

Chapter 11

President Roosevelt and the WPA

When pledging a “new deal” to the American people in 1932, President Roosevelt promised work and other aid for the jobless, though he had no specific plans on how he would accomplish this goal. His subsequent efforts to give direct assistance and work relief were among the most controversial programs of his entire administration. Roosevelt tried many different kinds of programs, as he tried to find the right formula for providing aid to millions of unemployed Americans without wasting billions of dollars on useless projects. Of the numerous programs designed to aid the unemployed, the Works Progress Administration. (WPA) was by far the largest, and the most controversial. During the eight hectic years of its existence, the WPA spent over 11 billion dollars, hired more than 8 million workers, and provided relief for an estimated 30 million people, roughly one-fourth of the nation. It became one of the most praised and most criticized of all the New Deal agencies.

The two charges most frequently levied against the WPA were inefficiency and politics. The word “boondoggling” was coined to describe useless projects completed under government supervision; private industry, it was claimed, could do work far more efficiently and not cost the taxpayer any of his hard-earned dollars. Government funds, critics also charged, were used to reward Democrats at the expense of Republicans.

The major part of this chapter examines the charge of inefficiency; careful consideration of this criticism is helpful today when Uncle Sam may again be called upon to provide work for jobless men and women, particularly in city slums where the unemployment rate is often at Depression levels.

From FERA to CWA



Boulder Dam – a PWA project

Harry Hopkins combined the tough exterior of a professional gambler with a social worker’s concern for humanity. His detailed knowledge of his field and his irreverent manner won him Roosevelt’s respect, and in May, 1933, the president appointed Hopkins to head the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Hopkins’s agency was given \$500 million to spend on food, clothing, cash, and medical care for 4 million people. Working with local and state agencies, Hopkins began dispensing money immediately.

Meanwhile, Congress, worried about giving money away, authorized establishing another agency, the Public Works Administration, to build dams, highways, bridges, and other useful projects. To head the PWA Roosevelt chose the honest and self-righteous Harold Ickes, who some claimed personally checked into every penny his department spent.

While Hopkins’s FERA was distributing aid and Ickes was carefully scrutinizing plans for each PWA project, more than 13 million Americans still faced a jobless winter in 1933. In response to protest marches of the unemployed, Congress again took action and created yet another agency, the Civilian Works Administration, under direct, Federal control. Roosevelt transferred Hopkins to the CWA where he started the flow of relief money his first day in office. CWA’s purpose was providing work, and Hopkins

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had 4 million on the payroll by January, 1934. To keep their jobs, some workers were required to dig ditches deeper than necessary, some were paid to refill the ditches, and others broke rocks with sledgehammers though machines were available. Hopkins succeeded in his prime objectives, however, by getting millions through the winter and pouring \$1 billion into empty pockets. Meanwhile, CWA workers built or repaired over 255 thousand miles of roads, enough to span the world thirty times, and this represented scarcely one-third of their accomplishments. But, with the winter emergency ending, Congress disbanded the CWA in the Spring of 1934. It was hoped that its employees would find jobs with private industry, but few could. Accordingly, Roosevelt devised a more permanent program to care for the unemployed.

On January 5, 1935, Franklin Roosevelt asked Congress for an awesome sum, nearly \$5 billion, to help only the unemployed, not those unable to work because of physical handicaps or age. Disabled men and women had always been the responsibility of the community or state in which they lived.

Congressional leaders frowned at Roosevelt's request for money to help the unemployed. Since thirteen states offered no established relief programs liberals opposed depending on the states to support them. Conservatives shouted that \$5 billion was just "too damn expensive." Republicans were shocked that Roosevelt failed to provide detailed information on how the money would be spent. But Roosevelt's bill was passed in April, 1935, and the Works Progress Administration came into being.

Both Harry Hopkins and Harold Ickes longed to head the new \$4.8 billion agency. Hopkins would spend the money quickly to create as many jobs as possible, as he had under CWA. Ickes, on the other hand, still favored the slow process of building massive public works, as under the previous PWA. Here lay the basis for a vivid conflict of personalities. Ickes is "stubborn and righteous," Hopkins confided to his diary? "He is a great resigner— anything doesn't go his way he threatens to quit." The President favored Hopkins's proposal of small projects employing as many people as possible, and Ickes accepted defeat bitterly:



Roadwork accounted by far for the largest number of WPA projects.

