and, at the same time, of utilizing needed skills which may otherwise remain idle."<sup>62</sup> The WPA was operating under the assumption that "the transition to full employment cannot be achieved within a few months, in spite of the

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<sup>59</sup> Time, Dec. 19, 1938, p. 11. For an earlier example of a journalist identifying connections between public works and defense, see Samuel Grafton, "The New Deal Woos the Army," The American Mercury 33 (Dec. 1934): 436-43.

<sup>60</sup> Major Arthur Wilson quoted in Rader "Harry L. Hopkins," 164-65.

<sup>61</sup> WPA Press Release, Nov. 11, 1940; Oct. 31, 1940; both in "Defense Construction. 1940 Material. N.W." folder, box 2, entry 768, "Division of Information. Records Concerning National Defense Projects. 1939-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>62</sup> "The Outlook for Construction Employment in 1942," Dec. 17, 1941, "045 AAAA Nov-Dec 1941" folder, box 64, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 045 Defense Training Program, 1940-43," RG 69, NA.

billions that have been appropriated for armaments."<sup>63</sup> With subsequent research showing that by March 1942 the twelve states which received 72% of the nation's defense contracts--and which contained about 55% of the nation's population--accounted for roughly 50% of the people employed by the WPA, the agency concluded that federal public works were essential, in spite of increased defense spending.<sup>64</sup>

Two of the more effective types of defense projects built by the WPA were roads and airports. WPA Chief Engineer Perry Fellows, who also served on the American Road Builders committee for highway safety, noted that the organization of the WPA, "which extends into almost every county in the nation, its flexibility, and its immediately available labor supply, adapt it particularly to do certain phases of this vital road building job."<sup>65</sup> Assistant Secretary of War Robert Patterson agreed with Fellows, noting that "Because the WPA is organized in almost every county in the nation, because of its experience and flexibility, it can execute almost every type of work in the preparedness program." While defense road building accounted for about 36% of WPA employment on highway and other road projects, it was not always visible to the public as defense work, per se.<sup>66</sup> Or, as Howard Hunter once put it, "we've been seeing WPA national defense work somewhat as one sees an iceberg. The part we have not seen is so much greater than the part we have seen."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> "The Effect of the Defense Program on Unemployment," June 25, 1941, "Vocational Training and Other White Collar" folder, box 3, entry 768, "Division of Information. Records Concerning National Defense Projects, 1939-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>64</sup> Donald S. Howard, The WPA and Federal Relief Policy (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943), 558.

<sup>65</sup> Perry Fellows, "WPA Defense Road Construction Program," Dec. 20, 1940, "Defense Construction. 1940 Material. N.W." folder, box 2, ibid; "Perry A. Fellows" folder, box 1, entry 736, "Division of Information. Photographs and Biographical Information about WPA Officials, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>66</sup> Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-1943 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), 85.

<sup>67</sup> "WPA National Defense Broadcast Columbia Broadcasting System," Aug. 28, 1940, ibid.



With this emphasis on defense, however, the WPA also began to shift away from putting people to work directly--"force account" construction--and relied increasingly upon private contracting. This was a dramatic shift in philosophy, departing from the WPA's explicit commitment to employ as many people as possible on its projects. WPA Chief Engineer Fellows summarized how the WPA's previous approach had been received by contractors, speaking to the American Road Builders's Association. When the WPA was created in 1935, "one might imagine that the Federal Government had not only confiscated the businesses of all the contractors but had transported the contractors themselves to Alaska for forced labor." However, Fellows stated, "we all wake up from such nightmare imaginings and realize that we are still living in the United States, under a government whose prime purpose is to encourage private enterprise and to keep government economic activity at a minimum." To this end, by January 1941 the WPA was turning to contractors to an unprecedented degree. While still carrying out force account work on occasion, the WPA, Fellows announced, "is leaning backwards trying to turn over as much of its work as possible to contractors." While some contractors saw this development as "an indication that the WPA is an octopus that reaches out into everything, even into the sacred work of national defense, which they take for granted should be handled entirely by private contract, and which they think would be handled by private contract if the WPA did not exist," Fellows argued that the WPA was only using force account construction to provide employment to the hardened unemployed, turning over the bulk of its defense work to private contractors.<sup>68</sup>

By March 1941 the WPA was putting about 500,000 people to work on defense projects, particularly on access roads for military bases, airports, and building

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<sup>68</sup> Perry A. Fellows, "Contracting in WPA Operations," Jan. 27-31, 1941, "221 American A-Z" folder, box 559, Central Files--221 Roads, RG 69, NA.

construction on Army and Navy posts.<sup>69</sup> Soon afterward, Carmody indicated the "hopeful possibility" that relief labor could be employed on such vast public works as interregional highways. Speaking at the first meeting of the National Interregional Highway Committee to such fellow committee members as Rexford Tugwell, Frederic A. Delano, and longtime head of the Bureau of Public Roads Thomas H. MacDonald, Carmody argued that the WPA's project to assemble a "shelf" of public works projects, sponsored by the National Resources Planning Board and the FWA, might form a basis for future decisions made by the Interregional Highway Committee.<sup>70</sup> Presidential adviser Lauchlin Currie supported Carmody's efforts to cast the FWA as the leader of the wartime road building program, urging FDR that "primary responsibility for the highway part of the [transportation] program be given to Carmody," adding that this action "would, I am sure, help the morale of his agency greatly." Out of these efforts came the report, "Highways for the National Defense," prepared by the Public Roads Administration, FWA, the Advisory Commission to the Council of National Defense, and the War and Navy Departments, which paid particular attention to upgrading the strength of bridges, width of strategic roads, adequacy of access to larger cities, and the servicing of existing and proposed populations at army, naval, and air bases.<sup>71</sup>

Between 1935 and 1939 the WPA had spent about \$66 million dollars in improving 169 of the 191 regular airline stops in 47 states, expenditures which the organization characterized as a key factor in national defense.<sup>72</sup> Following Hitler's

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<sup>69</sup> "The WPA Week in National Defense," March 12, 1941, "Defense Construction 1941 Material" folder, box 2, *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Minutes of the National Interregional Highway Committee, June 24, 1941, "National Interregional Highway Committee" folder, box 16, Rexford G. Tugwell Papers, FDRL.

<sup>71</sup> Lauchlin Currie to FDR, June 21, 1940; and "Highways for the National Defense," February 1, 1941; both in "OF 1e Bureau of Public Roads 1939-1941" folder, box 11, Official File 1e, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>72</sup> WPA Press Release, Dec. 4, 1938, "1/Defense Construction" folder, box 1, entry 768, "Division of Information. Records Concerning National Defense Projects, 1939-1942," RG 69, NA; and see Final Report on the WPA Program, 85.

triumph at Munich in September 1938, Hopkins even proposed that the WPA begin building airplane factories.<sup>73</sup> Colonel Harrington, weeks after taking over the WPA, continued Hopkins's support of the airport program, noting that while the WPA's "largest airport operations have been on the commercially important fields of many of the nation's largest cities, including the present airports of New York, Chicago, Cleveland, San Francisco, and Newark," it had also built up facilities that linked the east and west coasts of the country, such as "the Salt Lake City municipal field, where five lines of travel intersect, and five [air] fields in Tennessee cities, key points in the airline map of the east and south."<sup>74</sup> Between July 1940 and June 1943 the WPA built 215 airports and retrofitted 160 more; since 1935 the WPA had built a total of over 480 airports while improving or expanding over 470 other sites.<sup>75</sup>

New Dealers Aubrey Williams and Corrington Gill joined Harrington in touting WPA airport construction. Williams, in a press release titled "WPA Aids Aviation," noted the advantages of airport projects in relieving unemployment. "Many unskilled workers, the class which constitutes two-thirds of all those on WPA rolls, can be quickly and usefully employed in developing airports and airways," Williams said. "Because of this fact and because of the importance of airport development, the Works Progress Administration and earlier federal work-relief agencies have spent more than a hundred million dollars on such work." In addition to putting people to work in an effective fashion, though, airport projects also did vital work in modernizing the nation's infrastructure. "Airplanes are becoming larger, heavier and faster every year," observed Williams. "To accommodate such craft our airports and other aviation facilities must be correspondingly developed." Williams continued, making an argument that resonated

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<sup>73</sup> Rader, "Harry L. Hopkins," 29.

<sup>74</sup> WPA Press Release, March 15, 1939, *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Final Report on the WPA Program, 85.

with engineers such as Carmody: "To attempt to fly 1938 planes from war-time [i.e., 1918] airports would be as foolish and dangerous as to attempt to drive modern automobiles at full speed along the narrow, winding and bumpy roads which were adequate for horse-and-buggy traffic."<sup>76</sup> Gill--who had headed the divisions of finance and of research and statistics for WPA, and was in the midst of writing his book, Wasted Manpower: The Challenge of Unemployment--authored a number of articles for popular consumption, including "Airtouring America," "An Eagle's Eye View of America," and "Air Travel and Airports," all of which appeared between April and July of 1938.<sup>77</sup>

The WPA airport program garnered positive support in government and from the public. A young Texas congressman, Lyndon B. Johnson, worked hard to assure his state's place in the expansion of the nation's airport facilities, pushing for the establishment of a Naval Air Station at Corpus Christi and touting what one Army officer referred to as the "unusually fine climate" for air travel that existed in his state. LBJ had, in the words of historian Jordan Schwarz, "seen the future of American politics....public works projects could help elect congressmen, but defense contracts had become public works."<sup>78</sup> While politicians such as Johnson had seen the future, others saw the WPA's airport program as an important part in the growth of American aviation.<sup>79</sup> Edgar S.

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<sup>76</sup> WPA Press Release, Jan. 24, 1938, ibid.

<sup>77</sup> For the text of the Gill articles, see ibid.; and see Gill, Wasted Manpower: The Challenge of Unemployment (New York: W.W. Norton, 1939).

<sup>78</sup> Major General H. H. Arnold to Lyndon B. Johnson, June 3, 1940; and see also FDR to Lyndon B. Johnson, June 3, 1940; Rear Admiral J. H. Towers to Lyndon B. Johnson, June 3, 1940; and John M. Carmody to Lyndon B. Johnson, June 12, 1940; all in "White House--General Correspondence--Jan. thru Aug. 1940" folder, box 1, entry 4, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of Administrators with the House, 1939-1942. White House (General Correspondence, August-June, 1939) to White House 9/1/41--12/31/42," General Records of the Federal Works Agency, Record Group 162, National Archives; and Schwarz, New Dealers, 281.

<sup>79</sup> For the impact of these airports on the growth and development of cities, generally, see Douglas Karsner, "Aviation and Airports: The Impact on the Economic and Geographic Structure of American Cities, 1940s-1980s," Journal of Urban History 23 (May 1997): 406-36; and Jon C. Teaford, The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940-1985 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 93-105.

Gorrell, president of the Airport Transport Association of America, declared, "When the history of civil aeronautics during its formative era is finally written, there will be a chapter on the activities of WPA which will be unstinted in its praise." Gorrell thought that the WPA airports were the key event between the passage of Air Commerce Act of 1926 and the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938.<sup>80</sup> Henry Stimson, the conservative Secretary of War, wrote to Howard Hunter to ask him to "kindly express to the State Work Projects Administrator of Florida and to his able assistants the War Department's very sincere appreciation of their important contribution to the national defense," noting that by late 1940, of the seventeen civilian airport improvements in Florida that the War Department had requested, fourteen were well underway.<sup>81</sup> Army Chief of Staff Marshall concurred with Stimson. "The War Department has informed the Commissioner of Work Projects that the construction or improvement of a total of thirty airports in Maine is important for military purposes" because "the New England area and Maine in particular is a very strategic location from the standpoint of the possible concentration of large numbers of military aircraft."<sup>82</sup> Further south, the WPA administrator for Georgia argued, "Cancel out the work of the WPA in the past six years and, I assure you, it would seem that Hitler's Luftwaffe had suddenly visited us in the night."<sup>83</sup> By April 1941 the WPA was even running a small training program for airport ground personnel with the sponsorship

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<sup>80</sup> WPA Press Release, April 3, 1940, in "Defense Construction. 1940 Material. N.W." folder, box 2, entry 768, "Division of Information. Records Concerning National Defense Projects, 1939-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>81</sup> Henry L. Stimson to Howard O. Hunter, no date [prob. Nov. 1940], "100 Appropriations (Material from Dort) Various Drafts" folder, box 75, "Central Files: General 1935-1944," RG 69, NA. For a brief assessment of Stimson's lengthy career, see Alan Brinkley, "Icons of the American Establishment," in Brinkley, Liberalism and Its Discontents, 164-209.

<sup>82</sup> George C. Marshall to Guy Gannett, Nov. 9, 1940, in ibid.

<sup>83</sup> "Information Exchange Letter No. 12," Jan. 21, 1942, no folder, box 1, entry 13 [unidentified entry]. "Information Service Letters, 1938-1941. Administrative Division," RG 135, NA.

of the Advisory Commission for National Defense and the Civil Aeronautics Administration, training 5,750 airport workers.<sup>84</sup>

With the coming of war, the WPA moved to increase its involvement in national preparedness, building defense-related roads, improving military bases, constructing airports, and attempting to maintain the skills and morale of the unemployed by providing work. At the same time, however, the WPA was beginning to abandon its cardinal principle of force account construction. Further, its increased involvement in the heavier construction required by defense public works projects was making the WPA an organization less dedicated to providing employment and one more directed to accomplishing construction in the name of wartime efficiency and economy.

#### **WPA Worker Training for Defense**

In addition to defense-related construction, as part of its preparedness campaign the WPA began to train workers for the first time in its history, helping them to find employment in the growing defense-related industries. The relationship between worker training and New Deal works programs such as the WPA, CCC, and NYA, had long been controversial. Organized labor consistently had opposed government training for the unemployed, fearful that this would create too much competition for skilled union craftsmen. FDR himself famously had accompanied AFL President William Green as they toured the CCC's first camp, in order that he could be photographed re-assuring Green (and, by extension, the labor movement he represented) that none of the workers receiving relief was learning anything that would help him knock a union member out of work. Of course, the attitude of organized labor toward worker training depended in part on which unions one considers. "For example," one WPA official noted, "the industrial

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<sup>84</sup> "045 Special Folder airports Servicemen's Training Program (Corres. from Ms. Peter)" folder, box 64, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 045 Defense Training Program, 1940-43," RG 69, NA.

unions whose domain of work is not invaded by WPA projects have either been friendly or indifferent toward the program," with the auto workers going so far as to form a WPA department within their union, publicize WPA projects, request more of them, and demand higher wages and better working conditions for WPA work. "The construction unions," though, "have always been unfriendly and have joined hands with construction contractors in efforts to curtail or even abolish the work program of this agency." Building trades unions "resist the WPA accepting construction projects of any kind, claiming that this work should be done by contract under shop conditions and at the union wage." When "project workers were paid the prevailing wages, the unions frequently demanded that the union wage be accepted as the prevailing wage," and "when such wages were paid, the unions demanded further that only union workers be employed, especially in the skilled occupations." Although the defense program of public works had seen much construction, nearly all these projects were "done by contract under closed shop conditions," with unions holding "a monopoly of the recruitment" of labor.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the strong opposition from building trades unions towards worker training, however, the WPA considered the idea on several occasions. As early as 1937, Harrington reported to a conference of WPA state administrators that the WPA had been debating "whether we should go in general into a vocational training program," but added, "As you all know, we can't go into the training of apprentices in the organized crafts and building trades." Harrington stated "It is my own feeling that if vocational training is to be undertaken it should be undertaken by some agency of the government as a part of its regular duties, possibly by the Department of Labor. I don't think that you can run a work program with a vocational training program and mix the two together.

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<sup>85</sup> For more on organized labor's opposition to government training programs, see Howard, The WPA and Federal Relief Policy, 237-38; and Richard J. Jensen, "The Causes and Cures of Unemployment in the Great Depression," Journal of Interdisciplinary History 19 (spring 1989): 576-77; and for the WPA's perspective on the situation see "Attitude of the Labor Unions toward the WPA Work Program," May 13, 1942, "100 May 1942" folder, box 77, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69. NA.

You must either run the job or you must run the school, but you can't do both at the same time."<sup>86</sup>

By 1940, however, Harrington was of a different mind. Again addressing a conference of WPA administrators, Harrington described the most recent appropriations bill that had emerged from the Congressional conference committee as "the best piece of legislation that we have ever had." Harrington's pleasure soon disappeared, though, when "I discovered to my horror...that the conference had stricken out one of the most important items that we had gotten in the bill....providing for training for industries which are engaged in production for national defense." Fortunately, Harrington related, "we were able to sell a bill of goods to a few important people and we got our own act amended within twenty-four hours after it was passed."<sup>87</sup> With the WPA now explicitly authorized by Congress to train workers, Harrington returned to Washington and took to the radio. Speaking over the Mutual Broadcasting System network, Harrington briefed the nation on WPA's role in national defense. "In the coming months" the WPA will begin "training persons for industries which are engaged in production for national defense purposes." There were two rationales behind this move, Harrington said. "First, to provide the trained workers which industry will need; and secondly, to endeavor to assure WPA workers of an opportunity to secure a share of the increased employment which will result from our preparedness effort." Although "the primary responsibility of WPA is still to provide work and wages for the needy unemployed," Harrington asserted that "to the greatest degree possible, the energies of WPA will be devoted to furthering national defense."<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> "Proceedings Conference of State Administrators. Works Progress Administration," Feb. 12-13, 1937; "100 Jan-Feb 37" folder, box 69, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA.

<sup>87</sup> "Meeting of the State Administrators National Directors and Washington Staff of the Work Projects Administration," June 25-27, 1940, "100 Administrative June 1940" folder, box 74, *ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> WPA Press Release, July 1, 1940, "Press Releases, 1938-1940" folder, box 3, entry 740, "Division of Information. Press Releases, 1936-1942, with gaps." RG 69, NA.



Harrington's death in September 1940, however, left the WPA without an experienced administrator barely two years after Hopkins had stepped away. While the consensus inside the WPA was that FDR would place another army officer in charge of the program, Francis Dryden, the state administrator of the WPA in Maryland and a former Army and municipal engineer, was also rumored to be a candidate for the job.<sup>89</sup> Howard Hunter, however, was kept on as acting commissioner of the WPA, a post he had assumed when Harrington fell ill. A good friend of Hopkins's since the early days of the New Deal, Hunter was born in Georgia and attended Louisiana State University, graduating in 1917 and serving with a Tulane University medical unit in France during World War I. After the war he worked in Michigan's relief and welfare department, did Community Chest work in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and New York City, and served as New England director for Hoover's President's Organization on Unemployment Relief (POUR) in 1931. Hunter then supervised FERA's and the WPA's efforts in the Midwest; after Hopkins and Aubrey Williams left the WPA Hunter was appointed deputy administrator of the WPA, serving under Harrington.<sup>90</sup>

At the 1941 conference of WPA administrators, Howard Hunter noted the favorable impression the defense training program had made on the Congress. "I feel," Hunter said of the WPA's defense training, "that the sentiment expressed in the House [appropriations] committee and on the floor, for that matter, was to the general effect that it, perhaps, was the most important project that the WPA had been operating, and after the hearings, the report of the committee itself gave almost mandatory instructions to the WPA to not only continue that project, but to expand it." By 1941, then, the WPA

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<sup>89</sup> "Biographical Sketch Francis H. Dryden," no date, "Francis H. Dryden Deputy Commissioner" folder, box 1, entry 736, "Division of Information. Photographs and Biographical Information about WPA Officials, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>90</sup> "Biographical Sketch Howard O. Hunter," no date, "Howard O. Hunter" folder, box 2, entry 736, "Division of Information. Photographs and Biographical Information about WPA Officials, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

formally established a new Training and Reemployment Division, headed by Fred Rauch. A Kentucky native, Rauch, who had worked as an engineer and as an executive in the construction and manufacturing fields, had been an administrator in the WPA since 1935, and before that had worked in the CWA.

