

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE: FRANCES PERKINS'
REFUSAL TO ACCEPT MARGINALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Frances Perkins was the United States Secretary of Labor from 1933-1945, yet she has received little attention from historians. There are countless works that study President Franklin D. Roosevelt's years in office, but Perkins' achievements have yet to enter the mainstream debate of New Deal scholarship. Perkins did not "assist" with the New Deal; she became one of the chief architects of its legislation and a champion of organized labor. Ever mindful of her progressive mentor, Florence Kelley, Perkins started her reform work at Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago.

By the end of FDR's tenure as president, the forty-hour workweek became standard, child labor was abolished, and she was instrumental in the work-relief programs under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), the popular Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and most notably Section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Administration that allowed for collective bargaining for organized labor.

FDR's controversial appointment marked the first time a female had attained such a powerful position in government, and she wrestled with cross-sections of class, gender, and ethnicity during her tenure as FDR's Labor Secretary.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled, “The Ghost in the Machine: Frances Perkins’ Refusal to Accept Marginalization,” presented by Patrick French, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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INTRODUCTION

The flood of reaction letters poured into President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt's townhouse on Sixty-Fifth Street in Manhattan following his announcement that fellow-New Yorker and long-time ally, Frances Perkins, would be appointed his Secretary of Labor. Most of the mail did not address the issue of unemployment, which probably had surpassed twenty-five percent with thirteen million out of work at the height of the Great Depression. Nor did they urge consideration of reforms to advance the cause of collective bargaining or old age insurance – historic reforms that Perkins would actually spearhead in the coming years. The letters, overwhelmingly negative, instead despaired of Roosevelt's decision to appoint a woman to his cabinet – the first female cabinet secretary in U.S. history, in fact. Equally disconcerting to many of the correspondents, Perkins had never led, let alone belonged to, a labor union. In fact, to American Federation of Labor (AF of L) President William Green, a child of America's turn of the century working class, she came off as a privileged dilettante.

This essay examines Perkins' appointment as Secretary of Labor and the programs that she helped to write and enact in the first 150 days via popular newspapers and national periodicals. By examining these primary sources, it is possible to learn how Perkins stood tall in spite of the skepticism expressed toward a female appointee, and how she emerged as a champion of labor and social reform. It is striking that much of the massive secondary literature on the New Deal barely addresses Perkins' place in the early New Deal. But a closer examination illuminates that Perkins might be understood to have been the ghost in the New Deal Machine. While the charismatic president won accolades, it was Perkins who wrote large sections of the legislation that created the Federal Emergency Relief

Administration (FERA) – the nation’s first federally funded relief program, the enormously popular Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) that provided young men with work relief, and the National Industrial Recovery Administration (NIRA), most notably Section 7a that for the first time mandated that the federal government guaranteed organized labor the right to collective bargaining.

This study explores how cultural constructions of gender, class, and ethnicity intersected and cross-fertilized to make Perkins, whose credentials as an experienced labor relations administrator were impeccable, the popular president’s most controversial appointment. In 1933, Women had only possessed the right to vote in the United States for a little more than a decade when Perkins took office, and women still ranked as second class citizens in nearly all aspects of America life: from the job market to the legal system to family structure. The slogan equal work for equal pay had not been coined yet and women stuck in abusive marriages often faced legal obstacles to gaining divorce. Industrial workers too held only limited rights. For decades, the U.S. government had more often than not sided management’s deliberate determination to stifle union organization. The minimum wage was a dream, as was the eight-hour day in most industries. During the Great War and the Red Scare that followed, ethnic workers had faced rampant discrimination and even deportation, African Americans migrating north confronted discriminatory hiring practices and residential segregation, and during the 1920s Congress all but closed the door to additional European immigration to the United States. An examination of the popular press reaction to the Perkins appointment provides a window into conflicting and changing notions toward gender, class, ethnicity, and race in Depression-era America.