It is becoming ever clearer that Hopkins is dominating this program and this domination will mean thousands of inconsequential make-believe projects in all parts of the country.⁵

Ickes' Public Works Administration continued to do much building, but for better or for worse, Hopkins got the bulk of the money, and his philosophy dominated the administration's employment program.

The WPA In Operation

WPA's object was to provide work on useful public projects. It was not to compete with or replace private industry, and therefore paid less than the private sector. The jobs it provided were designed to help communities which needed the most help, therefore up to 80% of the money for projects came from the Federal government. Since local communities were to have some stake in the project, they were

⁵ quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), pp. 345-46.

required to supply the at least 20% of the funds. Furthermore, projects originated in local communities, and had to be approved by the WPA. Projects were designed by local officials to provide the maximum number of jobs to help the unemployed in the vicinity.

Accomplishments of the WPA

From May, 1935, to June, 1943, the WPA spent \$11 billion, completing over **250 thousand different projects**. These ranged from the construction of highways to the extermination of rats; from the building of stadiums to the stuffing of birds; from the improvement of airplane landing fields to the making of Braille books; from the building of over a million privies to the playing of the world's great symphonies. The WPA built or improved enough roads to circle the world twenty-four times; 700 miles of bridges and viaducts were built or repaired. Ten new buildings were constructed with WPA funds for every county in the country; another 80 thousand buildings were repaired. More than 1.5 million illiterate men and women were taught to read and write, the personal narratives of former slaves were recorded, plays were written and produced, and victims of flooding were assisted.

Criticisms of the WPA

Not everyone liked the WPA; a poll showed that 23 percent of all Americans thought it the "worst" of all New Deal programs. Budget balancers feared that government money was being wasted. Unions and industry complained of competition with regular business, while the jobless protested low government wages and an inadequate supply of WPA jobs. African-Americans claimed they weren't being hired, and Republicans complained that government jobs were used to buy votes while conservatives feared the beginnings of a socialistic state. Poking fun at WPA workers became a national pastime.

Most of the complaints, however, came under the heading of the inefficiency of WPA workers.

Efficiency and the WPA

Critics of the WPA, as we have seen, used the word *boondoggling* to describe its activities. It would have been far cheaper, it was argued, to give relief to the unemployed than spend money on useless projects. Private industry, made more efficient by the profit motive, would have done better work for less. Hundreds of examples among the WPA's 250 thousand projects illustrate the boondoggling criticism. In Cleveland, \$179 thousand was spent counting the same trees a private contractor was willing to count for \$5 thousand. A rat extermination project in New Orleans ended costing \$2.97 a rat. Twenty-one thousand dollars was spent placing two thousand street signs in Montgomery, Alabama, and \$78,000 to repair a ditch in Denver, Colorado.

Supporters of the WPA countered criticism by claiming that occasional cases of fraud or corruption were the fault of the local governments which, under the law, had to be the project's sponsors. Supporters also said that the notion that private industry could do things cheaper was missing the point — private industry wasn't employing the unemployed. "If we can boondoggle ourselves out of this Depression," President Roosevelt exclaimed, "that word is going to be enshrined in the hearts of people for many years to come."

Re-establish WPA?

Charges of inefficiency and politics bedeviled WPA during its entire eight-year history, as critics of WPA unceasingly demanded its elimination. Congress continued voting money for WPA projects, though never enough to employ all eligible workers, until World War II put an end to the need for relief. Based on WPA's turbulent history, one must ask whether its accomplishments outweighed its faults. In the light of today's needs, one may also ask whether WPA projects should be established to aid residents of inner city slums, or depressed rural areas, where the unemployment rate is often in excess of 3 times the national average, and conditions in some ways resemble those facing most Americans during the Great Depression. Students may wish to look at their and neighboring communities and speculate what projects – building and repairing roads and/or bridges, constructing athletic fields, public swimming pools, and/or basketball courts, building or repairing affordable housing, community centers, and/or public schools, might benefit these communities and provide constructive employment for the jobless.

Suggested student exercises:

1. Contrast Ickes' and Hopkins' approach to public spending, and explain whose made most sense at the time.
2. How were WPA projects uniquely designed to help the areas most effected by the Depression and not to supplant private enterprise?
3. Do you think the positive achievements of the WPA outweigh the negative. Your answer should include a list of WPA's accomplishments, and an evaluation of the criticisms.
4. Could the U.S, even in a time of relative prosperity, use a program today similar to the WPA?