Speaking frankly to other WPA administrators at the conference, Rauch noted that his division had to pay "very careful consideration" to what one fellow administrator termed "the union situation." "In the first place," Rauch said, "we do not expect to interfere with employer-employee relationships. We are working in plant training programs now in many plants that have union contracts...and the employers have all agreed that the program is very acceptable. Since "most contracts the employers have with the unions provide a certain learner period before persons are required to join the union, and under no circumstances does our training period go on beyond that initial period, so that so far we haven't had the slightest bit of difficulty with the unions." During the training period, which was not to surpass 160 hours or four weeks, the WPA paid the trainees' wages. WPA workers chosen for the training program were interviewed and selected by the companies's own personnel departments. In addition to training men at 375 plants, the WPA had approved 12 plants to train women for defense work, too.<sup>91</sup>

John Carmody realized that while the government could expect "some criticism of this training business," he "was glad to hear Fred say, and he says it on Howard's authority, that the training will be confined to certified people." As long as the training was confined to the usual pool of WPA employees (i.e., certified relief recipients), Carmody felt that "no criticism will be valid." Carmody was also pleased to hear Rauch

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<sup>91</sup> "Proceedings of the National Meeting of the Works Progress Administration," July 2-3, 1941, "100 Appropriations (Material from Dort) Various Drafts" folder, box 75, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA; "Biographical Sketch Fred R. Rauch," June 1941, "Fred R. Rauch" folder, box 3, entry 736, "Division of Information. Photographs and Biographical Information about WPA Officials, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA; Fred R. Rauch, "Training for Defense Industry," Oct. 21, 1941, "Vocational Training and Other White Collar" folder, box 3, entry 768, "Division of Information. Records Concerning National Defense Projects, 1939-1942," RG 69, NA; "The WPA Week in National Defense," Sept. 10, 1941, "Vocational Training and Other White Collar" folder, box 3, *ibid.*

state "that they are not going to build up a huge organization" to carry out defense training. "They will depend," Carmody said, "upon the regular employment service to do its job, and this training thing will go ahead on its own. It will be better training than has been done recently, I am sure, and the net result, I feel confident, will be the development of good will in the communities, a better understanding on the part of employers who haven't known enough about the WPA, better understanding and a wider acceptance of the whole program, because this part of it will be useful and well done."<sup>92</sup>

Indeed, Rauch sounded this very theme in an address to the Indiana State Conference on Social Work. Speaking on the subject, "Turning the Unemployed into Defense Production Workers," Rauch told his audience that the WPA's Division of Training and Reemployment was pursuing a three-pronged strategy in placing workers into jobs: "first, by finding jobs that are immediately available and for which the workers are already fitted; second, by arranging with employers to give the workers 'in-plant' training, that is training as learners, right in the plant, to fit them for regular jobs on the company payroll; and finally, by sending the workers to vocational classes in the public schools, so that they can acquire or brush up on skills needed in defense industry." In Rauch's opinion, however, "the importance of our in-plant training program can hardly be over-emphasized." With the rapid increases in defense-related orders, he said, "industry needs more workers to speed up production. Our trainees are workers whom we have carefully selected for defense plants because we believe they can do the work. And their record so far in private employment seems to justify our belief in them."<sup>93</sup> Although the AFL's Building and Construction Trades Department continued to object to the use of WPA labor on defense projects, Howard Hunter declared that "The WPA will continue to

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<sup>92</sup> "Proceedings of the National Meeting of the Works Progress Administration," July 2-3, 1941, *ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> Fred R. Rauch, "Turning the Unemployed into Defense Production Workers," Oct. 31, 1941, "Fred R. Rauch" folder, box 7, entry 737, "Division of Information. Administrative Speeches, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA.

carry out the work program under the directive given it by Congress--that is, finding jobs for needy, unemployed people on useful public projects, including those that are important to our total defense." Hunter argued that this "in no way conflicts with a continuation of our policy of cooperating in defense projects requested by the War and Navy Departments and by other defense agencies."<sup>94</sup>

The WPA information division did not hesitate to promote the defense training program, as can be seen in its script for the radio program, "Trainees in Defense Jobs." After a brief introduction from Rauch, the program presented the dramatized success stories of former WPA workers who had been trained for defense work. Over sound effects meant to bring to mind acetylene torch welding, riveting, and engine production, various workers related their invariably triumphant experiences of being trained by the WPA. That these stories were so positive was, of course, no accident, as a memo from Earl Minderman, the director of the information division, points out. Minderman wanted his staff to "round up four or five WPA workers here in the District of Columbia who are taking the training course and arrange to have them meet in the recording studio in the North Interior Building so we can make transcriptions of their personal experiences," adding, "Of course you will have to write the statements." These testimonials, Minderman continued, "ought to be written in a chatty and informal style designed to be given as part of an interview," relating "how they started their training course, where they are training, what they are studying, etc." Minderman especially thought that "it would be a good idea to have one person who has graduated from our course and is now holding down a lucrative job far beyond the dreams of avarice," with the WPA announcer then establishing "that these men are typical of thousands of WPA workers all over the United

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<sup>94</sup> "Memorandum Opposing WPA Labor not Approved by Defense Agencies," Nov. 6, 1941, "Defense Construction 1941 Material" folder, box 2, entry 768, "Division of Information. Records Concerning National Defense Projects, 1939-1942," RG 69, NA; and see F.H. Dryden to Sidney Hillman, July 25, 1941, "Labor Agreement" folder, box 8, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

States who are being enabled by the WPA to take training and fit themselves for better jobs in our defense industries."<sup>95</sup>

When it was first announced in August 1941, over three months before Pearl Harbor, the defense training program was well-received in the press. The New York Times editorialized that while the WPA had been "an obstacle to defense," with its "system of inventing projects, the overwhelming majority of them of a nondefense nature, to 'make work,'" the defense training program was "highly promising in several ways.

It represents a positive step for getting WPA workers off the relief rolls and back into private industry. It is an effort to have such workers produce the goods that are now imperatively needed, instead of working on many projects of more questionable utility. It recognizes the need for a great defense-work training program, even if that program has to be subsidized in part by Government until the workers are skilled enough for private employment. It is the rare type of plan, in short, that, properly administered, could help the men directly concerned, Government economy and defense all at the same time.

The New York Herald-Tribune concurred, writing that the program "seems the most sensible and practical program yet undertaken for the unemployed."<sup>96</sup>

This public perception, however, was countered by misgivings within the WPA itself over the effectiveness of defense training. Bruce Uthus, the WPA regional administrator for the states of Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Missouri, drafted a memo describing what he termed the "definite administrative deficiencies, of both a general and particular nature," of the program. "The most widespread deficiency," Uthus wrote, "on the part of WPA people has been their failure to follow up on their own referred trainees after course completion and secure the WPA investment by requiring

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<sup>95</sup> "Trainees in Defense Jobs," no date [Sept. 1941?]; and Earl Minderman to Floyd Dell, Oct. 2, 1940, both in "Training Course Sept. 1941" folder, box 2, entry 706, "Division of Information. Correspondence. Scripts, and Other Records Relating to Special Transcribed Programs, 1940-1941," RG 69, NA.

<sup>96</sup> Clippings from New York Times, Aug. 20, 1941; and New York Herald-Tribune, Aug. 20, 1941, both in "045 Newspaper Clippings on the Training and Reemployment Program--From Various Newspapers in the Country, 1941" folder, box 64, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 045 Defense Training Program, 1940-43," RG 69, NA.

said trainees to register their newly acquired skills or semi-skills with the local branch of the state's employment service office." The lack of a consistent record of which workers had received what training was clearly an obstacle to assessing the WPA's success or failure. "Another and almost as broad a deficiency on the part of WPA people," Uthus continued, "has been their lack of proper participation in the reporting and recording of private employment information relative to trainees as required by released memoranda and general letters from the central office," and, "the reluctance of our people, on both the state and district levels, to attempt to confer with representatives of the other agencies."

In addition to encouraging better coordination between the WPA, the USES (United States Employment Service), and the states, Uthus advised that "really substantial gains in meeting defense industries future needs and contemporary reductions in WPA rolls can best be attained by regional planning for basic training," warning that "narrow and uniformed local concepts of future labor needs will, if allowed free exercise, restrict dangerously the number of semi-skilled people necessary for the manning of new defense industry plants." Anticipating the creation of new shipyards, aircraft plants, and aluminum plants, that would generate a total of 65,000 jobs, Uthus cautioned that while semi-skilled workers could move into skilled positions, the WPA ought to concentrate on providing "basic training" to enable the unskilled to fill the resulting openings in semi-skilled positions.<sup>97</sup> WPA social worker Hilda Worthington Smith echoed this assessment, informing Carmody that while WPA workers could greatly benefit from increased training, the organization also needed to address the loss of WPA management personnel to defense industries.<sup>98</sup> By the spring of 1941 Corrington Gill urged Carmody to take notice of economist Alvin Hansen's estimate that it would take all of 1941 and

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<sup>97</sup> Bruce Uthus to H.J. McCormack, Jan. 24, 1941, "045 AAAA Jan-Oct 1941" folder, box 64, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 045 Defense Training Program, 1940-43," RG 69, NA.

<sup>98</sup> Hilda W. Smith, "General Impression of the WPA Program," Feb. 1941, "FWA-WPA" folder, box 115. Carmody Papers, FDRL.

1942 to re-employ five million people, along with Hansen's observation that "our economic system can fire people at a faster rate than it can hire them."<sup>99</sup>

By July 1942 some of these deficiencies had been overcome. While Fred Rauch had left the WPA at the beginning of the year to take a job with a group of utility companies near Cincinnati, Lieutenant Colonel John J. McDonough took his place. McDonough, a longtime WPA administrator, had previously served as the director of the WPA's division of employment, and as the state administrator in Massachusetts. Holder of a law degree, McDonough had a reputation as a labor relations expert.<sup>100</sup> Reviewing the division's accomplishments through May 19, 1942, McDonough noted that about 205,000 trainees had finished their training. Of these, 73% had found jobs in industry. By June 9, approximately 35,000 workers were still in training. Most notable about the first half of 1942, however, was the special attention the WPA had given to training women for defense work. While only 661 women were enrolled in defense training at the beginning of the year, by May this number had increased by over 500%, with women being trained in machine shop courses, aviation services, and sheet metal work. In addition, the WPA concentrated on training and employing older workers. Although employment had generally been going up--in May 1942, 48% more workers were leaving WPA rolls than were in May 1941--McDonough observed that "of course...full credit cannot be taken by WPA for this phenomenal rise in reemployment." Indeed, the impact of the Pearl Harbor bombing and U.S. entry into the war made it difficult for the WPA to assess accurately the effectiveness of their training and reemployment measures. With the reductions in WPA spending by Congress, and the impending termination of the

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<sup>99</sup> Corrington Gill to John M. Carmody, April 28, 1941, "1941 Corrington Gill" folder, box 62, entry "PC-37, 21, Records of the Office of the WPA Commissioner (Formerly Administrator), 1935-1943," RG 69, NA.

<sup>100</sup> My profile of McDonough draws on the "Works Progress Bulletin--Massachusetts" newsletter, Dec. 2, 1936, in "610 Mass. Oct. 1936--Jan. 1937" folder, box 1493, "Central Files: State 1935-1944. Massachusetts 610 Special Litigation," RG 69, NA.

program in 1943, though, McDonough advised his fellow WPA administrators that "the time to return the WPA workers to such other private or other public employment is now with us....Let us go out of the work relief business with our flags flying, and our heads held high, secure in the knowledge that our job has been well done."<sup>101</sup> Despite difficulties in running the program and in accurately measuring its success, the WPA concluded that its worker training program reached over 330,000 workers while it was in operation.<sup>102</sup> It contributed to the nation's preparedness for defense while assisting older and unskilled workers, the ones most often ignored by private industry.

### **Public Works, Federal Works, and National Defense**

While the WPA took concrete steps to contribute more directly to the preparedness effort as war approached, the PWA's contributions to national defense began during the early years of the New Deal. After leaving the PWA in 1939, Ickes reflected on his organization's accomplishments, looking anew at the impact that public works had on national defense. In an unpublished article drafted in 1942 for Ickes by his Interior Department staff, entitled "Thank God for PWA! Where would we have been today without it?," Ickes applauded his agency's handiwork while making the broader point that via the PWA over \$1 billion were "diverted" ("and I use the word advisedly and boastfully," wrote Ickes) to national defense, dating back to the \$237 million appropriated in 1933 by the NIRA for the Navy. The PWA bankrolled the building of 74,000 miles of strategic highway for the Army; the renovation and modernization of munitions and ordnance; the improvement of thirty-two Army posts (housing about 12%

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<sup>101</sup> "State Administrators Meeting in Chicago, July 7 and 8. John J. McDonough. Director, Division of Training and Reemployment," July 7-8, 1942, "Speeches of John J. McDonough 1942" folder, box 5, entry PC-37, 25, "Records of the Division of Training and Reemployment, 1940-1943," RG 69, NA, emphasis in original; and WPA Press Release, May 3, 1942, in "Vocational Training and Other White Collar" folder, box 3, entry 768, "Division of Information. Records Concerning National Defense Projects, 1939-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>102</sup> Final Report on the WPA Program, 91.



of enlisted soldiers); the purchase of cars, motorcycles, trucks, and tractors; and the construction of over fifty military airports. Further, the PWA gave the Army Air Corps the funds to purchase over 100 airplanes; and for the Navy it paid for two aircraft carriers (the Yorktown and the Enterprise); sixteen destroyers; four heavy destroyers; four submarines; two gunboats; and over 130 combat airplanes. In addition to this direct spending on the military, Ickes also noted carefully the import of the great hydroelectric projects built by PWA, singling out the dams at Grand Coulee and Bonneville. By 1940, the PWA had spent over \$314 million on the Navy and over \$155 million on the War Department.<sup>103</sup>

While Ickes saw the PWA as present at the creation of the New Deal's involvement with both national defense and federal public works, John Carmody initially had a different viewpoint. He thought that both the WPA and PWA were too concerned with providing employment, and not focused enough on carrying out construction that would gird the country for war. Upon his appointment to the FWA in 1939 Carmody summarized the state of the public works programs. "Neither PWA nor WPA had yet come to realize that what had been started to provide use work during the depression must give way to the new effort to prepare for defense." Both public works programs, in his view, "expected me to ask the President to recommend deficit appropriations and new ones to continue the old ones on the usual scale. I refused, told the President so, and he

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<sup>103</sup> Harold L. Ickes, "Thank God for PWA! Where would we have been today without it?," [1942], "Articles: Miscellaneous 'PWA Spent a Billion for Defense!' 'Thank God for the PWA! ca. 1942?'" folder, box 119, Ickes Papers, LC; and see Ickes's comments on a draft of similar material, Harold L. Ickes to Briggs, Oct. 5, 1942, "Articles Miscellaneous Re: PWA and National Defense ca. 1942," *ibid.* For Ickes's use of ghostwriters, generally, see Watkins, Righteous Pilgrim, 760-65; for the role of hydroelectric power and importance of New Deal public works to defense, see Schwarz, New Dealers, 280-84; 297-324; and Philip J. Funigiello, "Kilowatts for Defense: The New Deal and the Coming of the Second World War," Journal of American History 56 (Dec. 1969): 604-20; and Funigiello, Toward a National Power Policy: The New Deal and the Electric Utility Industry, 1933-1941 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1973), 226-54; for totals for PWA military spending, see Oscar Chapman to Samuel I. Rosenman, Nov. 14, 1944, "OF 466b PWA 1940-1945" folder, box 16, OF 466b, FDR Papers, FDRL.

agreed. We began to slow down all 'made' work, turned it into defense as fast as possible."<sup>104</sup>

Although Carmody criticized what he perceived as the unrealistic position of the PWA and WPA, he soon articulated a more complex viewpoint. He acknowledged, much as Ickes did, that public works programs had contributed to national defense well before 1940. By 1940 the FWA even issued to the public Millions for Defense, a thinly-disguised electoral pamphlet designed to tout the contributions of the New Deal works programs to the nation's preparedness. "Over a billion dollars of emergency funds has been spent for direct national defense purposes in the past 7 years," the FWA proudly declared. "Additional billions of emergency funds have been spent for roads, bridges, railroad electrification, streamlined trains, power plants, warehouses, docks, and other facilities which are indispensable to total defense and will be invaluable in furnishing energy for manufacturing defense materials, providing facilities for the swift transport of men and supplies, and creating needed storage space."<sup>105</sup> After the war the Army's Chief of Military History declared that "In the years 1935 to 1939 when regular appropriations for the armed forces were so meager, it was the WPA worker who saved many Army posts and Naval stations from literal obsolescence."<sup>106</sup>

In addition to this range of pre-1940 activity, the centerpiece of the new defense public works effort was the construction of wartime housing under the Community Facilities Act, passed in October 1940 in response to a growing consensus that an

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<sup>104</sup> John M. Carmody, "Re: JMC's Production Control Methods at REA and Federal Works Agency," [prob. 1958], "JMC's Production Controls" folder, box 205, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>105</sup> Federal Works Agency, Millions for Defense: Emergency Expenditures for National Defense, 1933-1940 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), unpaginated.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Hugh Conway and James E. Toth, "Building Victory's Foundation: Infrastructure," in Alan Gropman, ed., The Big "L": American Logistics in World War II (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1997), 197.

emergency shortage of housing for defense workers had to be addressed.<sup>107</sup> Sponsored by Texas Congressman Fritz Lanham, this act was commonly known as the Lanham Act. Under its authority, the FWA could fund the construction of housing and other structures, such as schools, child-care centers, and hospitals, that were deemed necessary for the war effort. Indeed, the 1943 WPA appropriation legislation specified \$6 million dollars to be spent on nursery schools and day care for children of working mothers.<sup>108</sup> By the summer of 1941 more than 5,000 houses per month were being completed by the FWA; by November a total of 44,000 homes had been built.<sup>109</sup> Carmody, however, was concerned that the Army and Navy were eager to use the Lanham Act to justify building more housing for their personnel, at the expense of building more houses for defense workers. "Frankly," he wrote, "I fear it will be more difficult to get additional funds for defense workers' homes than for necessary Army and Navy permanent needs." Carmody warned that "Unless a very substantial part of the Lanham Act appropriation is used to provide housing for industrial workers, it seems to me inevitable that the essential Army and Navy programs will be far more critically handicapped than they would be by any temporary delay in uniting families of the Army and Navy Personnel."<sup>110</sup> Despite these

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<sup>107</sup> For an example of this consensus, see the Twentieth Century Fund volume, Housing for Defense: A Review of the Role of Housing in Relation to America's Defense and a Program for Action (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1940).

<sup>108</sup> For more on WPA defense spending on child care, see transcript of "Broadcast on War Nurseries and Day Care of Children through the Evening Star Forum over Station WMAL and the Blue Network," Nov. 4, 1942, "Broadcast on War Nurseries and Day Care of Children--Evening Star Forum, November 4, 1942" folder, box 1, entry 38, "Information Records. Records Relating to Child Care in World War II, 1943-46," RG 162, National Archives; and Sonya Michel, Children's Interests/Mothers' Rights: The Shaping of America's Child Care Policy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 118-49.

<sup>109</sup> Philip J. Funigiello, The Challenge to Urban Liberalism: Federal-City Relations during World War II (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1978), 44-45. The correct date for the passage of the Lanham Act can be found in the FWA's Second Annual Report (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1941), 26; 54.

<sup>110</sup> John M. Carmody, "Memorandum on the Use of Lanham Act Money," Jan. 13, 1941, "White House 1/1/39--3/31/41" folder, entry 4, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of Administrators with the House, 1939-1942. White House (General Correspondence, August-June, 1939) to White House 9/1/41--12/31/42," RG 162, NA; also found in "OF 63 Housing 1941 Jan-July" folder, OF 63, FDR Papers, FDRL; and see Federal Works Agency, Information Division, "Questions and Answers on Defense

concerns, however, Carmody was particularly proud of the FWA's work on defense housing, and on defense construction, generally. In March 1941 he banned discrimination against skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled African-American workers employed on defense construction, a decision that prompted one African-American newspaper columnist to comment, "It's too bad the Government does not have more Carmodys. That could set a fine example of what democracy should really be like in this U.S.A."<sup>111</sup> The defense housing effort drew on a wide variety of expertise, including such longtime public housers as Catherine Bauer and Edith Wood, whom Carmody had met, along with such reformers as Frances Perkins, Wesley Clark, and Stuart Chase, in the early 1930s in New York City.<sup>112</sup> Despite this reliance on expert advice, however, the complex diffusion of bureaucratic responsibility for defense housing--Carmody at FWA; Nathan Straus at the United States Housing Authority; and Charles F. Palmer, the defense housing coordinator--only served to breed conflict between the administrators.

"I am so deeply disturbed about the conduct of the defense housing program," wrote Straus to presidential aide Isador Lubin. "Defense housing under the Lanham Act is producing neither an adequate number of homes for workers in National Defense today, nor is it building up the local housing Authorities for usefulness when the defense emergency is over. On the contrary, the present system is cumbersome, time-consuming and extravagant today and, at the same time, is destroying the morale of the local Authorities which could prove a mighty weapon for attacking unemployment when the

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Housing Under Control of the Federal Works Administrator," March 12, 1941, "PWR List of States and Cities Completing Six-Year Programs of Public Works" folder, box 3, entry 21, "Administrative Records. Records of the War Public Works Program, 1941-49," RG 162, NA.

<sup>111</sup> FWA Press Release, March 20, 1941, no folder, box 2, entry 32, "Information Records. Speeches of FWA Administrators, 1939-1949," RG 162, NA; Clarence Toliver, "The Point is This," Washington Afro-American, Sept. 6, 1941, untitled folder, box 110, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>112</sup> Minutes of "Conference on Management Policy of Defense Housing Projects," Jan. 7, 1941, no folder, box 3, entry 23, "Minutes and Reports of Conferences of the PWA, 1934-1941," RG 135, NA.

war is over."<sup>113</sup> By the end of 1941 Straus had gone public with his criticism, complaining openly about Carmody and Palmer. As one FWA official protested to FDR's press secretary, Marvin MacIntyre, "Mr. Straus is violating the ethics of his organizational relationship to the Federal Works Administrator, and is doing it in such a way as to create a mistaken impression of serious disharmony and inefficiency."<sup>114</sup>

Whether mistaken or not, however, this dispute helped to curtail both Straus's and Carmody's influence and stature. Straus was forced to resign his position in January 1942, a victim, he thought, of "the real estate lobby."<sup>115</sup> Ten months later FDR eased Carmody out of his post, informing him that "I have reached the conclusion that the Federal Works Agency must be reorganized in order that it may expeditiously handle problems thrown on it by the National defense program--problems of community facilities, defense highways, defense housing, etc." In case Carmody missed FDR's point, the President stated that "It is my conviction that you should not do this reorganization." FDR allowed Carmody to save some face, however, nominating him to fill a vacancy on the Maritime Commission.<sup>116</sup> Carmody, citing his dangerously high blood pressure and the advice of three doctors to slow down, accepted Roosevelt's decision and submitted his formal resignation.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Nathan Straus to Isador Lubin, Jan. 16, 1941, "Straus, Nathan" folder, box 88, Isador Lubin Papers, FDRL.

<sup>114</sup> John N. Edy to Marvin MacIntyre, Nov. 7, 1941, "FWA--Defense Housing USHA" folder, box 119, Carmody Papers, FDRL; this letter is also found in "White House 9/1/41--12/31/42" folder, box 1, entry 4. "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of Administrators with the House, 1939-1942. White House (General Correspondence, August-June, 1939) to White House 9/1/41--12/31/42." RG 162. NA.

<sup>115</sup> Roger Biles, "Nathan Straus and the Failure of U.S. Public Housing, 1937-1942," *The Historian* 52 (autumn 1990): 33-46; Funigiello, *Challenge to Urban Liberalism*, 102-106.

<sup>116</sup> Columbia University Oral History Project, "The Reminiscences of Nathan Straus," 103-104; FDR to John M. Carmody, Oct. 1, 1941, "Roosevelt, F.D." folder, box 76, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>117</sup> John M. Carmody to FDR, Oct. 7, 1941, "Roosevelt, F.D." folder, box 76, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

Reaction to Carmody's departure came from many directions. Mary K. Simkhovich, the President of the National Public Housing Conference, wrote to Carmody to thank him for his service. "During your administration, the foundation was laid for the mass production of housing by public agencies without sacrifice of standards. This was a contribution of major importance to the housing program of our nation and we want you to know that we look with gratitude upon the vision and skill displayed by you."<sup>118</sup> The African-American press, however, saw Carmody's departure as part of a broader trend. "Victims of anti-Negro bias, liberal white administrators in government agencies here are being forced out," a journalist wrote, "one by one, by a clique of prejudiced congressmen determined to curtail benefits Negroes have received under liberalized interpretation of laws recently enacted."<sup>119</sup>

Carmody faced a number of obstacles in his tenure as head of the Federal Works Agency. Resented by many in the WPA and PWA, victimized by a skeptical press corps, and faced with a hostile Congress, Carmody attempted to consolidate the New Deal's public works programs within the American state. While he did not succeed at this task, he did preside over the notable achievements in construction and wartime preparation made by the New Deal's public works programs as World War II drew near.