Perkins emerged in early 1933 as a possible cabinet appointee due to a confluence of cultural and political forces. For years, she had joined forces with a cadre of progressive women that not only advocated women's suffrage, but also championed labor reform, women's protective legislation, and a host of other social improvements. Alongside a network of other illustrious female activists – including the settlement house activist Jane Addams, Consumer's League leader Florence Kelly, future first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, and an array of others – Perkins helped forge what women's history scholars have tagged the “First Wave of Feminism.” This core group sought to advance women's rights in the United States, but unlike the founding mothers of the suffrage movement two generations earlier, backed away from the notion of full and immediate gender equality. They framed the case that as mothers and teachers, American women had historically inculcated republican values in the nation's future citizens and that their participation in the electoral process would make for a more virtuous body politic. They also argued for special protective legislation for women workers, including maximum hours, which singled out women as particularly vulnerable to the rigors of industrial production.

Perkins hailed from a New England, Protestant, middle class background – but had always aspired to upper class pretensions. Yet her appointment to FDR's cabinet would also come about due to the strong support she received from male politicians in her adopted state of New York. In the 1920s she became a political ally of the Irish-Catholic, Tammany tainted Al Smith. Smith used First Wave Feminists to bolster his credentials as a social reformer – a status that elevated him above most Tammany loyalists. Perkins and other women in turn gained access to government appointments where they could act on their reform agendas – and gained entry into the hardball world of Democratic Party politics.

They also cemented ties to workers, both ethnic and native born, who filled the ranks of the nation's labor unions. In Perkins's case, her first wave feminism and support for workers also gained the respect of African American leaders in the urban north. Frances Perkins not only forged a formidable alliance of women, industrial workers, minorities, and Democratic Party leaders to win appointment as FDR's Secretary of Labor. Once in office she operated as a key administration insider who authored some of the most breath-taking legislation of FDR's New Deal. She did so overtly, but remained content to let others, especially her president, take the bulk of the credit for the impressive record of accomplishment that quickly unfolded. Never a wallflower, and always an assertive woman, Perkin's might nonetheless best be remembered as the ghost in the New Deal machine.

CHAPTER 1

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

Perkins most recent biographer Kristin Downey has given us the most complete account of the New Dealer's upbringing and coming-of-age. Her parents were Fred W. and Susie Perkins, both descendents of colonists and American revolutionaries in Massachusetts.¹ Perkins's roots as a Yankee Doodle New Englander illustrate her penchant for reform. Many progressive bluebloods felt it was their duty to mitigate the social ills brought about by the Industrial Revolution. This mentality is significant to my study because it served as a basis for what Perkins considered her duty to reform America by helping those less fortunate: the poor, immigrant men and especially women, and all walks of working class laborers, not to mention those children still working in harsh conditions in factories.

Perkins' birthplace was on Beacon Hill in Boston, but her family hailed from Newcastle Maine. Her great-great grandfather settled several hundred acres along the Damariscotta River called Perkins Point. Perkins' family enjoyed affluence from income derived by their brick-producing factory. Perkins may have adopted her need for reform because her father's ebb and flow success as a businessman. They were forced to move from Boston to Worcester, where Perkins' father ran a moderately successful stationery store after their brickyard's bankruptcy.² Her family, while of New England blue blood stock, belonged to the bourgeoisie and therefore members of middle class to upper-middle class.

¹ Lillian Holmen Mohr, *Frances Perkins: That Woman in FDR's Cabinet*. (Massachusetts: North River Press, 1979) 6-7. Perkins was a descendant of American revolutionary James Otis, who protested about taxation and representation. Perkins' tri-corned hat, her trademark, originated as a tribute to her background and paid homage to Otis.

² Kristin Downey, *The Woman Behind the New Deal. The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and His Moral Conscience* (New York: Doubleday, 2009) 6. Perkins' father lost everything when a Nova Scotia company placed a large brick order to build a factory, but went out of business. It caused him to start over and open the stationery shop.