After Carmody's departure FDR soon settled on a replacement. For a time it was rumored that he was considering appointing General Brehon Somervell to take over for Carmody. A member of the Army Corps of Engineers since 1914, Somervell had run the important New York City branch of the WPA since August 1936, supervising one out of every seven dollars spent nationally by the WPA.<sup>120</sup> Somervell established a strong

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<sup>118</sup> Mary K. Simkhovich to John M. Carmody, Feb. 13, 1942, "JMC's resignation from Federal Works Agency" folder, box 111, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>119</sup> Clipping from unknown newspaper, "Force Negroes' Friend From Federal Posts," Jan. 22 [1942?], untitled folder, box 110, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>120</sup> Excerpts from L.D. Dunbar, "Profiles--Army Man at Work," The New Yorker, Feb. 10, 1940, "Lt. Col. Brehon Burke Somervell New York City" folder, box 3, entry 736, "Division of Information. Photographs and Biographical Information about WPA Officials, 1933-1942," RG 69, NA; Edward J. Flynn to FDR,

record in New York, maintaining good relations with the Workers Alliance and with Mayor Fiorello La Guardia. FDR, however, replied to New York politician Edward J. "Boss" Flynn's urgent inquiries with assurances that "There is no truth in the rumor about General Somervell." Although passed over for the FWA post, Somervell would go on to supervise the building of the Pentagon and play a key role in supplying American troops during World War II.<sup>121</sup>

Roosevelt chose General Philip B. Fleming to fill the vacancy at the top of the FWA. Fleming previously had worked in Ickes's PWA before he was put in charge of administering the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1939. Labor Secretary Frances Perkins thought highly of Fleming's work enforcing wage and hour standards, defending his appointment to Helene P. Gans of the New York branch of the National Consumers' League. Fleming's position, she wrote Gans, "requires not only administrative ability of the highest order but also immunity to pressures and courage to make such changes in personnel, structure and procedures as are necessary to accomplish the objectives of the act." Fleming, Perkins continued, "had demonstrated his ability to meet comparable requirements both in the PWA and in other federal agencies established during the Roosevelt administration," adding, "Those of us who are directly concerned with the administration of the act feel that we are most fortunate in having secured his services for this important task."<sup>122</sup> When Fleming was tapped to fill Carmody's job, Perkins told

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Nov. 1, 1941; and FDR to Edward J. Flynn, Nov. 6, 1941; both in "OF 3710 Federal Works Agency Sept.-Dec. 1941" folder, box 2, OF 3710, FDR Papers, FDRL; for more on Somervell's WPA tenure in New York City see Barbara Blumberg, The New Deal and the Unemployed: The View from New York City (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 99-123.

<sup>121</sup> John Kennedy Ohl, Supplying the Troops: General Somervell and American Logistics in WWII (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994).

<sup>122</sup> Frances Perkins to Helene P. Gans, Dec. 1, 1939, "Wage and Hour" folder, box 103, entry 20, "Office of the Secretary. Secretary Frances Perkins. General Subject File, 1933-1941," Record Group 174. General Records of the Department of Labor, National Archives--College Park, MD. For more on the dissatisfaction of the National Consumers' League with Fleming's appointment to administer the FLSA, see Landon R.Y. Storrs, Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 202-205.

Fleming that she had tried hard to keep such a valuable administrator on her staff. Perkins complained to FDR, telling the President that she "was getting tired of discovering and bringing in good men" such as Fleming, "only to have them taken away at the very moment when I was beginning to enjoy the freedom from worry that goes with having good administrators in the Department."<sup>123</sup> Roosevelt, however, did not let Perkins's complaints keep him from appointing Fleming head of the FWA on December 10, 1941.<sup>124</sup>

Approximately four months later, however, Fleming had fallen ill, causing FDR to reconsider his decision. It was not Fleming's illness alone, though, that led to FDR's misgivings. Howard Hunter, the head of the WPA since October 1940, had met with Roosevelt around the middle of March 1942 and subsequently wrote him to affirm the substance of their conversation--that "the incompetence of the active officials of the Federal Works Agency, and their interference with the operations of the WPA, make it embarrassing for him to continue as WPA Commissioner." Hunter indicated that he would resign effective May 1, 1942, with FDR's permission.<sup>125</sup> This meeting prompted FDR to confide in Director of the Budget Harold D. Smith, "I think something must be done about my very good friend, Colonel Phil Fleming. We simply cannot go along with his continued illness. How should I get word to him that I am putting in Howard Hunter as Acting Federal Works Administrator, with the understanding that as soon as Phil Fleming is ready to resume work he would replace him or would go to active war duty, whichever he prefers?"<sup>126</sup> For his part, Fleming complained to FDR about the "spirit of

<sup>123</sup> Frances Perkins to Philip B. Fleming, Oct. 24, 1941, in *ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> FWA Press Release, Dec. 10, 1941, "Federal Works Agency" folder, box 1, entry 746, "Division of Information. Publications of the Federal Works Agency and Subordinate Agencies, 1936-1946," RG 69, NA.

<sup>125</sup> Howard O. Hunter to FDR, March 16, 1942, "OF 3710 Federal Works Agency--Jan.-June 1942" folder, box 2, OF 3710; and see Howard O. Hunter to Grace Tully, March 16, 1942, "1942 Jan-Nov" folder, box 6, PPF 1820; both in FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>126</sup> FDR to Harold D. Smith, March 21, 1942, in *ibid.*



competition existing between employees of the Federal Works Agency engaged in war public works and the regional offices of the Works [sic] Projects Administration" and stated his opinion that both agencies "should be amalgamated so that in the creation of public works the Federal Government appeared only as the Federal Works Agency."<sup>127</sup> Fleming's assistant told FDR aide Edwin "Pa" Watson that the FWA had "been consolidating over here to get a line organization which operates similarly to the Corps of Engineers of the Army."<sup>128</sup> While FDR brushed aside Fleming's requests to phase out the WPA, any plans he may have had to make Hunter acting head of the FWA failed to make headway. In fact, just the opposite happened. By April 1942 Hunter had left the government, with the Associated Press reporting that he had said that since "it was a personal matter between him and Mr. Roosevelt he was not at liberty to discuss it." By July, Fleming, a man renowned for his "natural flair for diplomacy"--in fact, after World War II he would serve as ambassador to Costa Rica--added the title of acting WPA commissioner to his responsibilities as head of the FWA.<sup>129</sup>

### **New Deal Public Works at War: The WPA and Japanese American Internment**

Perhaps nothing else epitomized the wide-ranging role of New Deal public works during wartime than did the part the WPA played in carrying out the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast. Here, past concerns of the public works programs for developing national resources or providing morally uplifting employment were thrown aside in the name of wartime emergency. New Dealers such as

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<sup>127</sup> Philip B. Fleming to FDR, March 23, 1942, in *ibid.*; also found in "White House (Confidential) File," folder, box 1, entry 6, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of Administrator with the White House, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

<sup>128</sup> Baird Snyder to Edwin M. Watson, March 23, 1942, "White House (Confidential) File," folder, box 1, entry 6, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of Administrator with the White House, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

<sup>129</sup> *New York Times*, April 28, 1942, p. 23; *ibid.*, July 10, 1942, p. 5; and Philip B. Fleming to all state WPA administrators, July 13, 1942, "100 May 1942" folder, box 77, "Central Files: General 1935-1944. 100 Administration," RG 69, NA. See also Fleming's obituary in the *New York Times*, Oct. 7, 1955, p. 25.

Hopkins and Ickes had built extensive bureaucracies oriented around building public works and providing employment; during war these bureaucracies and administrative knowledge--these state capacities--were put to use in a way no one thought of back in the dark days of 1933.

By this point no longer Secretary of Commerce but still a key adviser to the president, Harry Hopkins was proud of the WPA's role in the internment process, touting its achievements to FDR. Even before Japanese Americans arrived at the internment camps, Hopkins praised the work of then-WPA head Howard Hunter to FDR. Hopkins assured FDR that Hunter and the WPA were "handling all the building of those camps for the War Department for the Japanese evacuees on the West Coast" and "doing it with great promptness." Hopkins continued praising Hunter, suggesting him as a candidate to head the entire FWA. "I don't think you are going to find anybody better," Hopkins wrote. Hunter, Hopkins assured FDR, "has a lot of steam, he acts very quickly and is thoroughly loyal to you."<sup>130</sup> While Army engineers played an important role in the construction of the camps for the Wartime Civilian Control Administration, Hopkins was correct that the WPA was central to the internment process.

Not only did the WPA play a large part in running the internment bureaucracy for the WCCA, it also was responsible for helping supervise the construction of fifteen assembly centers and staffing them.<sup>131</sup> Japanese Americans were held there until the internment camps were ready to receive them. One of these WPA-run assembly centers, at Manzanar in California's Owens Valley, was simply converted into one of ten internment camps, or "relocation centers," as they were called. While the WCCA was superseded by the War Relocation Authority as relocation centers replaced the assembly

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<sup>130</sup> Harry L. Hopkins to FDR, March 19, 1942, "OF 3710 Federal Works Agency Jan.--June 1942" folder, OF 3710, FDR Papers, FDRL.

<sup>131</sup> National Cyclopaedia of American Biography (New York: James T. White & Company, 1964), vol. J. s.v. "Nicholson, Rex Lee."

centers by the end of 1942, WPA staff remained in place to administer the camps. In fact, between March and the end of November 1942 the WPA spent approximately \$4.47 million on relocation and internment. By comparison, other civilian agencies involved in internment during the same period spent far less. The Office for Emergency Management spent about \$986,000 (funding the operating expenses of the Wartime Civilian Control Administration) and the Federal Security Agency spent slightly over half that amount, about \$533,000 (funding, through the Public Health Service, Social Security Board, Defense Health and Welfare Service, and the U.S. Employment Service, medical aid and other miscellaneous tasks). During these eight months the military spent approximately \$4.43 million on internment, slightly less than the WPA.<sup>132</sup>

Military officials such as Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, politicians such as California Governor Culbert Olson and Senator Hiram Johnson, influential newspaper columnists such as Westbrook Pegler and Walter Lippmann, and local California elites motivated by fear and racism pushed for the decision to evacuate and relocate Japanese Americans following the bombing of Pearl Harbor.<sup>133</sup> Once this decision was made, however, the WPA became the most important civilian agency involved in internment. Although overlooked in contemporary and

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<sup>132</sup> U.S. Army, Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast 1942 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1943), 350. Other key expenses include the construction of the assembly centers (\$10.7 million) and relocation projects (\$56.5 million), which were charged to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and \$4.1 million in crop loans issued by the Farm Security Administration.

In addition to drawing on WPA personnel, the internment effort relied on a number of federal agencies, including the Federal Security Agency, the Office of Emergency Management, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Department of Justice Press Release, Jan. 29, 1942, in Roger Daniels, ed., American Concentration Camps: A Documentary History of the Relocation and Incarceration of Japanese Americans, 1942-1945, 9 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 1:unpaginated. Recently the role of the Census Bureau in internment has also been explored; see William Seltzer and Margo Anderson, "After Pearl Harbor: The Proper Role of Population Data Systems in Time of War" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Population Association of America, Los Angeles, March 23-25, 2000). In author's possession.

<sup>133</sup> For an evaluation of the different influences on the decision to intern the Japanese Americans, see Roger Daniels, Concentration Camps: North America--Japanese in the United States and Canada during World War II, rev. ed., (Malabar, Florida: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, Inc., 1981 [1971]), 70-73.

subsequent historical accounts, the WPA provided the personnel, bureaucratic might, and knowledge essential to executing FDR's Executive Order 9066.<sup>134</sup> While historian Alan Brinkley has declared that the wartime agency that "infringed on personal liberty more directly than any other" was the Office of Price Administration, this chapter suggests that this claim merits reconsideration in light of the work done by the WPA for the WCCA and WRA.<sup>135</sup>

WPA officials in Southern California briefed Earl Minderman, director of the WPA's division of information in Washington, D.C., on the specific accomplishments of the WPA. On March 12, 1942, Lieutenant General DeWitt, the army officer in charge of the relocation and internment effort, asked Rex L. Nicholson, assistant WPA commissioner based at Salt Lake City, to take charge of the management of the first thirteen "reception" and "assembly centers."<sup>136</sup> Nicholson, who had participated in a number of informal pre-evacuation planning meetings, agreed to take the job, with the understanding that while he and his personnel would report to DeWitt they would remain

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<sup>134</sup> For a typical contemporary account, see George D. Nickel, "Evacuation, American Style," Survey Midmonthly 78 (April 1942): 99-103; Nickel, "Evacuation: American Style, Part II," Survey Midmonthly 78 (Oct. 1942): 262-65; and Nickel, "In the Relocation Centers," Survey Midmonthly 79 (Jan. 1943): 3-7.

<sup>135</sup> Brinkley, End of Reform, 160. The key historian of internment is Roger Daniels; among his many works on the subject see his Concentration Camps and Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993). For more on the War Relocation Authority, see the opinionated but useful Richard Drinnon, Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Myer and American Racism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). The work of the University of California, Berkeley, study of internment and relocation is also valuable; I have consulted Dorothy Swaine Thomas and Richard S. Nishimoto, with contributions by Rosalie A. Hankey, James M. Sakoda, Morton Grodzins, Frank Miyamoto, The Spoilage: Japanese-American Evacuation and Resettlement during World War II (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969 [1946]) and Morton Grodzins, Americans Betrayed: Politics and the Japanese Evacuation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949). Also useful are Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982); and Rita Takahashi Cates, "Comparative Administration and Management of Five War Relocation Authority Camps: America's Incarceration of Persons of Japanese Descent during World War II," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1980). None of these works discusses the role played by the WPA in internment.

<sup>136</sup> Eventually sixteen assembly centers and ten relocation centers were built. Daniels, Prisoners Without Trial, 55.

salaried employees of the WPA.<sup>137</sup> "General plans and policies for the operation of Reception Centers and Assembly points," DeWitt told Nicholson, "will be worked out by you with my Assistant Chief of Staff, Civil Affairs Division [Colonel Karl R. Bendetsen], and subject to his final approval. The actual administration and management of the Assembly Points and Reception Centers will be the responsibility of your agency."<sup>138</sup>

Nicholson kept his WPA position and was named the chief of the WCCA "reception and induction" division. Nicholson was well-suited to this responsibility. Born in Texas to a family that had ranched cattle there since the Civil War, Nicholson forged his own career as a structural engineer. In 1933 he left a large stake in a Washington state construction company to work first for the CWA, and then later for the WPA. Nicholson became acting state administrator for the WPA in Washington, and then director of employment and labor relations for the WPA in the Western U.S., including Alaska and Hawaii. Nicholson's star rose in the WPA thanks in part to his successful direction of an investigation into graft in New Mexico's WPA, leading to the federal prosecution of 121 people. Nicholson continued in his post after WPA was placed under the FWA, taking charge of the WPA's war construction in the Western U.S. and Pacific islands, supervising the building of 110 airports and over 200,000 miles of military highways and roads. In short, the Army turned to Nicholson and the WPA for expertise and efficiency, and Nicholson and the WPA delivered.<sup>139</sup>

"Ten days after the assignment was made," reported the WPA's state information officer for Southern California to Minderman, "we opened the first [camp site] at Manzanar in Owens Valley under the management of Clayton L. Triggs, one of our

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<sup>137</sup> U.S. Army, Final Report, 46.

<sup>138</sup> Lieutenant General John DeWitt to Rex L. Nicholson, March 28, 1942, reprinted in U.S. Army, Final Report, 47.

<sup>139</sup> National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, suppl. vol. J, s.v. "Nicholson, Rex Lee." and San Francisco Chronicle, March 27, 1951, p. 7.

regional men." Henry Amory, the WPA administrator in charge of Southern California, became camp manager at the Santa Anita assembly center, a location which was referred to as "our baby" by the WPA. "The rest of the staff," the report continued, "both here and at Manzanar, have been drafted from WPA." A third center, at the Pomona Fairgrounds, was projected to be ready within another ten days. It, too, was managed by a WPA official.<sup>140</sup> Conditions at these assembly centers were terrible, as Stanford history professor Yamato Ichihashi testified. The Santa Anita center was "mentally and morally depressive." "[T]housands are housed in stables which retain smells of animals. A stable which housed a horse now houses 5 to 6 humans.... There is no privacy of any kind. In short the general conditions are bad without any exaggeration; we are fast being converted into veritable Okies."<sup>141</sup> Conditions were so awful that government bureaucrats were surprised there were not more outbreaks of illness from the unsanitary surroundings.<sup>142</sup>

In June 1942 Ted Nakashima's essay, "Concentration Camp: U.S. Style," appeared in The New Republic. Nakashima's experience in the assembly center created out of the stables of Portland's Livestock Exposition Building was comparable to Santa Anita:

The food and sanitation problems are the worst. We have had absolutely no fresh meat, vegetables or butter since we came here. Mealtime queues extend for blocks; standing in a rainswept line, feet in the mud, waiting for the scant portions of canned wieners and boiled potatoes, hash for breakfast or canned wieners and beans for dinner. Milk only for the kids. Coffee or tea dosed with saltpeter and stale bread are the adults' staples. Dirty, unwiped dishes, greasy silver, a starchy diet, no butter, no milk, bawling kids, mud, wet mud that stinks when it dries, no

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<sup>140</sup> L.W. Feader to Earl Minderman, April 8, 1942, "Japanese Evacuation (N. California S. California)," folder, box 2, entry 687, "Division of Information. General Correspondence of the Field Relations Section. 1937-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>141</sup> Ichihashi quoted in Kennedy, Freedom From Fear, 753-54.

<sup>142</sup> Daniels, Concentration Camps, 89.

vegetables--a sad thing for the people who raised them in such abundance..... Can this be the same America we left a few weeks ago?<sup>143</sup>

Despite the distress of Japanese Americans over conditions in the camps, the WPA did little to create a livable environment.

Robert L. Brown, the reports officer and the assistant project director at Manzanar, recalled that Triggs "was quite a guy." In running the camp, Triggs drew directly on his experience with WPA. He had run camps for workers doing road construction and learned first-hand what was involved in camp administration. "[A] lot of the people that came to Manzanar to start with," Brown said, "were fellows that [Triggs] picked up from his WPA experience, and were people he knew."<sup>144</sup> Triggs, however, was able to come up with new variations on his WPA experience in running Manzanar. Indeed, Triggs explicitly requested that Nicholson approve the installation of some of the most restrictive elements of the camp: barbed wire fencing, guard towers, and spotlights.<sup>145</sup> Nicholson, at the request of Colonel Bendetsen, also ordered all camp administrators to post notices of Civilian Restrictive Order No. 1 in English and Japanese, instructing evacuees that they were to remain inside the camp's boundaries at all times.<sup>146</sup>

These features were among the most despised by the inhabitants of the camps. One evacuee, Bennie Okami, wrote a poem for the English class he attended in the Manzanar camp, "That Damn Fence."

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<sup>143</sup> Ted Nakashima, "Concentration Camp: U.S. Style," The New Republic, June 15, 1942, 822-23.

<sup>144</sup> "An Interview with Robert L. Brown conducted by Arthur A. Hansen on December 13, 1973 and February 20, 1974 for the California State University, Fullerton Oral History Program Japanese American Project," in Arthur A. Hansen, ed., Japanese American World War II Evacuation Oral History Project, 5 vols. (Westport, CT: Meckler Publishing, 1991), 2:100. After the war, Brown drew on his experience with the WPA and the internment camps while working for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Ibid., 105.

<sup>145</sup> Clayton E. Triggs and Harry L. Black to Rex L. Nicholson, May 12, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, BANC MSS 67/14 c, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, reel 148.

<sup>146</sup> Colonel Karl R. Bendetsen to All Assembly Center Managers (Through Mr. R.L. Nicholson, Chief Reception Center Division), May 22, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 148.

They've sunk the posts, deep in the ground  
 And they've strung barbed wire all the way around;  
 With Machine gun nests just over there,  
 There are sentries and soldiers everywhere.

Okami wrote that he and his comrades were "trapped like rats in a wire cage" and "That damned fence is driving us crazy."<sup>147</sup> Although he did not use language as graphic as Okami's, San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen also tried to portray the realities of internment. Caen regaled his audience with anecdotes such as the following: "Henry Iwata, an Oakland Japanese who used to leave a trail of 50-buck bills around local night spots, is now at [the assembly center at] Tanforan [racetrack], and writes pals that he's very comfortable--'They've got me in Seabiscuit's stall!'" However, Caen also wrote in a more serious vein: "Asami Kawachi reports the following conversation between a Japanese mother and her American-born little girl at the Santa Anita assembly center. Girl: 'Mama, I want to go back to America. I want to play with Patty!' Mother: 'Child, we are in America. See the American Flag?'"<sup>148</sup>

While one War Relocation Authority official later recalled that "Manzanar as an assembly center was manned just about 100% by the WPA," the WPA's involvement in internment went beyond providing administrative personnel. The WPA also lent its procurement and disbursement systems directly to the Army in order to supply the camps and conduct maintenance and repairs.<sup>149</sup> Indeed, the very first administrative order of the WCCA placed Nicholson and the WPA in charge of "the location, planning, construction,

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<sup>147</sup> Quoted in Cates, "Comparative Administration and Management of Five War Relocation Authority Camps," 66-67.

<sup>148</sup> Herb Caen, "It's News to Me," San Francisco Chronicle, May 15, 1942, p. 15, in Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 346; and Caen, "It's News to Me," San Francisco Chronicle, July 1, 1942, p. 15, in Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 347.

<sup>149</sup> "Ruth McKee Notes. Interview with E.R. Fryer," Feb. 18, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 22; U.S. Army, Final Report, 74; 222.



equipping of Reception Centers."<sup>150</sup> The reliance of the Army on the WPA for such basic functions not only illustrates the breadth and capability of the WPA, but also the reluctance of the military to undertake such a task. Neglected during the isolationist climate of the interwar years, the Army declined to commit potentially large amounts of men and supplies to running such an open-ended program as internment.<sup>151</sup> As recently as May 1940 Time magazine had described two weeks of botched Army war games--the largest peacetime exercise ever--as "old-fashioned nonsense," reporting "Against Europe's total war, the U.S. Army looked like a few nice boys with BB guns."<sup>152</sup> More directly, as Attorney General Francis Biddle and War Secretary Stimson told FDR at the end of February 1942, "the difficulties [of internment and relocation] were practical, i.e., the Army did not have enough men to evacuate or guard any very large number of Japanese at this time."<sup>153</sup>

As the Army completed its delivery of Japanese Americans into the assembly centers and prepared to turn the internment program over from the WCCA to the WRA, the WRA began to seriously consider hiring WPA administrators for its organization. Two WRA officials met with Nicholson to discuss the availability of his personnel. The WRA, they recorded, "is finding it nearly impossible to locate suitable administrative service personnel," and thought the WPA "had an excess of available personnel in

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<sup>150</sup> WCCA Administrative Order #1, March 16, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 12.