In 1902, a turning point in Perkins' life came while the future Secretary was attending Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. It was during her senior year that she met Florence Kelley, Executive Secretary of the National Consumers League.³ Kelley had a purely unconventional style for early turn of the twentieth century. She was divorced, middle-aged, and raising three children single-handedly. She was the daughter of a progressive Republican Congressman and the niece of early abolitionist, Sarah Pugh. She helped create the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and was a friend of W.E.B. Dubois. Kelley was a Marxist who had translated Friedrich Engels' *The Condition of the Working Classes in England in 1844*. Inspired for the reform fervor that swept the United States early in the century, she moderated her Marxism somewhat and became an advocate of the eight-hour workday, the organization of labor unions, the establishment of free employment offices, and the construction of more playgrounds for children.⁴ Kelley toured on the lecture circuit dedicated to the abolition of child labor and the elimination of tenement work and sweatshops. Kelley's motto at the National Consumers League was, "Investigate, record, agitate."⁵ She was not just interested in lowering prices for all consumers to enjoy inexpensive durable goods; rather she yearned for Americans to envision the ramifications of their cheap purchases. She wanted them to understand that cheaper goods meant a hard life for the workers on the line who often labored in unsafe

³ Downey, 12. Kelley toured the country to warn about the travails of the working class. She educated people about where their products hailed and how it affected the workers and the factory owners.

⁴ *ibid.*, 13. Kelley wanted the abolition of child labor and passed her sense of reform on to Perkins, who later realized Kelley's dream when she abolished child labor permanently 1938 with the Fair Labor Standards Act that regulated children under fourteen were not allowed to work.

⁵ *ibid.*, 13 Perkins used this strategy and it became doctrine for her during her tenure as Factory Investigatory Commissioner, as Industrial Commissioner, and as Secretary of Labor.

conditions for long hours. Kelly wanted to mobilize the middle class for what she referred to as, “enlightened standards for workers and honest products for everybody.”⁶

Perkins graduated from Mount Holyoke in 1902 with a degree in chemistry. She traveled to New York City to embark on social work. She did this against her parents’ wishes. Although both of her parents had made a habit of giving to charity and had instilled their own humanitarianism in their daughter, they had hoped that the recent college graduate would return home to work in the shop, find a husband, and have some children. Influenced no doubt by Kelly – and the growing momentum of the progressive reform movements as a whole – Perkins desired a position in the fifteen year old Charity Organization Society, which later became the United Way.⁷ Edward T. Devine, who initially refused to see Perkins, directed the organization. With persistence, she finally got an interview and told Devine she wanted to help the poor to improve their situation.⁸

Skeptical of her ability to deal with the poor, Devine began quizzing Perkins about different scenarios to see what she would choose as a remedy. One example included a drunken father passed out in bed, some sick children with sore throats, and an obvious domestic violence incident with a discombobulated wife. Devine asked what she would do if presented with this situation. Perkins said she would have the father arrested at once. Devine rejected the commonsense answer and informed Perkins the best way to help the family was to get the parents back to work, get them sober, and instruct them on how to

⁶ *ibid.*, 12. Kelley led the National Consumers League where she employed her strategy to investigate, agitate, and record. If Kelley were alive today, and she knew about the 2012 reports that Apple’s factories used child labor to hold down production costs, then she would have exposed them. Apple customers love their I-phones and I-pads. They are relatively cheap to purchase, and the shareholders enjoy record profits reflected in the price earnings. Kelley would probably create a blog to educate consumers on the pitfalls of unregulated labor.

⁷ *ibid.*, 14. The United Way helps people of all creeds and colors. Perkins would be proud that it has become a significant national charity and demonstrates her credibility in choice.