<sup>151</sup> For more on the weaknesses of the U.S. Army during this period, see Mark Skinner Watson, The United States Army in World War II: The War Department: Chief of Staff: Prewar Plans and Preparations (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Army, 1950), 15-56; and D. Clayton James and Anne Sharp Wells, From Pearl Harbor to V-J Day: The American Armed Forces in World War II (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), 5-15.

<sup>152</sup> Time, May 27, 1940, p. 19, cited in Doris Kearns Goodwin, No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 52.

<sup>153</sup> Francis Biddle, Notes on Cabinet Meeting, Feb. 27, 1942, "Cabinet Meeting, Jan-Jun. 1942" folder, box 1, Francis Biddle Papers, FDRL, microfilmed as part of the "Papers of the U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians. Part 1. Numerical File Archive" (Frederick, Maryland: University Publications of America, Inc., 1983), reel 3.

administrative services." Nicholson presented his ideas on the role of the WPA in the internment process to these officials:

Mr. Nicholson said that through the years he had developed an extremely competent staff of engineers, stewards, warehousemen, and other people needed to man reception centers. He cited examples of work accomplished by WPA with its enormous facilities, namely the Cooley Lake Clearing Project in which WPA had cleared and marketed the timber and had transferred some twelve towns from what is now the lake bottom to high ground.

Nicholson thought that the WPA was capable of running the entire internment program after the Japanese Americans had been delivered by the Army to the assembly camps. "Obviously, what Mr. Nicholson had in mind was to take over the WRA function as applied to project management," the WRA officials recorded, using the euphemistic phrase for running the centers and camps. Nicholson said "he would take over all functions except that of policy making. He said, in effect,--you formulate the policies and WPA will carry them out."<sup>154</sup>

The WRA made a counter offer to Nicholson: instead of running internment, WPA personnel could be employed by the WRA to carry out the "housekeeping" or quartermaster functions associated with running the centers and camps. Nicholson, however, wanted to maintain control over his staff and objected strongly to such an arrangement. "He said that he had trained his people and throughout the years had developed a fine, loyal staff which he would not wish to lose. He said these people were needed in WPA work. He pointed out that if they were assigned full time to reception centers they would be lost to him." Faced with Nicholson's opposition, the WRA administrators recommended that Milton Eisenhower, the WRA director, appeal directly to Nicholson's superior, FWA head General Philip Fleming, to secure WPA personnel for

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<sup>154</sup> E.R. Fryer, WRA regional director, and Lt. Colonel Cress, WRA deputy director, "Memorandum for the files," April 20, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 22.

use by the WRA and to direct Nicholson to make his WPA staffers available to run the reception centers.<sup>155</sup>

By May 1942 Nicholson and his division's responsibilities were outlined on a WCCA organizational chart. Nicholson's responsibilities were defined as

Equips, staffs, and operates all assembly centers and reception centers. Provides for system of supply for each project. Establishes accounting system for each project. Provides for all medical, hospital, education and recreation and recreational facilities required at assembly center and reception centers. Responsible for providing all necessary personnel required for assembly center and reception center operations, either directly or through other agencies; in the latter case, determines requirements and request fulfillment through WCCA and CAD [Civilian Affairs Division of the Western Defense Command and Fourth Army] channels.<sup>156</sup>

Draft notes for the chart indicate that Nicholson and the WPA, "in consultation [sic] with the US Army Division and District Engineers, is responsible for location [sic], planning, construction, equipping, staffing and operation of reception centers." If necessary, Nicholson was authorized to use the WPA to undertake construction directly.<sup>157</sup>

Lieutenant General DeWitt's control over the internment bureaucracy, however, stymied the efforts of WPA officials to make political capital out of their role in uprooting approximately 120,000 people and taking them away from their homes and businesses. One frustrated WPA administrator wrote, "the moving of these japs is one of the biggest tasks of its type ever attempted[;] we should get credit." He complained, "A complete report on the extent of our participation...would enable us to write a good story

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<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* Eisenhower ran the WRA until he resigned in mid-June 1942. He was replaced by Dillon S. Myer. Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial*, 57; Drinnon, *Keeper of Concentration Camps*, 36-38.

<sup>156</sup> Organization Chart of Western Defense Command and Fourth Army (including the Civil Affairs Division and the Wartime Civil Control Administration), May 3, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 12. Nicholson's WCCA division was variously called the "Reception Division" or "Reception and Induction Division," on a version of this chart that appears in the Army's *Final Report on Internment*, Nicholson's division is rather blandly referred to as the "Operations Branch" and "Operations Division." U.S. Army, *Final Report*, 68-69.

<sup>157</sup> Draft notes on WCCA organization, no date, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 12.

for periodicals." Even in recent newsreel footage, this official further grumbled, "the WPA is getting no credit for this work."<sup>158</sup> Indeed, Minderman sent several urgent letters and telegrams to Amory, pressing him for more details in order that he could showcase the WPA's achievements to a broader audience. Although "I had the impression," Minderman wrote Amory, "that nothing was to be said about this activity publicly," he desired that Amory's state information officer, L.W. Feader, "write me how much of the WPA's part in this program is being made public."<sup>159</sup>

Minderman's requests for details finally filtered through to Nicholson. He wrote Minderman, informing him that "Several of the managers of the evacuation reception centers have contacted me requesting advice as to how they should respond to your request for information on the evacuation program which we are operating." While Nicholson had notified them that no information should be issued "because of a strict order by General DeWitt to all concerned requesting that no information be given out except through his office," he was, however, "in the process of preparing a complete report for the Central Office which will cover our activity out here but it is not for release to the press."<sup>160</sup>

By the end of April all that Minderman had received in the way of substantive information was L.W. Feader's unreleased press release, which Feader had drafted around April 3. Although this document was written with the intent of showcasing the WPA, if read with caution it is still a valuable source. In his release, Feader wrote that the scale of the task facing DeWitt necessitated that he transfer "a major portion of the problem to the one Federal agency big enough and experienced enough to tackle the job." DeWitt's

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<sup>158</sup> H.W. to Jim [Branson?], undated [prob. April 1942], "Japanese Evacuation (N. California S. California)," folder, box 2, entry 687, "Division of Information. General Correspondence of the Field Relations Section, 1937-1942," RG 69, NA.

<sup>159</sup> Earl Minderman to Henry R. Amory, April 14, 1942; and see Earl Minderman to Henry R. Amory, April 17, 1942; and Earl Minderman to Henry R. Amory, April 22, 1942; all in *ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> Rex L. Nicholson to Earl Minderman, April 23, 1942, *ibid.*

order "went to WPA, the Work Projects Administration, and to Rex L. Nicholson, assistant WPA commissioner for the eleven western states." In less than three days after receiving this job, "WPA, with a record of meeting flood, storm and earthquake emergencies, was working side-by-side with the Army in organizing the evacuation plans and camps with such speed that within ten days the first Japanese were moving into Manzanar, the big reception camp in Owens Valley." Once inside the internment camp, Feader portrayed the fate of a typical internee, "John Doe Togo and his family." "Ushered and transported to the camp gates by the Army," wrote Feader, "they then become the charges of the WPA." After physical examinations, they were assigned housing and given colored buttons designating their assigned meal times. "They speedily find that other evacuees have learned, in a matter of hours, to adapt themselves to the new conditions of life and they are welcomed into the community life by their fellow evacuees," Feader's rosy report continued.

Mother Togo quickly learns that there is milk to be had for little Yoshio at his regular feeding time and that the meals for her family are well balanced. Father Togo finds that he is occupationally classified and given a job to do within the camp or center. Very soon he is proud to be helping newer evacuees as they become adjusted to the camp life and it is also a matter of pride to see that the whole center is well controlled by the evacuees themselves for a wholesome community life.

Of course, the reality of the situation did not match the WPA's portrait. Many years later Japanese Americans told the U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, "[W]e stood two hours three times a day with pails in our hands like beggars to receive our meals. There was no hot water, no washing or bathing. It took about two months before we lived half way civilized."<sup>161</sup> The barracks at Manzanar were "nothing but a 20 by 25 foot of barrack with roof, sides of pine wood and covered with thin tar paper...no attic, no insulation. But the July heat separated the pine floor and

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<sup>161</sup> Personal Justice Denied, 141.

exposed cracks to a quarter of an inch. Through this a cold wind would blow in or during the heat of the day dusty sand would come in through the cracks. To heat, one pot bellied wood stove in the center of the barracks."<sup>162</sup>

Feader reported that the WPA planned to allow as much self-government of the centers as was possible, "both in order to reduce overhead costs and in the hope, that by assuming self-responsibility, the large majority of Japanese, who are loyal American citizens, will retain their loyalty and their trust in American justice despite conditions which might ordinarily be destructive to morale." The experience of the WPA, "in sanitation, recreation, education and a host of other work and service activities is of tremendous value in the building and operating of the centers and camps, while the administrative organization of the WPA," Feader claimed, "was able to staff the new program on little more than a moment's notice." He quoted one WPA official who boasted, "We didn't have any time to think about this job--we just started doing it, and it is lucky that we had the people and the experience to get a flying start."<sup>163</sup>

Much of this WPA press release is confirmed by the reports made to University of California, Berkeley, sociologist and demographer Dorothy Swaine Thomas. Thomas and her colleagues at Berkeley directed a participant-observer study of "evacuation and resettlement," relying on Japanese American graduate students who were themselves interned as well as on the reports of white observers who lived in and visited the camps. With funding from the Rockefeller and Columbia foundations, among others, as well as the cooperation of WRA, the study produced several books and generated a wealth of material now housed at the University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library.<sup>164</sup> As

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<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-39.

<sup>163</sup> WPA Press Release, undated [circa April 3, 1942], *ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> Thomas and Nishimoto, et al., Spoilage; Thomas with the assistance of Charles Kikuchi and James Sakoda, The Salvage: Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952); see also Grodzins, Americans Betrayed; Jacobus tenBroek, Edward N. Barnhart, and Floyd W. Matson, Prejudice, War, and the Constitution (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954). The

the study got underway, Thomas and her staff requested permission from Nicholson to visit the internment camps.<sup>165</sup> After visiting Manzanar for several days one sociologist noted the WPA's role in the opening of the camp:

About March 15 the military police were sent to Manzanar, and immediately following in two or three days, contractors and the WCCA moved in. The personnel of this agency was composed largely of WPA people. On March 20 the first convoy of Japanese arrived, about 60 in number. There were no finished barracks for them, nor doors, windows, or steps, and the expression that "The houses were built around the Japanese" can be taken literally. The administrative office for the WCCA personnel was not ready, and they worked for several days without a roof. The administrators say that for several days there was no division of authority, and each personnel member did anything he saw to do from assisting the carpenters to helping the Japanese move into their quarters.<sup>166</sup>

Minderman, upon hearing from Nicholson that his projected account of the WPA's role in the internment process would have to remain secret, proposed to James Branson, a colleague of his in the WPA, "How about asking Nicholson to submit his report to General DeWitt and ask him to approve the parts of it which he considers suitable for publication." In case there was any confusion, Minderman clarified his aims. "The idea is that we want to get out a story on this and we are perfectly willing to submit it to General DeWitt for clearance."<sup>167</sup> Branson then drafted a letter to Nicholson for Minderman's signature, emphasizing his desire to make WPA's role in relocation and internment public. "I am extremely anxious to arrange," Branson wrote, "if at all possible, for some parts of the story to be released, and through our office here, if possible." Branson noted that "The reports I have seen so far give no credit to WPA for

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records of the study and of the War Relocation Authority are stored as Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, BANC MSS 67/14 c, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>165</sup> Dorothy Swaine Thomas, "Notes on Interview with Colonel Evans. DST," May 20, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 16.

<sup>166</sup> Dr. Carter to Dr. Dorothy Thomas, "Progress and Organizational Report on Manzanar, Japanese Relocation Settlement," June 1, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 158.

<sup>167</sup> Earl Minderman to James R. Branson, April 27, 1942, *ibid.*

the complete job you are doing out there, either in the newspapers or in the news reels." While Branson underscored the WPA's desire to accommodate DeWitt's desire to control the flow of information through his office, he noted that "it does seem too bad that such a magnificent job" done by the WPA "should not be recognized."<sup>168</sup>

The WPA's job was recognized, however, by members of Congress who were worried about the potential for idealistic New Dealers to botch the internment effort. These politicians feared that the WPA would focus too much on helping the Japanese-Americans rather than on simply keeping them locked up. In January 1943 the subcommittee of the Senate Military Affairs Committee held hearings on a proposal to transfer responsibility for the camps from the WRA--and, by extension, from the WPA officials running these camps--to the War Department, proper. Failing this, they wanted to see the WRA assess the loyalty of the evacuees. While the Army was responsible for guarding the camps and maintaining security, Wyoming Senator Joseph C. O'Mahoney asked Eisenhower's successor as head of the WRA, Dillon S. Myer, "Would it be proper to say, with respect to all other matters, WPA administers the camps?" Myer, a New Dealer who had previously worked in the Department of Agriculture implementing the Agricultural Adjustment Act, subsequently becoming assistant chief of the Soil Conservation Service, replied that this was indeed the case.<sup>169</sup> Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy's aide Colonel William P. Scobey clarified this point, however, when a concerned Senator O'Mahoney asked him if using WPA personnel meant the same thing

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<sup>168</sup> Earl Minderman to Rex L. Nicholson, April 27, 1942, *ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Military Affairs, Hearings on S. 444 A Bill Providing for the Transfer of Certain Functions of the War Relocation Authority to the War Department 78th Cong., 1st sess., Jan. 20, 27, and 28, 1943 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1943), 7, in Daniels, ed., 9 vols., American Concentration Camps, 7:unpaginated. For more on Myer, who after the war served as head of the Federal Public Housing Authority and as Commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, see Dillon S. Myer, Uprooted Americans: The Japanese Americans and the War Relocation Authority during World War II (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1971); and Drinnon, Keeper of Concentration Camps.



as "making a WPA project out of it." Scobey argued that while the WPA ran the camps, the Army was in charge of the overall internment project.<sup>170</sup>

Rex Nicholson recounted for the committee the history of the WPA's involvement with internment. Assistant Secretary of War McCloy first phoned Nicholson on March 6, 1942, and after Nicholson traveled to Washington, D.C., met with him, along with representatives from other federal agencies, to discuss the "Japanese situation in the West." McCloy, Nicholson related, "said it had been suggested to him that the WPA organization out there was perhaps the best equipped agency to handle the management of these assembly and reception centers, and wanted to know whether or not it was possible for us to assume the responsibility for the job."<sup>171</sup> That night, Nicholson flew from Washington, D.C., to San Francisco to meet with General DeWitt and his staff. "After this conference," Nicholson reported, "we agreed to assume the responsibility for the management of all assembly and reception centers established for the evacuation of the Japanese. It was to be a temporary function, pending the organization of the War Relocation Authority and their getting themselves in shape to accept the Japanese and transfer them inland." The WPA was "to furnish administrative staffs for each center to assume complete responsibility for all management inside the center." The Army, Nicholson said, "did not go inside except on inspection trips."<sup>172</sup>

Nicholson traveled from San Francisco to the Owens Valley and found that construction on the "reception center" at Manzanar had hardly begun. "Well," he

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<sup>170</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Military Affairs, Hearings on S. 444 A Bill Providing for the Transfer of Certain Functions of the War Relocation Authority to the War Department, 85.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 94. For more on McCloy's involvement with internment, see Kai Bird, The Chairman: John J. McCloy, the Making of the American Establishment (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 147-74; and Alan Brinkley, "Icons of the American Establishment," in Brinkley, Liberalism and Its Discontents, 164-209.

<sup>172</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Military Affairs, Hearings on S. 444 A Bill Providing for the Transfer of Certain Functions of the War Relocation Authority to the War Department, 94.

recalled, "the Army engineers practically worked a miracle. They were able to get some buildings up, although they did not get doors and windows in them. However, we took the Japanese in. We received a large number of them on the date on which the general had ordered them out, and during the interim we had equipped the center with the proper equipment--feeding and housing equipment--staffed it, and we received the Japanese when they arrived and served them a hot meal."<sup>173</sup> The WPA was responsible for the internees from approximately April through November, when, the internment process completed, the WRA assumed management of the camps. "Here is what we had to do" during those months, Nicholson recalled. "It was the plan in the beginning to move [the internees] right into these permanent centers inland, but we found that we did not have time to locate the proper center to build the facilities to house them, so it became necessary to go out and take over race tracks and fair grounds where there were utilities already installed--light, water, heat, power. The Corps of Engineers went in and built the barracks and the mess halls and the facilities, and they built 16 of those places in 3 weeks. We staffed them just as fast as they got the buildings up, and as soon as the contractor was out of the way we started feeding the Japs right in."<sup>174</sup> Kentucky Senator Albert "Happy" Chandler was particularly interested in establishing that it was not the WPA that was responsible for the WRA's policy of gradually releasing "loyal" internees, pressing Nicholson to disassociate himself and the WPA from the policies of Myer's WRA. "Is it your opinion," asked Chandler, "that there are many of those Japanese there who are enemies of the country, almost irreconcilably, who are in these relocation camps, who ought to be gotten out and segregated and put to themselves?" Nicholson agreed with Chandler, arguing that "We recommended segregation" to the WRA and Myer.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

Although WPA personnel remained essential to the operation of the WCCA and the WRA, several months after internment began Nicholson had overstayed his welcome. By early April 1942 one Army officer stated to the staff director of the Tolan Congressional Committee investigating national defense migration that "I got the impression in an interview with Mr. R.C. Nicholson [sic], Regional WPA Director now serving as head of the alien reception center under the Army's direction, that his work and Eisenhower's are headed for over-lapping if the matter if [sic] not straightened out soon."<sup>176</sup> One of Eisenhower's subordinates, however, stressed the utility of the WPA's personnel and procurement system to the WCCA. He wrote Eisenhower, "I have consulted with Mr. Nicholson...and he is of the opinion that his agency could continue to procure supplies for WRA after it has taken over from WCCA." The WPA and Nicholson possessed

an experienced and efficient staff who are experts in the line of procurement desired. The agency is all set up and operating efficiently for WCCA, from whom WRA will take over. Further, this will avoid a change to a different procurement agency immediately upon the transfer of evacuees from WCCA to WRA, which would no doubt cause a considerable amount of confusion. Lastly, it has been my experience that competent personnel is difficult to obtain.<sup>177</sup>

In case Eisenhower missed his point, this official reiterated that while "WRA might possibly establish its own procurement agency...I strongly recommend against due to the fact that experienced personnel is difficult to obtain aside from the fact that it would have to be organized into a team from the ground up."<sup>178</sup>

As W.J. Jamieson, the head of the WPA in Arizona, wrote in a memo he sent to Arizona Senator Carl Hayden, the WPA's organization along with its experience running

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<sup>176</sup> John W. Abbott to Robert K. Lamb, April 10, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 12. Abbott quoted from his interview with Lt. Colonel Boekel.

<sup>177</sup> Memo to Eisenhower from Foy, April 9, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 19.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

camps for workers building roads and airports translated directly into administering camps full of Japanese American internees. The WPA's staff, Jamieson wrote, "is in a splendid position to assume these responsibilities due to its familiarity with the immediate conditions, previous associations with the various Federal, State, and county agencies....[and] Our previous cooperation with and close assistance and friendly contact with the State Farm Bureau assures us of their counsel and cooperation, and the same would be relatively true as concerns the various school and health authorities."<sup>179</sup>

Leland Barrows, an aide to WRA solicitor Philip Glick, told University of California, Berkeley, sociologist Morton Grodzins that friction between Nicholson and WCCA head Bendetsen and WRA head Milton Eisenhower led to Nicholson's downfall. "Bendetsen wanted WRA to take over the Assembly Centers (WPA continuing to administer the camps themselves) but WRA refused," Grodzins recorded. "Eisenhower was willing to give all the WPA people four month temporary Civil Service appointments, but refused to commit himself for any more lengthy period." Barrows called Nicholson "the worst goddamned political dealer I ever saw." Nicholson, Barrows told Grodzins, "wanted to be made Deputy Director and to let his own gang run the Centers. When Eisenhower said no, Nicholson walked out in a huff."<sup>180</sup> E.R. Fryer, regional director of the WRA in San Francisco, confirmed to WRA historian Ruth McKee that "Nicholson, Regional Director of the Western area of WPA put a cog in the works by refusing to release WPA men except on a condition. The condition which he put up to Eisenhower was that Eisenhower make him an assistant director....Eisenhower got very mad and kicked him out..."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> WPA State Administrator W.J. Jamieson to Dr. H.R. Harper, May 22, 1942, enclosed in Jamieson to Senator Carl Hayden, May 26, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 22.

<sup>180</sup> Morton Grodzins, "Interview with Leland Barrows," Oct. 4, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 22.

<sup>181</sup> "Ruth McKee Notes. Interview with E.R. Fryer," Feb. 18, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 22.

Eisenhower's frustration with Nicholson emerged in some of his correspondence. In May 1942 he informed Assistant Secretary of War McCloy of his plan for the WRA to supersede Nicholson's WCCA division; by June 1942 in the event that the WRA was not allowed to take over the assembly centers he wanted to "issue immediately a blanket invitation to all WPA employees in assembly centers to join WRA at the appropriate time."<sup>182</sup> While Eisenhower valued Nicholson's expertise, he valued a streamlined bureaucracy under his direction even more. "By all means Mr. Nicholson should continue to supervise activities in assembly centers. And by no means should we attempt to take over WCCA's responsibilities. But we are all interested in a single program." Eisenhower summed up his position, stating, "It's high time to discard all bureaucracy."<sup>183</sup> Although Nicholson was replaced on June 30, 1942, WPA staffers continued to administer the assembly centers and relocation camps until the end of the year.<sup>184</sup>

Before Nicholson's departure unfolded, however, the WPA found itself at the center of a controversial question: if the evacuees were to be put to work on various public works projects while they were interned, how much would they be paid? Eisenhower, Leland Barrows recalled, "resolved practically every problem in terms of public relations," and "The wage policy, of course, is one of the best cases in point." Clayton Triggs, or as Barrows called him, "some stupid WPA administrator at Manzanar," disclosed to the press that Japanese Americans would be paid WPA wages for their work while they were interned. "This, of course, created a furor," Barrows said, as the public complained that Japanese American would be getting paid more than

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<sup>182</sup> Milton Eisenhower to Assistant Secretary of War, "Consolidation of War Relocation Authority and Wartime Civil Control Administration Evacuation Staffs," May 9, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 21; and Milton Eisenhower to Elmer Rowalt, June 16, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 19.

<sup>183</sup> Memo from Province to Coverley, Rogers, Adams and Collins, May 8, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 19.

<sup>184</sup> U.S. Army, Final Report, 47.

American soldiers. "Actually, we had held practically no discussions at all about wage scales. Nevertheless, Mr. Eisenhower almost immediately issued a statement to the effect that wages lower than soldiers' wages could be paid evacuees. The sole basis for this announcement was the force of public opinion. It was a shot in the dark, but actually, it turned out to be a pretty good one."<sup>185</sup>

Much of the confusion and controversy of the period is reflected in Eisenhower's letter to his friend E.H. Wiecking. After arriving in San Francisco, he wrote, "we found the situation somewhat confused, due to the fact that a large number of agencies had their fingers in the pie, and without any great amount of over-all planning as to what was going to be done with the Japanese after they were evacuated."

One of the first unfortunate breaks that has occurred was the premature statement by the WPA man in charge of the Santa Anita assembly point that the Japanese evacuees were being paid \$54 to \$94 a month--more than American soldiers. This caused a fresh outbreak of bad publicity and I received a wire from Representative Leland Ford wanting to know about it.

Eisenhower presented to Wiecking the explanation he gave Congressman Ford, a Republican from Santa Monica. "The facts of the case are that the Army was merely considering using the subsistence wage scale of the WPA, and in any event would charge against this wage the cost of subsistence, which would leave a net wage somewhat less in most cases than the Army pay. In any event, they have not decided on the wage scale and the statement by the project manager was premature."<sup>186</sup> In other words, Eisenhower speculated that the government could in effect pay the Japanese Americans a lower net wage than was received by American soldiers by billing the evacuees for the costs of keeping them locked up.

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<sup>185</sup> Morton Grodzins, "Interview with Philip Glick," Oct. 1, 1943, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 22.

<sup>186</sup> Milton Eisenhower to E.H. Wiecking, March 26, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 18; and see also Eisenhower to Leland Ford, March 29, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 19.

As Eisenhower wrote to Harold D. Smith, Director of the Budget, the question of wage policy "is a ticklish one."

For example, if we were to announce that the Government is going to provide the minimum essentials of food, clothing and shelter and, in addition, would pay a maximum cash wage of \$21 a month for public work on such projects, I think the public would approve and we would hear nothing more about the matter. But this would be bad policy. We would have established an invitation to laziness. Those who did not wish to work would receive the same food and housing as those who wanted to work very hard. The only punishment that might be possible for those who refused to work would be internment on the grounds that they were saboteurs. Consequently one must think in terms of charging each individual his pro-rata share of all costs for provisioning, health, and education and then pay a wage high enough to permit each family to meet these costs and also to have a small amount of cash left over for essential clothing and incidentals. This in turn would require a wage scale ranging from, say, \$40 a month to \$75 a month and, for an average family, would yield a smaller income than would the plan first mentioned. Even so, a wage policy of this sort would meet a storm of public protest, and might lead to restrictive legislation. Still another possibility is to maintain a set of project accounts which recorded all expenditures and all income; the profits, if any, would eventually be paid to the Japanese. In the meantime a small cash allowance would have to be made to each individual.<sup>187</sup>

By May 1942, however, the WCCA concluded not to charge the evacuees for their accommodations. The WCCA decided that the WPA, while operating and managing the assembly and reception centers, would also keep track of all the work done by evacuees. "Since there will be no charge for subsistence, shelter, et cetera, and payment for work will be made, such record will be for statistical purposes only and will reflect all transactions for each evacuee, including benefits received."<sup>188</sup> The evacuees would be paid according to two wage scales. Within the camps they could make a maximum of \$21 a month (soon reduced to \$19); outside the camps they would be paid a

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<sup>187</sup> Milton Eisenhower to Harold D. Smith, April 5, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 18.

<sup>188</sup> "Instructions Governing Operation and Maintenance of Assembly and Reception Centers Under Jurisdiction of the Commanding General, Western Defense Command," May 22, 1942. Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 12.

prevailing wage, often for work harvesting agricultural crops such as sugar beets.<sup>189</sup> The San Gabriel Sun, in an editorial entitled "Use It," urged the WRA to put the evacuees to work. "Wholesale waste is almost criminal," the Sun declared. "We refer to the manpower in the Japanese concentration camps, politely referred to as 'assembly centers' and 'reception centers.' Here approximately 100,000 persons, many of them American citizens, are being maintained at government expense and given practically nothing to do." Without singling out the WPA by name, the Sun evoked the program's influence for its readers. The paper observed that "The few projects set in motion thus far" in the camps "are largely of the 'boondoggling' variety," using the term long employed by critics of the WPA. While the Sun noted that many of the evacuees were loyal American citizens, it concluded that "from a cold dollars-and-cents standpoint, the Caucasian American taxpayer is entitled to a work-return from the tax-money which he contributes for the carrying out of the evacuation and relocation programs."<sup>190</sup>

Nicholson and the WPA's role in internment has remained unknown for many years. After leaving the WPA Nicholson moved to Berkeley, California, and ran his own businesses, the Pacific Tractor and Implement Company of Richmond, and the Columbia Tractor and Implement Company of Portland, distributing Ford tractors and Dearborn farm equipment. In 1946 Nicholson was asked by President Truman to plan the re-organization of all federally owned lands under the Department of Interior. Nicholson's 300-page study, known as the Nicholson Report, called for a new Bureau of Land Management to replace five different supervising agencies. In 1951 he again returned to government service, becoming Special Assistant to the Administrator of Civil Defense, Millard Caldwell. Nicholson referred to this decision as "putting my foot in a bear trap

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<sup>189</sup> Daniels, Concentration Camps, 93; Thomas and Nishimoto, et al., Spoilage, 33-34; Edward H. Spicer, Asael T. Hansen, Katherine Luomala, and Marvin K. Opler, Impounded People: Japanese-Americans in the Relocation Centers (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1969 [1946]), 88-96.

<sup>190</sup> San Gabriel Sun, June 11, 1942, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 158.



again." He outlined a five-point program for civil defense: improving communications, developing a warning system tied to Air Force radar, creating a system for procurement of emergency supplies, and building shelters in case of Soviet attack. Nicholson's fifth point was a school to train state personnel who in turn would train people who lived in target areas, with neighborhoods manned by squads of twelve people.<sup>191</sup> In 1952 Nicholson became the California head of Adlai Stevenson's presidential campaign and was active in the state's Democratic party.<sup>192</sup> When Edmund G. Brown declared that he would not run for Governor in 1954 but would instead run for re-election as the state's Attorney General, one journalist reported that "some Southern California Democratic bigwigs are talking of attempting to build up Rex Nicholson of Berkeley" as the party's gubernatorial candidate.<sup>193</sup> Nicholson was also mentioned as a potential candidate for the Senate. He died in 1974, his role in Japanese American internment largely forgotten.

Historians have noted that the War Relocation Authority drew on a variety of New Deal precedents and government agencies. WRA Administrator Milton Eisenhower served in the Department of Agriculture. His successor, Dillon Myer, had administered the Agricultural Adjustment Act and after the war ran Federal Public Housing and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. University of California, Berkeley, sociologist Dorothy Swaine Thomas was among the first to identify the significance of the New Deal's contribution to the WRA, however, when she recorded her impressions of Myer and his staff in 1944. "WRA is a typical, New Deal, idealistic agency," she wrote. "I worked for FERA [the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, a forerunner of the WPA] for quite a period under Harry Hopkins and observed exactly the same phenomena."

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<sup>191</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, March 27, 1951, p. 7; National Cyclopaedia of American Biography, suppl. vol. J, s.v. "Nicholson, Rex Lee."

<sup>192</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, Aug. 28, 1952, p. 7.

<sup>193</sup> San Francisco Chronicle, Dec. 2, 1953, p. 1.

They carry the torch for the Japanese people, but always in abstract, idealistic terms without much understanding of the problems that are being faced in the projects, or of what the people themselves really want. Policies are formed partly on an opportunistic basis (which is really necessary) but partly in terms of this abstract idealism...but almost never in terms of concrete problems met by actual individuals.<sup>194</sup>

While Thomas's criticisms of the WRA were accurate, she was operating under the assumption that it was somehow supposed to do what the Japanese Americans wanted. The WRA and the WPA, however, were not primarily occupied with assisting Japanese Americans; they were concerned with efficiently carrying out Executive Order 9066.

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The role of the WPA in Japanese American internment, viewed broadly, was the consequence of the reorganization and execution of New Deal public works programs under the twin goals of economy and efficiency. In the face of growing opposition from a conservative Congress, New Dealers had managed to maintain the increasingly unpopular works programs during the late 1930s and early years of World War II, building housing, roads, and airports, and providing worker training. However, the WPA--the program that to many New Dealers epitomized the potential of the welfare state to level inequalities--ultimately played a key part in carrying out the largest forced relocation of people in U.S. history since Indian removal.<sup>195</sup> This use of the capacities of the state to shape society, a touchstone of new institutionalist scholars, casts serious doubts on the notion that World War II witnessed a weakened New Deal state that crumbled and gave way to a vigorous wartime state. Rather, the wide-ranging role played by the public works programs in readying the U.S. for war indicates that this wartime state had deep and vital roots in the state structure built by the New Deal, illustrating the

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<sup>194</sup> Dorothy Swaine Thomas notes, "High Points in Conversation between DST and Dillon Myer, Tozier, Glick and Barrows," Jan. 20, 1944, Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Records, reel 92. This document is also cited in Drinnon, Keeper of Concentration Camps, 3.

<sup>195</sup> Edwin Amenta does an excellent job establishing that the WPA--and not social security--was for many New Dealers the key program in the American welfare state. See Amenta, Bold Relief, 3-17.

considerable strengths of New Deal liberalism while at the same time calling into question its social democratic potential.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> For connections between the New Deal and wartime states, see Hooks, Forging the Military-Industrial Complex; and Sparrow, From the Outside In.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## PUBLIC WORKS AND THE POSTWAR WORLD

The postwar legacy of the New Deal's public works programs is complex and far-reaching, spanning the entire nation with projects ranging from military bases to national highways. This legacy, however, has been obscured by a historical literature that focuses on the unceremonious end of such programs as the National Youth Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, and Work Projects Administration during World War II.<sup>1</sup> Viewed beyond the rise and fall of individual programs, however, the influence of the New Deal's public works programs on federal construction during the postwar period is compelling. During the years between the end of the WPA in 1943 and the passage of the Federal-Aid Highway Act in 1956, the federal government turned away from a rationale for public works based on social welfare and returned to one based on efficiency and economy. Public works projects such as dams, airports, and especially, highways, became central aims of the American state. This transition marked less an end of reform, however, than a restoration of the public works philosophy epitomized by the Hoover Administration and continued and expanded by Harold Ickes's Public Works Administration throughout the New Deal.<sup>2</sup> This chapter explores this period of flux by

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Donald S. Howard, The WPA and Federal Relief Policy (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1943); Federal Works Agency, Final Report on the WPA Program, 1935-1943 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947); William E. Leuchtenburg, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940 (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); Searle F. Charles, Minister of Relief: Harry Hopkins and the Depression (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1963); John A. Salmon, The Civilian Conservation Corps, 1933-1942: A New Deal Case Study (Durham: Duke University Press, 1967); Edwin Amenta, Bold Relief: Institutional Politics and the Origins of Modern American Social Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and David M. Kennedy, Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Brinkley, The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995). The fate of what historian Nelson Lichtenstein terms "labor liberalism" also pivots around a shift in liberalism's fortunes during and after World War II. Nelson Lichtenstein, Walter Reuther: The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 155-57; and see also the accounts in Kevin Boyle, The UAW and the Heyday of American Liberalism, 1945-1968 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Robert H. Zieger, The CIO, 1935-1955 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); and David L. Stebenne, Arthur J. Goldberg: New Deal Liberal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

examining several key areas of public policy and debate: the relationship between the New Deal state and planning, the reorganization of the executive branch of government, and the influence that New Deal public works had on the development of federal highway construction, culminating in the passage of the 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act.

Although individual New Deal public works programs were killed by a conservative Congress during the war, the Federal Works Agency continued to function until 1949, supervising such organizations as the Public Roads Administration, the Public Buildings Administration, and the Public Works Administration. In 1949, however, the federal government again reorganized its public works functions.<sup>3</sup> Under the direction of a commission headed by a retired president, Herbert Hoover, the federal government folded the responsibilities of the Federal Works Agency into a new agency, the General Services Administration. The creation of the GSA formalized the return of federal public works to an ideal of efficiency and economy, an ideal first epitomized by the public works promoted by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation when Hoover was president.

This bureaucratic story, however, stood at odds with what was happening to public works spending by the American state. In a period marked by a growing Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, the federal government justified increased spending on public works projects in the name of national security. As the infrastructure of what President Dwight Eisenhower would term the military-industrial complex spread across the nation, the Southern and Western regions of the United States became home to military bases, a comprehensive highway network, and new and improved airports.<sup>4</sup> By restoring the legacy of the New Deal's public works programs to

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<sup>3</sup> Peri E. Arnold, Making the Managerial Presidency: Comprehensive Reorganization Planning, 1905-1996 2d ed., rev. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 118-159.

<sup>4</sup> Jordan A. Schwarz, The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993); Bruce J. Schulman, From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); and Roger Lotchin, Fortress California: From Warfare to Welfare (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

the texture of this period, this chapter lays the groundwork for understanding how New Dealers such as Lyndon Johnson came to believe in exporting New Deal-inspired economic development to Southeast Asia, eventually calling for such projects as a Tennessee Valley Authority on the Mekong Delta. While subsequent efforts during the last half of the twentieth century to improve the federal government's involvement in social welfare programs are notable for their lack of connection to such New Deal programs as the WPA, liberal and conservative politicians continued to rely on the New Deal's legacy of fostering economic development through public works construction in making both foreign and domestic policy.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Federal Works Agency, 1939-1949: Planning for Postwar Public Works**

Created in 1939, the Federal Works Agency contained the newly renamed Work Projects Administration (formerly Works Progress Administration), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Public Buildings Administration (formerly in the Treasury Department), the Public Roads Administration (transferred from the Agriculture Department), and the United States Housing Authority.<sup>6</sup> Placing these functions together in one agency presented the potential for the New Deal to consolidate and establish its emergency public works programs on a permanent basis within the American state. The Federal Works Agency maintained its hold on these functions until 1949.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Lloyd C. Gardner, Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995), esp. 185-200; Alice O'Connor, Poverty Knowledge (Princeton: Princeton University Press, forthcoming); O'Connor, "Neither Charity Nor Relief: The War on Poverty and the Effort to Redefine the Basis of Social Provision," in Donald T. Critchlow and Charles H. Parker, eds., With Us Always: A History of Private Charity and Public Welfare (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 191-210; and O'Connor, "Swimming Against the Tide: A Brief History of Federal Policy in Poor Communities," in Ronald F. Ferguson and William T. Dickens, eds., Urban Problems and Community Development (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999), 77-137.

<sup>6</sup> Floyd Dell, draft of "Federal Works Agency" entry for Encyclopaedia Americana, Dec. 5, 1939, "Federal Works Agency" folder, box 1, entry 746, "Division of Information. Publications of the Federal Works Agency and Subordinate Agencies, 1936-1942," Record Group 69, Records of the Work Projects Administration, National Archives.

The FWA was run by New Dealer John Carmody for a brief period (1939-1941) before being taken over by Major General Philip B. Fleming. Fleming, who had worked closely with Harold Ickes during the first years of the Public Works Administration, drew on his years of experience with the Army Corps of Engineers in charting the FWA's course. In addition to such wartime public works activities as road and highway building, worker training, and wartime housing construction, the FWA, along with the National Resources Planning Board, began to plan for the postwar period.<sup>7</sup> Specifically, the two organizations sponsored a Public Work Reserve project, using funds from the WPA.<sup>8</sup> This effort to assemble a "shelf" of public works plans, ready to put into action at the first signs of an economic downturn, built on earlier work of the NRPB's Public Works Committee to develop a six-year program of public works. Indeed, the concept of a prepared "shelf" of plans dated back to Progressive Era arguments for public works construction.<sup>9</sup>

The Public Works Committee included a range of personnel from the worlds of public works, labor, and construction. Chaired by a former PWA official and vice-president of the American Society of Civil Engineers, Colonel Henry Waite, the Committee's members included Frank W. Herring of the American Public Works Association, F.E. Schmitt of the Engineering News Record, long-time public works

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<sup>7</sup> For a fuller profile of Fleming and a review of the wartime activities of the FWA, see Chapter Six above.

<sup>8</sup> Philip B. Fleming to Frederic A. Delano, Sept. 22, 1942, "National Resources Planning Board" folder, box 9, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," Records of the Federal Works Agency, Record Group 162, National Archives. For more on the NRPB, see Marion Clawson, New Deal Planning: The National Resources Planning Board (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981) and Patrick D. Reagan, Designing a New America: The Origins of New Deal Planning, 1890-1943 (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Otto T. Mallery, "The Long-Range Planning of Public Works," chap. 14 in Business Cycles and Unemployment (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1923); V.A. Mund, "Prosperity Reserves of Public Works," Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 149, Part II, (May 1930): 1-9. For a historical treatment, see Udo Sautter, Three Cheers for the Unemployed: Government and Unemployment before the New Deal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 94-110.

advocate Otto T. Mallery of the Pennsylvania State Planning Board, William Stanley Parker of the Construction League of America, Frederick J. Lawton of the Bureau of the Budget, Corrington Gill of the WPA, the PWA's Fred Schnepfe, and representatives of the departments of Labor and Commerce.<sup>10</sup>

In drawing upon this earlier planning work done by the PWA and the NRPB, the Public Work Reserve project also built on the Hoover-era heritage of public works. This heritage was evident in its concerns for economy and efficiency, and in its very legislative history. In 1939, the NRPB's Public Works Committee declared that all of its recommendations for future construction were made in the service of "economy and efficiency in federal public works construction."<sup>11</sup> In another progress report, the committee described its origins and methods, noting for the record that it was planning in six-year periods because this was the periodization adopted by the Federal Employment Stabilization Board, created under the Employment Stabilization Act of 1931.<sup>12</sup>

The Public Work Reserve focused on assembling a range of projects "designed to develop the resources, services and facilities of the Nation and through them, to provide employment." These projects, the Federal Works Agency declared, would be "undertaken by local, state, and federal agencies after the reduction of defense activities." John Carmody, FWA head when the Public Work Reserve was announced, argued that the Reserve presented "two distinct advantages--it is undertaken definitely and deliberately at a time when the nation's resources are being heavily taxed in order to be prepared as never before to cushion the economic and industrial shock that follows war

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<sup>10</sup> F.E. Schmitt to H.M. Waite and Fred E. Schnepfe, Oct. 6, 1939, "Subcommittee I--Public Works Comm. of NRC" folder, box 2, entry 33, "File of Fred E. Schnepfe Relating to the 6-Year Planning Program of the National Resources Committee, 1936-1940," Records of the Public Works Administration, RG 135, NA.

<sup>11</sup> "Report of Public Works Committee of the National Resources Planning Board on Federal Six-Year Program of Public Works for 1941-1946," Sept. 1, 1939, "Executive Order--NRC" folder, box 2, in ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "Appendix C--Origins and Methods of Six-Year Programming of Federal Public Works," Feb. 27, 1939, "Subcommittee I--Public Works Comm. of NRC" folder, in ibid.



preparation effort." Second, Carmody said, was that the Reserve would enlist "the best efforts of planning bodies everywhere--local, state, and national--in the preparation of a sound, well rounded out program that will be related not only to public needs but to the plans of private industry for readjustment and future expansion." Ultimately, in Carmody's eyes, "Our aim is to utilize the full potentialities of the nation to provide needed public service and facilities rather than the limited concept of public work merely as a means of providing employment."<sup>13</sup> In other words, infrastructure, and not employment, was now the chief aim of New Deal public works projects.

Although the Public Works Reserve was a short-lived entity, this notion of public works as a government-supervised effort to provide the construction of necessary infrastructure, rather than as a way to ameliorate unemployment, would increasingly animate debate over federal spending on public works during the postwar period. As the director of the Public Works Reserve, E.C. Smith, told regional gatherings of the Public Work Reserve staff in Atlanta and in Salt Lake City,

Months ago government executives started thinking about possible conditions in the country which might arise after defense activities are terminated and the country returns to a normal plane. It was sensed that unless very comprehensive planning and preparation is carried out at this time, looking toward developed programs, both public and private, for the absorption of labor of all sorts which will be released from defense activities, there would be a period of time during which serious unemployment conditions might exist. If orderly and well-planned means are available for immediate use to absorb employment as and when such a time comes, it may be possible to avoid the conditions which existed during the days of CWA, the early days of the WPA, and avoid such delays as were experienced in PWA in getting projects underway. During those times there was, generally speaking, no reservoir of planned useful work, with the result that much "made" work was necessarily resorted to for furnishing emergency employment, with its resultant unfavorable results and reactions in many places. With these

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<sup>13</sup> Federal Works Agency Press Release #106, June 23, 1941, "Public Works Reserve" folder, box 2, entry 746, "Division of Information. Publications of the Federal Works Agency and Subordinate Agencies, 1936-1942," Records of the Works Progress Administration, RG 69, NA.

thoughts in mind, the President requested the heads of Federal agencies to develop some practical plan. Out of this was born the Public Work Reserve.<sup>14</sup>

By July 20, 1942, however, the PWR had come to an end, a victim of budget cutbacks and the wartime reorientation of the works programs. FWA head Philip B. Fleming wrote to NRPB chair Frederic A. Delano, noting that under these circumstances "I do not feel that it will be possible for us to continue with post-war planning until our authority to do so has been clearly expressed." However, Fleming continued, "The President has asked me to give continued study to the whole subject in an effort to find some way, if possible, to permit a resumption of the work, and, if necessary, to draft a proposal for possible submission to the Congress."<sup>15</sup>

Fleming continued to champion the cause of public works planning throughout his career as head of the FWA. In 1943, Fleming went before the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds to testify on the importance of planning. The Committee's chair, Texas congressman Fritz Lanham, wanted to gather opinion on the part that public works could play in postwar reconversion. Seeking to capitalize on a recent Gallup poll that found that one of the main topics of concern to the American people was the issue of postwar employment, Fleming argued that public works could address the problem of providing work for demobilized soldiers and for people employed in war-related industries. "My own preference," Fleming stated, "is for a Federal program of assistance in plan preparation. If there is such a program it would be possible to plan projects in those localities where they will be most urgently needed, both on their own account and for their employment-creating possibilities, and have them ready for the contractor on time." Fleming saw public works planning as essential to the process of converting to

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<sup>14</sup> E.C. Smith quoted in Public Work Reserve, "Digest of Proceedings and List of Officials Attending," Meeting Held at Piedmont Hotel, Atlanta, Georgia, July 14, 15, 16, 1941; and in Regional Conference of Public Work Reserve, Newhouse Hotel, Salt Lake City, Utah, July 28, 1941.