⁸ *ibid.*, 14. Perkins learned there is a big difference between studying a problem and solving a problem in the real world.

improve their situation.⁹ Devine's answer gave Perkins a big dose of reality. Her ideas about the poor needed some fine-tuning. Perkins thought she had failed and would abide by her parent's wishes to return home and find a suitor.

Learning to Be a Reformer

Perkins could not stay in her hometown of Worcester, MA for long. In 1904, there was an opening to teach science at a women's college in Chicago. The field of science was usually a male-dominated arena, but Perkins had demonstrated an aptitude for the subject in secondary school and college. She took the job at Ferry Hall in Lake Forest, Illinois sight unseen.¹⁰ Chicago is where Perkins began to get her sea legs to navigate the oceans of poverty in America. This move reveals her desire to dive into social work. Ferry Hall was a small private finishing school for girls from elite families. Most assuredly, there was little social work to do in Lake Forest, which was becoming one of the wealthiest cities in America. However, Chicago was just a short thirty-minute train ride, and the location of Jane Addams's Hull House. Perkins finally got her shot at working on the front lines where she could make a real difference in immigrant's lives.

In June 1905, Perkins continued her transformation in Chicago by changing her first name from Fannie to Frances (more gender-neutral) and converted from Congregationalist to the Episcopal Church (more affluent). Against her parents' wishes, she had actually toyed with the idea of converting to Catholicism, but settled on a transition to the Episcopal sect as "half-way to the Catholics."¹¹ Downey noted Perkins's conversion served as a probable

⁹ *ibid.*, 14. This was a devastating blow to Perkins' sense of duty. She felt so bewildered that she considered her parent's suggestion to return home.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 15. Downey treated this as an excuse to take a change of scenery. Martin believed it was a way out of Maine and away from her parents. I think she knew she had to get to Chicago because of her intimidation from the meeting with Devine.

¹¹ George Martin, *Madam Secretary: Frances Perkins*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976) 56. Perkins wrestled with her conversion, which she took extremely seriously. Religion was a cornerstone in her life, and

platform for a, “social stepladder,” a way to rub shoulders with business and social elites who embraced, not only Episcopal religious doctrine but also, who used the church at one and the same time to network among their own kind and to extend their generosity to less fortunate communities throughout the Chicago area. Perkins began associating with the Armor, Swift, and Morton families through church charity events. Once again, the future secretary worked to reconcile her attraction to schools, communities, and churches associated with upper class refinement with her sense of noblesse oblige to assist those who had been left behind by the rigors of industrial capitalism less fortunate.

Eager to advance her social justice agenda, Perkins worked at Hull House in Chicago on the weekends. Jane Addams erected Hull House in 1889 just three years after the Haymarket riot when unionists struck to gain an eight-hour workday. The famous Settlement House served as a haven for immigrants who desired a better way of life in America. It also provided young, middle and upper class reformers like Addams – and later Perkins – a place to learn about the realities of urban poverty. In Chicago, Perkins sought to put into practice the reformist zeal she had learned from Florence Kelly and combine it with the pragmatic philosophy of self-improvement that Edward Divine passed along to her. She had come to believe that the most effective antidote to poverty, broken families, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, and other social ills lay in helping low income workers find jobs and establish financial independence. At Hull House, she was able to put this battle plan into action. While in Chicago, she also witnessed her first impassioned speeches regarding unionization

she always kept the social gospel in her thoughts when approaching a societal problem. Catholicism was too risky an enterprise and she understood that Americans attached a stigma to Catholics, including the Ku Klux Klan.

and the working poor.¹² Even though trade unions initially represented malfeasance in Perkins blueblood eyes, her position began to soften as she realized unions provided immigrants and the working class ample wages.