<sup>15</sup> Philip B. Fleming to Frederic A. Delano, Sept. 22, 1942, "National Resources Planning Board" folder, box 9, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

peacetime. With planning, "it would be possible to encourage public construction activities where reconversion may be long delayed, while holding off, or at least not encouraging, such activities in places where there will be little problem of reconversion and where large-scale public employment might actually delay recovery by competing with private business for men and materials." To underscore his position, Fleming appealed to the need to assist returning veterans, arguing "It would be most unfair [for the United States]...to bring our soldiers home from Asia and Europe, hand each of them \$60 and a day-coach ticket home, as was done in 1919, and thereupon wash its hands of any further responsibility for them." Further, Fleming argued, if depression strikes the postwar economy, "America cannot expect to make her voice effective in the world if she is hampered by disillusionment, conflict, and disunity here at home. If we are to speak effectively in the councils of the world we must have the unity which has at its base a rising standard of living and a wide diffusion of the means of reasonable comfort and peace of mind."<sup>16</sup>

Several weeks after Fleming testified, National Resources Planning Board member Beardsley Ruml went before the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds. Ruml, a registered Republican, treasurer for the R.H. Macy department store, philanthropist, and University of Chicago professor, was described by The New Yorker magazine as a man whose "career is almost geological in its mixed stratification of science, public affairs, and private business."<sup>17</sup> Like Fleming, Ruml believed in the importance of a planned public works policy for the postwar period. Ruml, however, had a more limited and focused goal in mind. As part of a nine point proposal for a postwar fiscal program, Ruml urged, "let us plan our public works, not to balance the whole

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<sup>16</sup> "Statement of Major General Philip B. Fleming, Administrator, Federal Works Agency, before the Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds of the House of Representatives," Nov. 23, 1943, "Post-War" folder, box 1, entry 23, "Administrative Records. Records Concerning Plans for Postwar Public Works, 1941-1944," RG 162, NA.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Reagan, Designing a New America, 143.

economy, but to help toward stabilizing the construction industry." It was not realistic, Ruml thought, to expect public works to work as "a general cure-all for the business cycle." Rather, "the most we can expect, and this is no small gain, is that public works can be planned and undertaken in such a way as to even out the activities of the construction industry itself, thereby providing a reasonable level of construction throughout the year and year after year." Along with readying a shelf of useful public works projects, Ruml urged Congress to establish an inquiry into the needs of the construction industry and invoked the importance of basing budget estimates "on the efficient and economical carrying-out of worthwhile activities to accomplish our national purposes."<sup>18</sup>

The chair of the AFL's committee on housing, Harry C. Bates, also testified before the House Committee on Public Buildings and Grounds. "Building trades have played a leading part in the launching of war mobilization," Bates proclaimed, "acting as the advance guard which build the initial defense projects of the Army and the Navy and erected cantonments for the training of our troops." To ease the readjustment to peacetime, Bates called for a "double-barreled public works program," consisting of short-term construction projects "dictated by the most essential requirements of local community welfare," along with long-term projects "which can extend over a period of years and which could also be contracted and expanded to counterbalance the effect of the business cycle upon employment."<sup>19</sup>

The American Society of Civil Engineers joined the AFL and FWA in stumping for the cause of postwar public works planning, publishing a program entitled, "Postwar

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<sup>18</sup> "Testimony of Beardsley Ruml Before the Committee of the House of Representatives on Public Buildings and Grounds," Jan. 19, 1944, "Post War Planning--1944" folder, box 10, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

<sup>19</sup> American Federation of Labor Information and Publicity Service Press Release, Feb. 10, 1944, "Post-War" folder, box 1, entry 23, "Administrative Records. Records Concerning Plans for Postwar Public Works, 1941-1944," RG 162, NA.

Construction: Planning Now Will Safeguard National Economy in Critical Transition Period."<sup>20</sup> If the nation neglected the responsibility to plan for the return to a peacetime economy, the engineers opined, it would run the risk of contributing to widespread unemployment, lead "into another dole or so-called work relief period," and, in general, "add to the economic ills that may befall the country." To avoid such disaster, the engineers urged a program of privately contracted public works construction. "The construction industry," the society argued, "consists not only of engineers and architects but also of contractors. By training and experience this group is most competent to plan, supervise, and execute construction projects with economy and dispatch, and to secure the maximum return for the dollar invested. The contract system long since has demonstrated its merit; it should be employed for both public and private construction."<sup>21</sup> The engineers proposed a short-term plan of necessary projects as the most practical solution to the problem of postwar planning. "Many of these projects are of the self-liquidating type that can be financed by revenue bonds to be retired by the beneficiaries on a 'pay-as-you-use' basis," they declared, recalling the approach favored by Ickes and the PWA. "These useful projects would provide a huge total of nation-wide construction activity, readily financed and capable of being launched promptly, or as needed, to assist in providing adequate employment during the reconversion or transition period following the war."<sup>22</sup>

While Congress heard from many different parties, Fleming traveled around the country to promote public works planning. In 1944, he spoke to a gathering of civic organizations in New Orleans. Fleming made the case for thinking of public works

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<sup>20</sup> American Society of Civil Engineers, "Postwar Construction: Planning Now Will Safeguard National Economy in Critical Transition Period," July 29, 1943, in *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* Emphasis in original.

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

planning as simply an extension of the sorts of planning people do in their everyday lives, for business or pleasure. "As to our planning of public works construction for the post-war period," Fleming argued, "the great trouble, I think, is that too many people are trying to make it seem harder than it needs to be." Who were these people, wondered Fleming? "I think that the tremendous anxiety all of us entertain as to the future of our country, of our cities, and of our individual affairs has spawned a new breed of experts, some of whom--but of course, not all--are among the star-gazers and medicine men who despise the commonplace and obvious, and look instead to the esoteric and the occult for their inspiration." Against these unrealistic dreamers and their schemes, Fleming proposed that public works planning be thought of as "a truly national program" that "would give us the best guarantee that post-war projects will be socially useful and of value in themselves."<sup>23</sup>

Fleming's assistant, George Field, also traveled to promote the cause of public works planning. Speaking to the Public Works Planning Conference of the Ohio Foundation in Akron, Field argued that support for postwar planning could negate the need for the return of the Works Progress Administration. Field stated that on this point he agreed with "industrial leaders."

They often begin by saying earnestly: "We do not want another WPA". To this I say, "By all means, let's avoid the necessity for another WPA." I have worked for the WPA from its beginning to its end and I think it did a fine job under great difficulties; but I don't want the Nation to need another WPA, and I don't know anyone in the government who does. In future let us not have a means test as a prerequisite for a job and a monthly security wage as compensation for work--let us be ready with real jobs at prevailing wages when jobs are needed.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "Address of Major General Philip B. Fleming, Administrator, Federal Works Agency, at a Luncheon Meeting of Representatives of Civic Organizations," Feb. 8, 1944, in *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> "Address of George H. Field, Assistant to the Administrator, Federal Works Agency, Before the Public Works Planning Conference of the Ohio Foundation," Feb. 18, 1944, in *ibid.*

Field observed that industrial and business leaders often declared "Let us have our public works carried on by contract, instead of by force account." In response, Field agreed, "Again I say: 'Let's do just that.'" But to carry this out successfully, he argued, states and localities needed to draw up blueprints now, before the war ended.

Planning is not just making a list of desirable public works. It is not just talking and thinking about public works. If done correctly it involves hard work by architects, engineers, and public officials who are willing and able to make decisions and to start drawing plans and specifications without knowing the precise date when construction is to begin. There are too many people who seem to think that there is plenty of time to sit around and talk about public works a while longer.<sup>25</sup>

Field argued that an extensively planned public works program would not only prevent the return of a WPA-like agency to minister to the unemployed, it would also generate "the public works that will be required as accessory facilities for the great expansion of industry and business which must take place if we are to have full peace-time employment."<sup>26</sup> Although the FWA leaders were willing to abandon the WPA, that they were eager to place their agency and its public works projects in the service of the cause of full employment indicates the great potential that some New Dealers saw for public works in the postwar society.

Indeed, Fleming testified for the FWA before Senator Robert Wagner's Full Employment Subcommittee in support of the Full Employment Act of 1945. Fleming viewed the bill, which called for the federal government to make economic policy in order to generate "the highest feasible levels of employment opportunities through private...investment and expenditure," as operating "in the old-time American tradition," declaring that "the country could not fail to gain in understanding from annual debates embracing the whole state of the economy rather than debates upon fragmentary sections

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

of it. Our country has become so complex and involved, with every part of it so related, directly or indirectly, to every other part of it, that no one industry can any longer be considered in isolation."<sup>27</sup> If planned carefully, public works projects, he assured the Senate, could help stabilize the economy. They "do not compete with private industry; rather they tend to supplement and stimulate private industry."

Extension of streets and water and sewer lines create new opportunities for home building. Good highways promote the speedy and cheaper dissemination of agricultural and manufactured products. Much manufacturing requires for its efficient operations an abundant supply of uncontaminated water and adequate sewerage for the disposal of industrial wastes. It is no exaggeration so say that the expansion of production which will be needed to assure a continuing high level of national income and to provide abundant jobs will be contingent upon a like expansion of the social overhead.<sup>28</sup>

Fleming kept FDR apprised of his many different speaking engagements before civic, labor, and business groups on behalf of the FWA and public works planning, and let the President know the different arguments he was developing.<sup>29</sup> While he agreed with Field on the need to avoid the return of the WPA, Fleming went so far as to tell a joint meeting of labor officials, businessmen, and local politicians in St. Paul, Minnesota, that public works construction in general was not rooted in any political ideology. As far as Fleming was concerned, "Public works do not involve economic or political ideologies at all...whether a bridge is to be used by Jews or Gentiles, Republicans or Democrats, the techniques used in constructing it are the same."<sup>30</sup> To the American Road Builders's

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<sup>27</sup> The Full Employment Act of 1945 quoted in J. Joseph Huthmacher, Senator Robert F. Wagner and the Rise of Urban Liberalism (New York: Antheneum, 1968), 297; for Fleming's testimony see Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Banking and Currency, Full Employment Act of 1945, 79th Cong., 1st sess., July 30, 31, Aug. 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 31, and Sept. 1, 1945, p. 863.

<sup>28</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Banking and Currency, Full Employment Act of 1945, 79th Cong., 1st sess., July 30, 31, Aug. 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, 31, and Sept. 1, 1945, p. 868.

<sup>29</sup> Philip B. Fleming to Franklin D. Roosevelt, July 30, 1943, in "Federal Works Agency June-Dec. 1943" folder, box 3, Official File 3710, Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, FDRL; and in "White House 1943" folder, box 1, entry 6, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of Administrator with the White House, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.



Association in Chicago, Fleming declared "To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, I believe that, after the experience of the last 12 or 13 years, we now hold these truths to be self-evident.... That worth-while [sic] public works require months for advance preparation--for engineering surveys, the preparation for plans and specifications, and the acquisition of land."<sup>31</sup> Also in Chicago, Fleming spoke to the Associated General Contractors, suggesting that public works planning was as sensible as home owners insurance. "It is far better that we should be prepared at all times than that we should stagger from one crisis to another, trying to 'get by' on hastily improvised plans that, precisely because of hasty preparation, are so often ill-advised and wasteful of public funds."<sup>32</sup>

While speaking to these groups, Fleming also followed in the tradition established by Carmody, Hopkins, Ickes, and FDR himself, making it a point to be present at the completion of New Deal public works projects and speaking at public dedication ceremonies. At the dedication of the Chicago subway, built with the support of the PWA, Fleming recalled how difficult it was to get the PWA up and running in 1933. "We got a small staff together and sat down around a table in what is now the Federal Works Building in Washington and stared at each other for several minutes. What were we supposed to do next?" To be truly effective, Fleming recalled, "It seemed as though we would have to take a year off and go around the country and see what was needed, what would be most useful, and try to integrate all the various suggested projects into one over-all plan that would make national sense." If the nation was to be ready for the postwar period and not repeat this delay, Fleming argued that planning needed to begin immediately.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The FWA assembled excerpts from Fleming's speeches in Post-War Public Works (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), "Post War Planning--1944" folder, box 10, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

Private enterprise, Fleming reasoned, was a necessary but not sufficient factor in the reconversion process. To a group of municipal officials in Florida, Fleming stated that "Much of America's greatness is due to the private enterprise system, and we are all agreed, I think, that we want to keep that system." However, Fleming assured the New York AFL, "I do not personally feel that we can leave it all to private business" to assure postwar prosperity. Fleming noted that even the Chamber of Commerce had endorsed a comprehensive program of public works projects to ensure employment after the war's end. Fleming made the case for the federal government's role before a number of organizations, placing the FWA's activities in a long history of federal actions that benefited business. To the Associated Equipment Distributors, Fleming argued that

One might suppose that there is something alien and un-American, or even immoral, in using the Federal power to save the country, including business itself. The fact is we have been doing it from the very start. We have never hesitated to assist business. We have protected it from competition with prohibitive tariffs. The Reconstruction Finance Corporation has loaned billions to bolster up the sagging economy. We have directed harbors and rivers and built port facilities at public expense to assist business. We have subsidized publishers with low postal rates, and provided the aviation industry with airports at public expense. When we needed transcontinental railroads to open up the West and private capital hesitated to assume the risks we came to the rescue to the tune of a free gift of 20 sections of land and a credit of from \$16,000 to \$48,000 for every mile of track laid.<sup>34</sup>

Fleming reminded his audience that "Business needs to remember that a large part of it will be heading the procession to the bankruptcy court if, because of inertia, we permit this war to taper off into another great depression."<sup>35</sup>

Fleming, did not, however, make an argument in favor of the return of the Works Progress Administration after the war. In fact, he explicitly portrayed the Public Works Administration as the key New Deal precedent for the postwar period. Speaking at the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

Times Hall Forum Meeting in October 1944, Fleming was asked, "But wouldn't it be better to wait until after the war before we undertake the planning of such works? We will then know what we have to provide for. Maybe a public works program will not be necessary." Fleming was direct in his reply.

No, that was the mistake we made the last time. When the Public Works Administration was set up in 1933 we were given three and a third billion dollars with which to undertake a comprehensive program of public works that would put men to work quickly. I was executive officer of PWA at that time and still remember the headaches that went with the job. What were we to build? More important, where were the plans for building? They simply were not in existence. States and cities filed applications but few of them had acquired sites, made any engineering surveys or produced any blueprints. We had to send the applicants home to work out their plans before we could act.... The lesson is that our plans must be made in advance if they are to be effective in an emergency.<sup>36</sup>

Given Fleming's belief in planning, then, the next question asked, "You are not thinking in terms of another WPA?" "Not at all," the General replied.

In my opinion WPA performed a magnificent service. It kept eight million people alive in their time of need. It's [sic] weakness was that it applied a means test to job applicants and paid only a bare subsistence wage. But who can doubt that much more would have been accomplished if our plans had been ready on time? After this war I hope to see a public works program carried out by the contract system, upon which men will be employed at the prevailing wage rates, and not because they are destitute but simply because they want to work and are able to do the job. WPA was the price we paid for our failure to plan something better when we had time to plan.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the efforts of Fleming and the FWA to promote the cause of planning, the actual work done by states and localities to prepare for the postwar period was rather slender. In a report to Congress, the FWA declared that "The most significant fact about this post-war planning [by state and local governments] is that the great bulk of it is in the 'preliminary' and 'idea' stages of plan preparation." While completed plans totaled about

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<sup>36</sup> "Questions for Times Hall Forum Meeting of October 11, 1944," "Post War Planning--1944" folder, box 10, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

\$970 million, plans in the "preliminary" and "idea" stages totaled around \$3.7 billion and \$6.3 billion, respectively. "Also significant," the FWA reported, "is the fact that about two-thirds of the plan preparation which has been brought to the completed stage is reported by the state and local governments of only five states," New York, California, Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio. Further, around two-fifths of completed plans were located in only five cities: New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Los Angeles. In sum, the FWA concluded, "there is an urgent need for the Federal Government to establish a definite policy with regard to the action the Federal Government will or will not take, in providing assistance to them, in the preparation of plans for their post-war public works."<sup>38</sup>

The U.S. Conference of Mayors joined in pressing Congress for increased planning for postwar public works projects. Pointing to the War Mobilization and Reconversion Act of 1944, the Conference of Mayors noted that Title V of the Act called for detailed engineering and architectural plans for postwar public works to be prepared. To this end, FDR had requested that the House appropriate more than \$78 million. The House Appropriations Committee, however, allotted only \$5 million. "If, as a matter of national policy, public works are to serve as a cushion against potential widespread Post-war unemployment, an appropriation of 5 millions is a useless and futile gesture," the Conference of Mayors charged, "and is so inadequate as to constitute no appropriation at all. The amount might better be eliminated completely."<sup>39</sup> Like Fleming and the FWA, however, the Conference of Mayors also invoked the specter of the WPA in order to spur greater support for planning. "There are many who proclaim they do not want another

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<sup>38</sup> Federal Works Agency, in collaboration with the Bureau of the Census, Report of Proposed Post-War Public Works: Volume and Status of the Plan Preparation of Post-War Public Works Proposed by State and Local Governments (Washington, D.C., Sept. 1944).

<sup>39</sup> United States Conference of Mayors, "Plans for Post-War Public Works as authorized by Title V of the War Mobilization and Reconversion Act of 1944," Feb. 22, 1945, "Post War Planning--1945" folder, box 11, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA. Emphasis in original.

WPA," the Conference of Mayors observed. "Failure to plan now for really useful and needed projects can only lead to a makeshift work relief program and consequently waste of manpower and funds."<sup>40</sup>

Testifying before the House Subcommittee on Postwar Economic Policy and Planning, Edward J. Cleary, the managing editor of the Engineering News-Record, emphasized the links between "today's blueprint" and "tomorrow's job." Unlike the Conference of Mayors, however, Cleary did not see any need for federal aid to states and localities in order to encourage planning for the postwar reconversion. Drawing from a recent editorial he contributed to the Engineering News-Record, Cleary stated that in his opinion there was still plenty of time before the war would end for public works plans to be assembled. Instead, he urged the removal of War Production Board construction restrictions in order to stimulate the building industry. "I see no better way of 'gearing up' the industry than to provide the opportunity for contractors to bid on work and start constructing," Cleary declared. With government restrictions removed, Cleary thought, the construction industry could right itself.<sup>41</sup>

The Association of General Contractors agreed with the Engineering News-Record. While the AGC acknowledged that "public works are legitimate, valuable and necessary contributions to our national welfare," it declared that "at the present time we feel it is more important to plan for the development of the nation after the war to the fullest extent of its potentialities, through individual initiative. Under such circumstances the volume of privately financed construction will be so great that there will be little need to undertake public works for other than their normal utility or cultural value." To that end, the AGC also encouraged the lifting of government regulations "now restricting the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Emphasis in original.

<sup>41</sup> Edward J. Cleary, "Public Works Construction; Today's Blueprint and Tomorrow's Job," March 15, 1945, "Post War Planning--1945" folder, box 11, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.

civilian activities of construction." However, the AGC did see a place for the FWA to make loans to states and localities to encourage the drawing up of plans, as long as the federal government "does not intend to engage in public works which directly or indirectly compete with the proper functions of private enterprise, or the proper functions of state and local governments."<sup>42</sup>

In order to solidify support for the FWA among the construction industry, in August 1945 Fleming directed that a draft of the Committee on Postwar Construction's "Report on Postwar Construction" be given to the AGC for comments and suggestions. This report's policy recommendations indicate the direction that New Deal public works was taking even before the war's end. The Committee on Postwar Construction was created by the Office of War Mobilization and Reconversion to study how public works projects might be used to ease the reconversion to a peacetime economy. Fleming was the steering member of the Committee, which included members from the Civil Aeronautics Administration, National Housing Agency, the Army Corps of Engineers, the Departments of Interior and Agriculture, and the War Production Board. "In the process of reconversion and thereafter," the committee declared, "the Committee believes that public works should be managed with a view to avoiding so far as possible, any competition with private construction that is ready to proceed at any given time." In fact, the Committee argued, "Whenever private industry is ready with plans, financing and organization to go ahead with construction work, the Federal, State and local governments should have their own plans so organized as to be able to restrict their demands on material and labor." Although the Committee called for increased federal

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<sup>42</sup> "Statement of Harry A. Dick, President, The Associated General Contractors of America, Inc., before the Subcommittee on Public Works and Construction of the House Special Committee on Postwar Economic Policy and Planning," March 15, 1945, "Post War Planning--1945" folder, box 11, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162. NA.

support for planning, it stressed that this planning would not interfere with private activity.<sup>43</sup>

After the war had ended, in early 1946, Fleming traveled to the American Road Builders Association meeting in Chicago. Although speaking to a group of contractors, Fleming presented a more robust case for federal involvement in construction than he had within the Committee on Postwar Construction. "[W]e need a well-stocked shelf of plans available at all times to throw into the breach when needed," Fleming told the road builders. "Only in that way can public works construction be made to pull its full weight and to help stabilize the construction industry which historically has been subject to nearly ruinous fluctuations." Arguing that public works had "a two-fold role to play in the overall economy," Fleming asserted that public construction delivered "the facilities and services which the people need," and, secondly, it provided "useful employment when needed to supplement the jobs available in private industry."<sup>44</sup>

Later that year, Fleming spoke to the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing on the subject of "Tomorrow's Public Works." Noting that states, counties, and municipalities were doing little public works construction, Fleming worried that "the public and professional attitudes toward public works have changed so drastically within the last few years that they amount almost to a revolution.... we will do little building hereafter in yesterday's tradition." Rather, Fleming proposed, "We will build in the social, political, and economic context of tomorrow."

For the first time in our history we are now planning public works on a nationwide scale well in advance of the construction date. This is one phase of the revolution in our attitude toward public works to which I referred a moment

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<sup>43</sup> "Report on Postwar Construction," enclosed in H.E. Foreman to Baird Snyder, Aug. 14, 1945, "P.W. Constr. Ind. Adv. 6/1/45 12/31/45" folder, box 6, entry 7, "Administrative Records. Central Files, 1941-1949," RG 162, NA.

<sup>44</sup> "Address of Major General Philip B. Fleming, Administrator, Federal Works Agency, before the American Road Builders Association," Jan. 14, 1946, "Addresses by General Fleming 1946" folder, box 5, entry 32, "Information Records. Speeches of FWA Administrators, 1939-49," RG 162, NA.

ago. I think I may claim some credit for that. As long ago as 1942 I began advocating the advance planning of public works, as, of course, others had done before.<sup>45</sup>

With a "reserve shelf of plans, complete in all engineering, legal, and other details," and a commitment to the principle that "public bodies ought not to enter into competition with private business for men and materials," Fleming declared that public works still had an important role to play in the American economy.

The advantages of continuous planning are many. It will give labor some assurance of an alternate source of jobs when business declines. It will result in better plans, and therefore less expensive plans. Waste inevitably occurs when plans have to be hashed together in a hurry. It will reassure the taxpayer. He will know what needs to be done year by year. Proposals for large enterprises will not be sprung upon him as a surprise. Of course, the widest publicity should be given to every proposal so that general discussion may be had.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps most controversially, Fleming asserted that planning "should lift orderly public works development from the realm of political controversy." The more the American public thought of public works planning as an everyday occurrence, Fleming thought, the less it would seem like a foreign intrusion into the economy.

In their private affairs the American people are the greatest planners in the world. Every business man is a planner. Every manufacturer plans with great detail what he will manufacture, where he will obtain his raw materials and his labor supply. He plans his sales campaign with the greatest care. He leaves little to chance. Only in our common affairs have we seemed, up to the present time, to be allergic to planning. But in this field, too, I am convinced, we are beginning to realize that we can no longer proceed by guess and by gosh. By trusting to luck we may stumble into a prosperous and happy future--but I doubt it.<sup>47</sup>

Fleming's skepticism was well-judged. Although he continued to lead the FWA effectively--testifying before Congress from 1947 through 1949 on such issues as planning, the need to develop Alaska with public works projects, and the ability of the

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<sup>45</sup> "Address of Major General Philip B. Fleming, Administrator, Federal Works Agency, before the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing," Aug. 19, 1946, in *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*



FWA to coordinate emergency disaster relief--Fleming was unable to make a successful case for the continued existence of the Federal Works Agency.<sup>48</sup> When the subject of the reorganization of the executive branch again arose in 1947, New Deal public works at last faced bureaucratic extinction.

### **Hoover Redux: Government Reorganization and Public Works**

In July 1947 Congress again took up the topic of reorganizing the executive branch, calling for a commission to make recommendations on how to reduce and streamline the federal government. Of the commission's twelve members, six came from each party, with four selected by President Harry Truman, four by Speaker of the House Joseph Martin, and four by the President of the Senate Arthur Vandenberg. But who would head such a body? Truman and the Congress turned to a retired, yet still active, former president: Herbert Hoover. Hoover was pleased to accept the position, announcing that the Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government would strive to reduce the costs of government to the taxpayer, in the name of "efficiency and economy."<sup>49</sup> Joining Hoover on the Commission were Dean Acheson, James Forrestal, Arthur S. Flemming, and George H. Mead (appointed by Truman); along with Joseph P. Kennedy, Senator George Aiken, Senator John McClellan, and Professor James Pollock (appointed by Vandenberg). Speaker Martin named Hoover, James Rowe, Jr., Representative Clarence Brown, and Representative Carter Manasco.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> See Fleming's testimony in Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Public Works, State Planning for Public Works, 80th Cong., 1st sess., July 11, 1947; Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Public Works, Alaska Public Works, 81st Cong., 1st sess., April 28 and May 17, 1949; and Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Public Works, Coordinating Emergency Activities of Federal Agencies in Disaster Areas, 80th Cong., 2d sess., June 14, 1948.

<sup>49</sup> Gary Dean Best, Herbert Hoover: The Postpresidential Years, 1933-1964 (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983), 2:312-13.

<sup>50</sup> Arnold, Making the Managerial Presidency, 122-23; and, still worth reading, Ferrel Heady, "A New Approach to Federal Executive Reorganization," American Political Science Review 41 (Dec. 1947): 1118-26.

Hoover's private view of the Commission's power was rather more explicit than his public pronouncements about undertaking reorganization in order to achieve greater efficiency and economy. Given Truman's tenuous popular support and the eventual choice of Thomas Dewey as the Republican presidential nominee for 1948, Hoover increasingly viewed his position as head of a reorganization effort as a unique opportunity. As one historian has noted, Hoover "clearly envisioned that the [Commission's] report would be issued after the election of Dewey to the presidency, and that with a friendly, GOP-dominated Congress the report could be used to roll back much of the New Deal."<sup>51</sup> Hoover's friend, Julius Klein, informed Hoover of Commissioner Clarence Brown's plans:

Brown plans to get into the matter very aggressively and asked me to pass along the word to you in strict confidence that he put in the provision that the Commission should report after November 1948...so as to lay the groundwork for the expected complete housekeeping that will be necessary at that time.<sup>52</sup>

With the report to be issued after the election, the Commission could claim the mantle of bipartisanship for its findings. Hoover himself wanted the staff for the Commission to reflect his views, however. "The first thing we need is a good counsel," Hoover wrote, "preferably someone who has had experience in the departments and who is surely not a New Dealer." The Republican Conference in the Senate was even more direct in voicing its hopes: the Commission would undertake "a major operation on the sprawling, tax-eating, patchwork bureaucracy bequeathed to us by the New Deal."<sup>53</sup>

While the central recommendations issued by the Commission dealt directly with the public works bureaucracies built by the New Dealers, these proposals were not as

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<sup>51</sup> Best, Herbert Hoover, 2:325.

<sup>52</sup> Julius Klein quoted in Arnold, Making the Managerial Presidency, 122-23.

<sup>53</sup> Hoover quoted in William E. Pemberton, "Struggle For the New Deal: Truman and the Hoover Commission," Presidential Studies Quarterly 16 (summer 1986): 516; the Senate Republican Conference quoted in ibid., 517.

explicitly anti-New Deal as one might have expected. As one student of the Hoover Commission has observed, Truman and his appointees to the Commission were able "to check conservative onslaughts against the New Deal reforms," largely by working with the Commission to shape its recommendations.<sup>54</sup> Hoover's own assessment of the New Dealers on the Commission was rather more blunt:

The major worries of the New Dealers were: the total abolition of political appointment in civil servants; the entire subjection of the military to the civilian arm; forms of budgeting and accounting which would expose the concealed expenditures and subsidies in the Government; the exposure of the extent to which socialism had run; and, especially, they disliked the estimates of \$2.5 billion annual savings at a time when they were trying to add \$4 billion taxes for their socialist-fascist program.<sup>55</sup>

In their impact, however, the Commission's findings on the issue of public works programs delivered less a full-scale rollback of these agencies than a codification of the dismantling of these programs that had begun during World War II.

New York public works czar Robert Moses, the head of the Hoover Commission task force on public works, had originally recommended to Hoover that the federal government create a new Department of Public Works, a position that both Hoover and Truman supported. Faced with opposition from entrenched interests--especially the Army Corps of Engineers--however, Hoover and the Commission did not follow Moses's plan.<sup>56</sup> The Commission recommended instead that the Federal Works Agency be dissolved. Its public building functions would be replaced by a new Office of General Services, or, as it was eventually called, the General Services Administration. A public works bureaucracy that, during the New Deal, supervised public works construction

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>55</sup> Hoover Commission Memoir, April 13, 1949, in Timothy Walch and Dwight M. Miller, eds., Herbert Hoover and Harry S. Truman: A Documentary History (Worland, Wyoming: High Plains Publishing Company, 1992), 159.

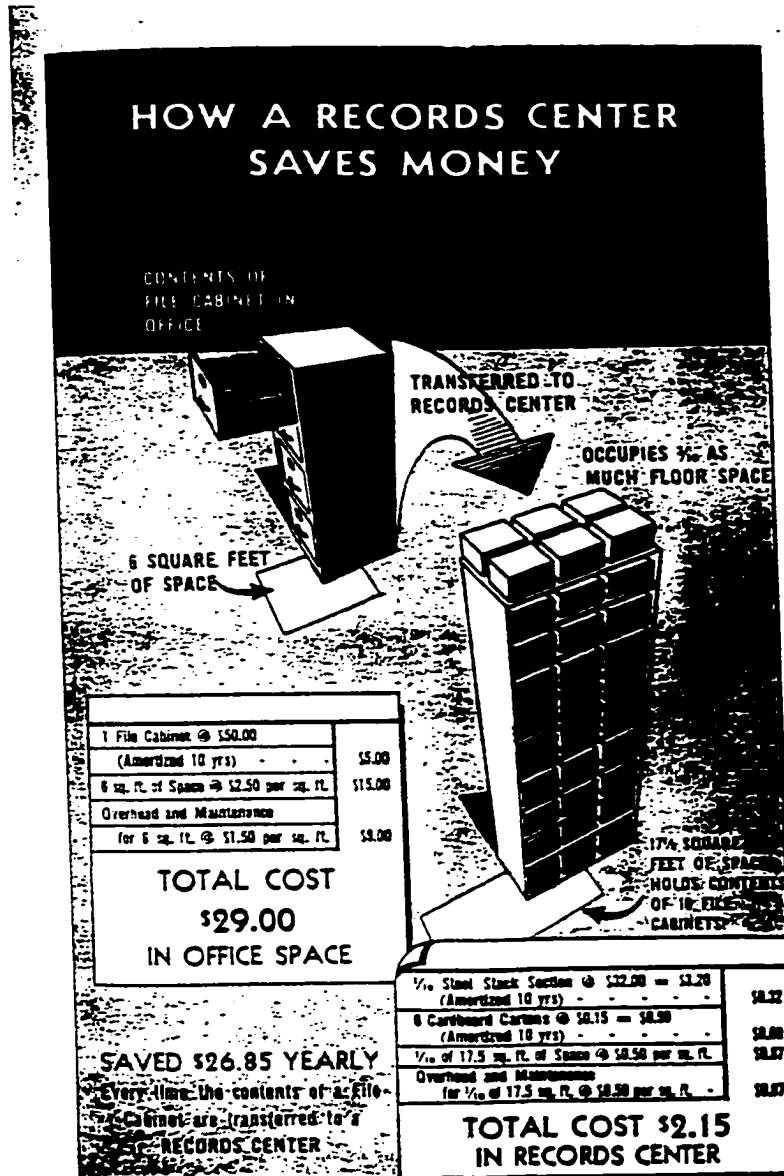
<sup>56</sup> For Moses's account, see Robert Moses, Public Works: A Dangerous Trade (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), 711-32.

across the nation, was to be replaced by a far less-powerful agency that would be in charge of the "housekeeping" functions of the federal government, including such tasks as record storage and courthouse maintenance. [figure one here] The other public works functions of the federal government would be shifted to the Interior Department.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> The Hoover Commission Report on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government (New York: McGraw-Hill, no date), 75-83; 263-95.

Figure 1. Source: The Hoover Commission Report on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government (New York: McGraw-Hill, no date), 81.



One-time head of the Federal Works Agency, John Carmody, kept a close eye on the recommendations of the Hoover Commission. Indeed, Carmody served briefly as an adviser to the reorganization effort, recalling later that out of all his different experiences in twenty-five years of government service, "none was more unsatisfactory nor more fantastic than my brief period with the Hoover Commission." Carmody observed that "a more reactionary group could not well have been gathered to destroy liberal gains that had been made, legislatively and administratively, during the previous twenty years." His colleagues on the Commission, however, were just as uneasy with Carmody as he was with them. Carmody concluded that "It was a mistake to invite me to help with the kind of reorganization of government operations Mr. Hoover and his colleagues, largely presidents of large corporations, had in mind and it was a mistake for me to accept."<sup>58</sup> Carmody went so far as to organize a "Citizens Committee against the Hoover Report" to counter the Hoover-inspired body, Citizens Committee for the Hoover Report, lobbying against the Commission's recommendations.<sup>59</sup>

Carmody's personal files and correspondence reflect the active interest he took in following the trajectories of the two major New Deal agencies he had been involved in; the Rural Electrification Agency and the FWA. He saw the Hoover Commission as an explicit attempt by Hoover "to kill public power in the United States, including the Tennessee Valley Authority."<sup>60</sup> Carmody's suspicions were not unfounded; Hoover supposedly remarked to Senator Barry Goldwater, "I would sell the TVA if I could only get a dollar for it."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> July 31, 1958, "Hoover Commission--1954: Reminiscences of John M. Carmody," in "Hoover Commission--Reminiscences of JMC," box 156, John M. Carmody Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.

<sup>59</sup> "Citizens Committee against the Hoover Reports," typed notes, no date, "Hoover, Herbert. John" folder, box 227, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>60</sup> Columbia University Oral History Project, "The Reminiscences of John Michael Carmody." 448.

<sup>61</sup> Joan Hoff Wilson, Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1992 [1975]), 227.

As the years passed, Carmody watched the growth of the General Services Administration with deep misgivings. Reading a 1955 letter from Alan Johnstone, who had been Carmody's General Counsel at FWA, Carmody marked with emphasis this passage:

As to our Federal Works days, the outfit which we started with such devotion and care has been converted by the book-keepers in the Budget from a Works Department into an old woman's knitting bag containing varicolored bits of yarn, while the Government's construction personnel is scattered all over the lot in futile competitive enterprises. To that extent the advances of the Roosevelt Administration which proposed to used [sic] public work and the development of the public domain as a stimulant to the enterprise of the people has been, at least, shunted aside.<sup>62</sup>

Johnstone and Carmody both resented the trajectory taken by the FWA as it was absorbed by the General Services Administration. The GSA's first head was not a New Dealer; instead, Truman appointed the head of the War Assets Administration, Jess Larson. Larson, while head of the WAA, had supervised the disposal of about \$8 billion in government property. Under Larson, the GSA adopted a decentralized structure with ten regional offices distributed throughout the country. As Larson put it, the GSA's purpose was "performing the housekeeping operations of the Government." Specifically, Larson wrote,

[The GSA] will perform, or supervise the performance of, the property management functions of the Government covering both real and personal property, and it will do likewise insofar as the records management functions of the Government are concerned. In addition it has what might be termed a miscellaneous function that falls in the general category of Federal-aid projects to states and municipalities involving public works other than roads. Traditionally Congress has placed the programs falling under this category in the Federal Works Agency and current legislation contemplates their continuation under this Administration. Consequently, the organization is being perfected to meet these

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<sup>62</sup> Alan Johnstone to John M. Carmody, Oct. 29, 1955, untitled folder, box 115, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

responsibilities; so, therefore, in addition to our property and records management responsibilities, we will have a division of Federal-aid public works projects.<sup>63</sup>

Larson's administration of the GSA was far from smooth, however. He became a central figure in two influence-peddling scandals, involving (unproved) allegations that Larson showed favoritism in awarding government contracts for supplies.<sup>64</sup> Larson's administration of the GSA drew derision from Johnstone, who viewed Larson as only the most recent in a series of missteps concerning public works policy:

And I hold it against certain of our friends that they induced Roosevelt and Truman to throw the switches the wrong way when you left Federal Works. Then the "great liquidation" began, as I warned [General Philip B.] Fleming--to be completed by [Jess] Larsen [sic] when he replaced competent men by the ambitious but inept War Assets boys.<sup>65</sup>

The GSA even attracted the attention of Fortune magazine, which, six years after the GSA's founding, labeled it as "Washington's Most Durable Mess."<sup>66</sup>

Reflecting further on the place of public works policy within the reorganization of the Federal government, Johnstone remarked, "It has always seemed inconceivable to me that we can agree to establish a Department of Education, Health and Welfare, which is doing dam [sic] little education, no health and only scant welfare, but are unwilling to have a Department of Public Works which could replenish the fountain to refresh the whole private enterprise system which supports the whole." Johnstone argued that public works were more beneficial for the economy than the social security program, writing to Carmody "I am sure that it must have occurred to you that Social Security which is based

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<sup>63</sup> Jess Larson to Senator John L. McClellan, Aug. 22, 1949 [draft], "Hoover Commission" folder, box 1, entry 30, "Administrative Records. Records Relating to the Organization of the General Services Administration, 1949-50," RG 162, NA.

<sup>64</sup> Eleanora W. Schoenebaum, ed., Political Profiles: The Truman Years (New York: Facts on File, 1978), s.v. "Larson, Jess." For more on the War Assets Administration, see Gerald T. White, Billions for Defense: Government Financing by the Defense Plant Corporation during World War II (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 98-112.

<sup>65</sup> Johnstone to Carmody, Oct. 29, 1955, untitled folder, box 115, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>66</sup> Herbert Solow, "GSA: Washington's Most Durable Mess," Fortune, Aug. 1955, p. 76.



on payroll taxes is a depressant, because it takes money out of pay checks which make up buying power, while public works, the public jobs aside, makes the bed for more jobs since it puts the public facilities, including the hiterto [sic] undeveloped public resources, to the service of all the people on equal terms."<sup>67</sup>

In looking for the continued influence of the New Deal's public works programs within a specific department of the federal government, however, Johnstone was looking in the wrong place. While the creation of the General Services Administration marked the eclipse of an employment-based public works policy, government construction by no means disappeared. Rather, with the advent of the Cold War, public works took on different forms.

### **Public Works and the Cold War**

The legacy of the New Deal's public works influenced a number of Cold War programs, particularly Truman's Point Four program. In his 1949 inaugural address, Truman announced four major foreign policy points for his administration: the first three were continued support of the United Nations, the Marshall Plan, and plans for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Fourth, Truman announced a "bold new program" that would draw on American science and resources to aid underdeveloped nations. The Washington Post termed Point Four a "'Fair Deal' Plan for the World."<sup>68</sup>

As the Truman Administration tried to flesh out the substance behind Truman's address, Thomas Corcoran turned to the man who had led the Public Works Administration, Harold Ickes. Corcoran wrote to Ickes that he had been "working like hell on the Point IV business." Although Ickes had fallen out with Truman and had

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid; for an evaluation of social security's origins, see Mark H. Leff, "Taxing the 'Forgotten Man': The Politics of Social Security Finance in the New Deal," Journal of American History 70 (Sept. 1983): 359-81.

<sup>68</sup> David McCullough, Truman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 730-31.

resigned his post as Interior Secretary in 1946, Corcoran wondered if Ickes was interested in returning to public service. Point Four, Corcoran declared, had the potential to use public works and economic development as the carrot to containment's stick. "[T]he usefulness for you" was what "intrigues me most," Corcoran wrote. "Point IV has to be the affirmative hope-side of our foreign policy to balance the negative military policy of keeping strong and being tough." If Ickes was interested, and if Truman could be persuaded to appoint him, Corcoran proposed, "your appointment will mean that the program takes on the character of an international PWA as distinguished from a boondoggling WPA."<sup>69</sup>

Ickes was interested, but skeptical. "Your suggestion, as to how the money appropriated in support of Point Four should be used, is another of your inspirations," he wrote Corcoran. "By all means, an international PWA should be set up." Ickes, however, did not think that Corcoran would be able to persuade Secretary of State Dean Acheson or President Truman to consider him for any role in Point Four. "I suspect that you had better give up trying to do anything with this particular lame duck," Ickes concluded.<sup>70</sup> Despite meager funding, however, during the 1950s the Point Four program made important strides, building much-needed highways and airports in such nations as Afghanistan, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Vietnam.<sup>71</sup>

While Point Four encapsulated the notion of exporting New Deal public works abroad during the first years of the Cold War, the program that most explicitly drew upon the legacy of New Deal public works at home was the national highway system. Although the story of the building of the highways has been told, the links between this

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<sup>69</sup> Thomas Corcoran to Harold L. Ickes, Sept. 6, 1950, "Harold L. Ickes. General Correspondence, 1946-52. Corcoran, Thomas, 1946-51" folder, box 53, Harold L. Ickes Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Emphasis in original.

<sup>70</sup> Ickes to Corcoran, Sept. 11, 1950, in *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Schwarz, *New Dealers*, 340.

project and the New Deal public works have been largely neglected.<sup>72</sup> In April 1941, FDR had created the Interregional Highway Committee, directing this group to develop a national roadbuilding policy to be implemented after the war. New Deal planners, state road engineers, as well as political appointees, one historian has observed, "were committed to engineering specifications, traffic flows, and city and regional planning as their form of political expression."<sup>73</sup>

Speaking at the first meeting of the National Interregional Highway Committee to such fellow committee members as Rexford Tugwell, Frederic A. Delano, and longtime head of the Bureau of Public Roads Thomas H. MacDonald, FWA head John Carmody argued that the Public Work Reserve's shelf of projects might form a basis for future decisions made by the Committee.<sup>74</sup> Presidential adviser Lauchlin Currie supported Carmody's efforts to cast the FWA as the leader of the wartime road building program, urging FDR that "primary responsibility for the highway part of the [transportation] program be given to Carmody." Out of these efforts came the report, "Highways for the National Defense," prepared by the Public Roads Administration, FWA, the Advisory Commission to the Council of National Defense, and the War and Navy Departments, which paid particular attention to upgrading the strength of bridges, width of strategic roads, adequacy of access to larger cities, and the servicing of existing and proposed populations at army, naval, and air bases.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See, for example, Tom Lewis, Divided Highways: Building the Interstate Highways, Transforming American Life (New York: Penguin Books, 1997).

<sup>73</sup> Mark H. Rose, Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989 rev. ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 19.

<sup>74</sup> Minutes of the National Interregional Highway Committee, June 24, 1941, "National Interregional Highway Committee" folder, box 16, Rexford G. Tugwell Papers, FDRL.

<sup>75</sup> Lauchlin Currie to FDR, June 21, 1940; and "Highways for the National Defense," February 1, 1941: both in "OF 1e Bureau of Public Roads 1939-1941" folder, box 11, Official File 1e, FDR Papers, FDRL.

Other New Dealers and reformers weighed in on the importance of highway construction. Public works advocate Otto T. Mallery, for example, was quick to see the potential for national highway building to continue the work of New Deal public works projects. In 1943, Mallery wrote to Columbia University economist Carter Goodrich and FDR adviser Isador Lubin of the ability for what Mallery termed a "Pan American Highway" to stand as a public works project of "international scope and significance."<sup>76</sup> In a study of American highway policy for the Brookings Institution, published during World War II, Charles L. Dearing was struck by the extent that "federal highway policy has been dominated and complicated" since 1933 by New Deal public works programs.<sup>77</sup> While these programs provided employment, Dearing was particularly impressed by the ability of the New Deal's public works to unsettle established structures and pathways of highway planning and funding. "The injection of emergency considerations into federal road activity created general confusion in the country's highway policy," reported Dearing. "This trend has produced a more complex managerial structure characterized by additional dispersion and overlapping of authority and responsibility among the several levels of government."<sup>78</sup> The FWA tried to resolve this confusion through its planning for the postwar period.

Arguing that federal direction of highway construction was an issue "so vital and fundamental in the economy of this Nation," FWA head Philip Fleming told Congress that World War II should serve as an important lesson. "I do know from our war experience how vital our highway system was to our existence then. Our highways really became a part of our production line."

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<sup>76</sup> Otto T. Mallery to Carter Goodrich, Nov. 19, 1943, enclosed in Otto T. Mallery to Isador Lubin, Nov. 19, 1943, "Mallery, Otto T." folder, box 65, Isador Lubin Papers, FDRL.

<sup>77</sup> Charles L. Dearing, American Highway Policy (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1942), 86.

<sup>78</sup> Dearing, American Highway Policy, 89, 99.

There were wings and fuselages and turrets and engines moving over our highways to Kansas and Texas and being assembled there in finished airplanes. There were mechanical parts moved up into New Hampshire which became bomb sights. So our highways really were a part of our national effort. Without them I do not know where we would have been in our war effort.<sup>79</sup>

When the Eisenhower administration turned to the task of highway construction, it embraced all the arguments for federal public works put forward by the New Dealers. Public construction would help head off rising unemployment and recession; improved highways would help secure national defense; and a widespread network of reliable roads would spur the economic development throughout the country. It was through the construction of the federal highway program that Eisenhower most notably performed the task of assimilating the political innovations established under the New Deal.<sup>80</sup> Although subsequent conservative Republicans, such as Barry Goldwater, would mock Eisenhower's use of these state capacities as a mere "Dime Store New Deal," the highway program begun in 1956 signaled a public works effort as significant as anything undertaken during FDR's four terms as president.<sup>81</sup>

The New Deal's public works programs did more than establish an important precedent for the economic development carried out by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956; they also provided politicians with a way of thinking about how the world worked. No one drew on this way of thinking more extensively than did a former Texas head of the National Youth Administration, Lyndon Baines Johnson. Former FWA head John Carmody was quick to notice when Johnson declared his intentions to replicate the Tennessee Valley Authority overseas, in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. Carmody tore

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<sup>79</sup> Congress, Senate, Subcommittee of the Committee on Public Works, Federal Aid for Highways, 80th Cong., 2d sess., Feb. 28, 1948, pp. 153-54.

<sup>80</sup> Fred Greenstein, The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader (New York: Basic Books, 1982); and the essays collected in Shirley Anne Warshaw, ed., Reexamining the Eisenhower Presidency (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993).

<sup>81</sup> Goldwater quoted in James T. Patterson, Grand Expectations: The United States, 1954-1974 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 271.

journalist Drew Pearson's "Washington Merry-Go-Round" column out of the Washington Post on May 10, 1965. In this piece, Pearson noted the long-standing connections between Abe Fortas, Arthur "Tex" Goldschmidt, and Johnson. Fortas and Goldschmidt, while working at the PWA, helped advise Johnson on securing a public works loan for a series of dams for thirteen counties in Texas; by 1965 Fortas was a White House adviser for LBJ and Goldschmidt had gone to the United Nations, "where," Pearson related, "he has continued building dams all over the world." The result of this association, Pearson reported, was that LBJ "began pushing the idea that a giant series of dams on the Mekong River might bring peace and prosperity to war-torn North and South Viet-Nam."<sup>82</sup> Carmody, who knew Goldschmidt quite well when they both worked for Harry Hopkins's Civil Works Administration, was pleased to see the philosophical approach behind the New Deal's public works programs continue to shape public policy.

Indeed, in presenting the "TVA on the Mekong Delta" plan to LBJ, Goldschmidt made explicit comparisons to the success that New Deal public works programs scored in attacking what FDR called the nation's number one economic problem, the South. "Only economic integration with the nation as a whole," Goldschmidt wrote, "could cure the South and close the North-South gap. And this integration could only be accomplished by Federal action. There is a direct parallel today in the economic development of the former colonial regions of the world."

Economic development is too important to leave to the blind play of economic forces; it can be hastened or hindered by the intervention of policies designed to increase production and promote welfare. And the process is strengthened by outside assistance. The rich nations of the world will have to do for the poor nations what the Federal Government of the U.S. did for the South.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Drew Pearson, "LBJ's Mekong Project Not New," Washington Post 10 May 1965, in "Johnson, Lyndon B." folder, box 188, Carmody Papers, FDRL.

<sup>83</sup> Goldschmidt quoted in Gardner, Pay Any Price, 195.

Johnson agreed, replying to Goldschmidt, "We are in a better position to handle some of the problems of the developing countries because of the problems we faced so recently in developing our own."<sup>84</sup> This confidence of Johnson's Great Society liberalism in the ability of government to address such broad economic and social concerns, both at home and abroad, stemmed directly from the liberalism fostered by the New Deal.

Perhaps no New Dealer best expressed this confidence and optimism than did TVA director David Lilienthal. In his classic work, TVA: Democracy on the March, Lilienthal crafted a manifesto that expressed the scale and scope of New Deal liberalism. The "dreamers with shovels" could use the power of the federal government to spread economic development and democracy across the United States and across the globe. Lilienthal urged people to "cut through the fog of uncertainty" and grasp the reality in front of them--namely, that institutions created by the New Deal could use the power of government to build "real things" and help "real people."

My purpose is to show, by authentic experience in one American region, that to get such new jobs and factories and fertile farms our choice need not be between extremes of "right" and "left," between overcentralized Big-government and a do-nothing policy, between "private enterprise" and "socialism," between an arrogant red-tape-ridden bureaucracy and domination by a few private monopolies. I have tried in these pages to express my confidence that in tested principles of democracy we have ready at hand a philosophy and a set of working tools that, adapted to this machine age, can guide and sustain us in increasing opportunity for individual freedom and well-being.<sup>85</sup>

In forging this brand of liberalism, New Dealers created a political philosophy that transformed the American economy, landscape, and political system for nearly fifty years.

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<sup>84</sup> Johnson quoted in ibid.

<sup>85</sup> David E. Lilienthal, TVA: Democracy on the March (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953 [1944]). xxi.

## Conclusion

In the years following World War II, the Federal Works Agency was turned into the General Services Administration, the agency that supervises federal office space. A bureaucracy that once epitomized the ability of the New Deal to put people to work while improving the nation's infrastructure became the agency that, most recently, handed out the keys for the Presidential Transition Offices to Dick Cheney.<sup>86</sup> While this consolidation of government agencies marked a formal end of the New Deal's public works agencies, the influence of these programs loomed large in fostering the public works spending that proceeded under the categories of national defense and federal highways.

Few were as aware of the many changes that New Deal public works underwent during these years than was FWA head Major General Philip B. Fleming. Heir to the state capacities built by Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins, and consolidated under John Carmody, Fleming paused near the end of his tenure to reflect on the connection between New Deal liberalism and the federal government's public works programs. In response to a letter from Richard Wilson of Look magazine, Fleming took stock of the legacy of the New Deal:

Your recent letter interests me very much and I am glad to give you my thoughts on the questions you raise. I do feel, however, my position will be much clearer if it is set in a more specific frame of reference than the terms "liberals" and "New Deal" imply. These labels carry such different connotations for different people and groups that I prefer more direct language. To me as a Government official the programs and policies which I have been associated with had a common purpose--to make this country a better place to live and work in. As I saw it, that was the spirit which animated the "New Deal."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Washington Post, Dec. 15, 2000, p. A39.

<sup>87</sup> Philip B. Fleming to Richard L. Wilson, Feb. 26, 1948, "L (General)" folder, box 8, entry 5, "Correspondence of Administrators. Correspondence of General Philip B. Fleming, 1942-1949," RG 162, NA.



That established, Fleming reviewed his record as a New Dealer. Working as an assistant to Harold Ickes's Public Works Administration from 1933 to 1935, Fleming wrote, gave him "a two year close-up of the compelling need and the difficulties of putting men to work on useful public projects. It took about eighteen months to employ 100,000 men because we lacked adequate plans, drawn up in advance." Fleming's subsequent service on the huge Passamaquoddy dam project in Maine, and work directing engineering improvements in the upper Mississippi valley, "convinced me more and more of the widespread and continuing need for planned public works." Finally, the General wrote,

Since Pearl Harbor I have been Administrator of the Federal Works Agency, dealing with buildings, roads and community facilities. Nothing in my experience leads me to believe that the time has come to abandon community foresight-- which is just another name for advance planning. On the contrary we need more of it at every level of government. We need it to make our smaller communities and our big cities better places to live and work in. And I believe we are going to do more and more advance planning. How else can we meet tomorrow's problems? The list is formidable and pressing. It includes such diverse items as stream and water pollution, traffic congestion, the need for urban redevelopment-- not to mention soil erosion and many other problems that touch the common welfare.<sup>88</sup>

Out of all of these projects, though, what was the most important contribution of federally supervised public works programs? Fleming ended his reflection on New Deal liberalism and public works with the observation that it was "In the vital matter of highway construction," since with this program "we are now launched upon a huge program that for the first time links the plans and resources of Federal, state, county, and municipal governments." In so doing, Fleming concluded, "Some may not call this the 'spirit of the New Deal,' but whatever name you give it, the spirit is very much alive."<sup>89</sup> Indeed, Fleming was acutely aware that, in developing the underdeveloped regions of the United States, linking the nation through land and air in an integrated market, and

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

providing a basis for thinking about the postwar world, New Deal public works and the highway programs and defense contracts that succeeded them forged an expression of New Deal liberalism in mortar, concrete, and steel.

## EPILOGUE: PUBLIC WORKS AND THE BUILDING OF NEW DEAL LIBERALISM

Above all, the New Dealers were builders. From the Public Works Administration, to the Works Progress Administration, to the Federal Works Agency, New Dealers such as Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins, John Carmody, and Philip Fleming deployed the state capacities of the public works programs across the nation, building in almost every county in the United States. For too long, however, the New Deal's public works programs have been judged a failure because of their inability to solve the most vexing problem of the Great Depression, mass unemployment. Viewing these programs as the extraordinarily successful economic development measures that they were, however, helps us recover just how dramatically the New Deal transformed the American economy, political system, and physical landscape. As programs such as the PWA and WPA demonstrated, government-sponsored economic development was deeply political. From appointing staff to selecting projects, from Washington, D.C., to project worksites across the country, the New Deal public works programs wrought in concrete and steel a physical realization of a political philosophy, New Deal liberalism. Harry Hopkins encapsulated the power of this approach when he defined it as a political project that could "tax and tax, spend and spend, and elect and elect." Opponents of the New Deal were quick to recognize the genius of Hopkins's statement, spearheading the drive to pass the Hatch Act in 1939, rolling back a striking feature of the New Deal order--the massive expansion of the federal payroll outside of the civil service structure.

Despite this backlash, the public works programs produced an astonishing variety of projects: roads, dams, highways, bridges, airports, sewage systems, housing, and military bases, to name but several. With the creation of the Federal Works Agency in 1939, New Dealers were close to carving out a permanent place for their emergency works programs within the American state. They seized World War II as an opportunity to promote government-funded construction as essential to preparedness efforts. While

these reformers retooled effectively for wartime, concentrating on projects such as access roads for military bases, expanding temporary housing for war workers, and training unskilled workers for defense-related industries, this period also marked the return of New Deal public works to generating infrastructure and a turn away from reducing unemployment. This shift was most notable in the activities of the WPA, as it shifted more of its projects to private contracting, gradually abandoning the goal of employment in its public works projects. Most notably, WPA personnel contributed to the war effort by playing a crucial role in the internment of Japanese Americans.

All of these achievements raise a central question for historians of the United States: how do we evaluate New Deal liberalism when we place its public works programs at the center?

Viewing these programs as the New Dealers did, as the New Deal's central enterprise, we are reminded of the extremes of the New Deal's accomplishments and its shortcomings. As such historians as Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., have stressed, the New Deal was truly revolutionary. In terms of public works, this revolution was awesome in both scale and scope. The PWA sponsored a tremendous amount of this infrastructure, but the WPA also put its resources behind this cause, devoting 75% of its funds and projects to construction. These programs secured the foundations for forging a national market after 1945; built roads, airports, planned for national highways, and improved military bases, aiding the eventual rise of the Sunbelt and the "Gunbelt"; and gave the New Dealers a policy tool that could be used to shape overseas development, from the Cold War through the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce J. Schulman, From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980 (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994); Randall M. Miller and George E. Pozetta, eds., Shades of the Sunbelt: Essays on Ethnicity, Race, and the Urban South (Boca Raton: Florida Atlantic University Press, 1989); Ann Markusen, et al., The Rise of the Gunbelt: The Military Remapping of Industrial America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Jordan A. Schwarz, The New Dealers: Power Politics in the Age of Roosevelt (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

Bound up with these triumphs, however, were stunning limitations. Most notably, of course, was the public works programs's failure to bring an end to mass unemployment. Those that the New Deal did employ were white men, for the most part. This was hardly surprising, given their prevalence in the building trades and construction industry, generally. Still, the New Deal had a remarkable chance to address the crisis of unemployment among African-Americans and women and, despite some well-intentioned employment quotas and specialized projects (sewing projects for women, for example), accomplished strikingly little on these fronts.<sup>2</sup>

It is a reflection of how tightly the public works programs's accomplishments and limitations were knit together that during the postwar period New Dealers watched silently as the FWA was absorbed into the General Services Administration in 1949. While this last structural component of the works program came to an end, the heavier construction that was a hallmark of the New Deal became a central focus of the federal government. Federal funds paid for the infrastructure that made up the national highway system, military bases, and airports. While the New Deal's legacy for economic development has remained an important part of the American state since 1956, the social welfare component of its works programs has not. Subsequent welfare measures, such as those undertaken during Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, bypassed the precedent of the WPA. The Great Society had no jobs program.

Indeed, when considering the spectrum of New Deal public works activities from 1933 through 1956, the WPA appears less as the centerpiece of federal construction efforts, and more as an employment-oriented variation on the theme of infrastructural development. This theme was articulated first by the approach to public works tried

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Mettler, Dividing Citizens: Gender and Federalism in New Deal Public Policy (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Nancy E. Rose, Workfare or Fair Work: Women, Welfare, and Government Work Programs (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995); Jill Quadagno, "From Old-Age Assistance to Supplemental Security Income: The Political Economy of Relief in the South, 1935-1972," in Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol, eds., The Politics of Social Policy in the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 235-63.

under the Hoover administration and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, it was amplified and expanded by the PWA, and it was recapitulated vigorously during World War II and afterwards. New Deal public works programs succeeded in fostering state-sponsored economic development, and in managing populations: they built a wealth of infrastructure, directed unemployed workers during the Depression, and imprisoned Japanese Americans during World War II. Viewed in this light, the New Deal's public works program signaled far-reaching achievements, expanding the federal government and generating construction projects across the nation.

These accomplishments, however, indicate that New Deal liberalism was less a political project concerned with advancing equality, redistribution of wealth, or social democratic ideals, than a conservative effort. New Deal liberalism focused on conservative--in the sense of preserving and strengthening--goals such as maintaining social order and administering and managing resources in order to improve the national estate. These goals were pursued with tremendous energy, but their conservative character provides an insight into the oft-termed "weakness" of the welfare state as it developed in the United States. Put another way, New Deal public works programs led not to the embrace of a "social" Keynesianism, but rather to the adoption of a "commercial" Keynesianism.<sup>3</sup> That this path underwrote a "weak" welfare state should not surprise; after all, the New Deal's public works programs were more successful in building roads and dams than they were in employing people. Indeed, many of the staffers of the PWA and WPA--civil engineering experts and members of the Army Corps of Engineers, for example--were specialists in planning and constructing public

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Weir and Theda Skocpol, "State Structures and the Possibilities for 'Keynesian' Responses to the Great Depression in Sweden, Britain, and the United States," in Peter R. Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol, eds., Bringing the State Back In (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 107-63. See also Herbert Stein, The Fiscal Revolution in America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Sven Steinmo, Taxation and Democracy: Swedish, British, and American Approaches to Financing the Modern State (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); and Theodore Rosenof, Economics in the Long Run: New Deal Theorists and Their Legacies, 1933-1993 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

works projects. They were not experts in solving a crisis in unemployment; they were professional builders.

Franklin Roosevelt articulated this goal of economic development during his first campaign for the presidency, in a speech he made in 1932 to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco. There, FDR posed the central question of his day, declaring that "The issue of Government has always been whether individual men and women will have to serve some system of Government or economics, or whether a system of Government and economics exists to serve individual men and women." FDR took his audience through the sweep of American history, reviewing the struggles between Hamilton and Jefferson over the purpose of the federal government, and reminding them of the more recent battles waged by Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. "The day of the great promoter or the financial Titan, to whom we granted anything if only he would build, or develop, is over," FDR declared.

Our task now is not discovery or exploitation of natural resources, or necessarily producing more goods. It is the soberer, less dramatic business of administering resources and plants already in hand, of seeking to reestablish foreign markets for our surplus production, of meeting the problem of underconsumption, of adjusting production to consumption, or distributing wealth and products more equitably, or adapting existing economic organizations to the service of the people. The day of enlightened administration has come.<sup>4</sup>

The soberer, less dramatic business of the New Deal's public works construction was the focus of this political order, shaping policy debates for many subsequent years.

Debates over federal public works programs in the years since 1956 have increasingly witnessed the separation of their capacities to provide employment from questions about developing infrastructure. An important intervention in this debate during the early 1980s, from the infrastructure side, barely acknowledged the WPA in proposing a new agenda for public works. "The WPA model may be very difficult to

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel I. Rosenman, ed., The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt (New York: Russell & Russell, 1938), 1:743; 751-52.

undertake today because public construction requires a labor force versed in skills that few of the unemployed have acquired," a contributor to Rebuilding America's Infrastructure asserted.<sup>5</sup> The volume's editor agreed:

As is so often true of simple solutions to complex problems, a new WPA would not work. It would neither build what needs building nor employ those who most need employment. Rehabilitating public works is not so simple as passing out overalls and paint to people in line for unemployment benefits and pointing them toward a crumbling bridge. For one thing, the federal government keeps no records on the condition of public facilities; thus, it is in a poor position to know where a new WPA army should march.<sup>6</sup>

Even such a harsh dismissal of the WPA as an employment measure, however, had to acknowledge its achievements in building public works. Although "the WPA exerted a trivial impact on the nation's unemployment rate and did nothing to stimulate an overall recovery," this critic thundered, nevertheless, "It did, of course, build thousands of public facilities...many of which survive in use today."<sup>7</sup>

Supporters of federal public works projects observed that these programs contributed to overall economic growth, accounting for 20% of the increase in national income between 1950 and 1970 by one measure. They remain essential to American prosperity, they argued.

Without a major effort to rebuild America's public works, we jeopardize our ability to sustain an economic recovery, we weaken government's capacity to deliver essential public services, we seriously threaten the quality of the environment, and we pose a major threat to public health and safety. Thus, a crucial first step in rebuilding America's public works is forging a public consensus that infrastructure is as essential to economic recovery as private investments in plant and equipment.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Barker, ed., Rebuilding America's Infrastructure: An Agenda for the 1980s (Durham: Duke University Press, 1984), 279.

<sup>6</sup> Barker, ed., Rebuilding America's Infrastructure, xxv.

<sup>7</sup> Barker, ed., Rebuilding America's Infrastructure, xxxiii, n. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Barker, ed., Rebuilding America's Infrastructure, xvii.



Although Rebuilding America's Infrastructure garnered substantial public attention upon its publication, its proposals for public works were not well-received during the years of the Reagan and Bush presidencies. From the Democratic party, however, a number of politicians have made serious--albeit unrealized--public works proposals. In 1992 Bill Clinton's promise to "invest in infrastructure," while much-debated during his presidential campaign, was not redeemed once he took office.<sup>9</sup> Senators, such as Illinois's Paul Simon during the 1980s and Oklahoma's David Boren during the early 1990s, have also proposed a revival of federally sponsored public works programs.<sup>10</sup> Outside of the political arena, two of the most serious advocates of public works have been journalist Mickey Kaus and social scientist William Julius Wilson. Kaus and Wilson proposed a revival of a neo-WPA in order to address the problem of systemic poverty. In making these proposals, however, both Kaus and Wilson rely on a historical narrative that treats the WPA as a welfare measure that happens to produce some useful artifacts.<sup>11</sup>

If the promise of New Deal public works is to be revived, it deserves to be revived in an intellectually coherent fashion, in a form that New Dealers themselves might recognize. These reformers did not simply provide employment to help raise morale; they invested in a wide range of public works, building socially necessary projects that raised the standard of living for many Americans. While some historians have not recognized this triumph for what it was, the New Dealers were well aware of what they had accomplished. "Today it is builders and technicians that we turn to," declared David

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<sup>9</sup> For a call to embrace the New Deal's public works heritage that dates from this period, see Alan Brinkley, "Liberals and Public Investment: Recovering a Lost Legacy," The American Prospect no. 13 (spring 1993): 81-86.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Simon, Let's Put America Back to Work (Chicago: Bonus Books, 1987); for more on Boren's proposal see Rose, Workfare or Fair Work, 171-72.

<sup>11</sup> Mickey Kaus, The End of Equality (New York: Basic Books, 1992); William Julius Wilson, When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

Lilienthal, whose Tennessee Valley Authority was begun with a \$50 million appropriation from Harold Ickes's PWA.

[M]en armed not with the ax, rifle, and bowie knife, but with the Diesel engine, the bulldozer, the giant electric shovel, the retort--and most of all, with an emerging kind of skill, a modern knack of organization and execution. When these men have imagination and faith, they can move mountains; out of their skills they can create new jobs, relieve human drudgery, give new life and fruitfulness to worn-out lands, put yokes upon the streams, and transmute the minerals of the earth and the plants of the field into machines of wizardry to spin out the stuff of a way of life new to this world.<sup>12</sup>

The wit, organization, imagination, and faith of the New Dealers led a public works revolution in the United States. Their projects built New Deal liberalism, a political order that spanned most of the twentieth century and still casts its shadow over the present.

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<sup>12</sup> David E. Lilienthal, TVA: Democracy on the March (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953 [1944]), 3.

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