In 1907, Perkins took a job in Philadelphia because she discovered that immigrant women had been forced into sexual slavery.¹³ Fictitious employment agencies enticed women immigrants with jobs and a boarding house, but it was a façade for a bordello. Perkins learned about these bordellos from her Chicago friend, and fellow reformer the muckraking journalist Upton Sinclair, author of *The Jungle*. The women were drugged and fell prey to diseases or suicide. Perkins became the General Secretary of the Philadelphia Research and Protective Association (PRPA), which concerned itself with tracking recently arrived immigrant women. She used the hornswoggled women's harsh experiences to solicit donations from sympathetic Philadelphians, many of whom included prominent Quakers and old abolitionists.¹⁴ As part of her work for the PRPA, Perkins interviewed transplanted women and discovered that black females from the South had migrated to Philadelphia, and they too were sold into sexual slavery.¹⁵ Perkins investigated 111 employment agencies and 165 so-called lodging houses throughout Philadelphia to determine their legitimacy.¹⁶ She used the municipal government and aligned with law enforcement to close fraudulent houses.

After taking courses at the nearly all male Wharton School of Business in Philadelphia, Perkins earned a fellowship from the Russell Sage Foundation and in 1909

¹² Downey, 21. Chicago was a hotbed for radicals. On the weekends in the city, she heard about the benefits of socialism and her Republican upbringing began to waiver.

¹³ *ibid.*, 22. Perkins' sense of social justice included all races, especially disadvantaged women.

¹⁴ Martin, 66. Perkins understood the Quakers as long time abolitionists and appealed to their sense of propriety.

¹⁵ Downey, 22. Again, Perkins did not consider race a deterrent. Anyone who needed help appeared on her radar, and she was willing to champion any social justice cause in labor.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 22. Perkins went on a crusade to eradicate these predators as part of her protective legislative philosophy.

embarked back to New York City. Perkins' professor chose her as part of a group of fellowships at the New York School of Philanthropy. She also enrolled at Columbia University to earn a master's degree in economics and sociology. The field of Economics was reserved for primarily men, but she earned her best marks in graduate school. Her master's thesis was entitled, "A Study of Malnutrition in 107 Children from Public School 51," which awarded her a Masters Degree in Political Science.¹⁷ Her friend, Paul Kellogg published her thesis in *Survey*, in October 1910.¹⁸ The New York Consumers League offered her a position as a lobbyist. Working with Florence Kelley began as a dream that she fulfilled to impose a much-needed overhaul for those downtrodden in New York and later, the entire country.

March 1911 marks another profound moment in Perkins transformation from New England blue blood to social justice crusader when she heard sirens while having tea at a friend's house. The fire brigade had barreled toward the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire March 25, 1911.¹⁹ Perkins witnessed the fire, which further confirmed the horror of unsafe working conditions in factories. In just under a half-hour, about 150 women perished in the Asch building. Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, the owners, kept the door locked to avoid theft. Building inspections rarely occurred, and as a result, the shoddy fire escapes served no salvation. Some jumped to their death, rather than burn alive, and Perkins never forgot it.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, 74. Perkins used her methodology she learned from Florence Kelley to demonstrate poverty's effects on the family.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 74. Kellogg was another like-minded reformer and a member of the elite who aspired to social justice. He wrote to free anarchists on trial, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti and published another of Perkins' projects called, the *Pittsburg Survey* 1910-1914, which became a model for sociologists to implement reform.

¹⁹ *New York Times*, March 26, 1911. "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire; Trapped High up in Washington Place Building; Street Strewn with Bodies; Piles of Dead Inside." Accounts of the death toll vary from 141 to 150. Because the girls were immigrants, most were unidentifiable. The age ranged from about 16 to 23 years old.

It was in New York that Perkins began to make the transition from reformer to politically active reformer. New York's Tammany Hall was part of the "brass spittoon" culture that crawled with male, ethnic, Catholic, politicians, but unafraid, she continued to navigate the male dominated waters of New York politics. This was where Perkins befriended New York's future governor and 1928 Democratic presidential candidate Al Smith. Smith was a working class son of New York's East Side, schooled at Fulton's Fish market, rather than Yale or Harvard. He never enrolled in college or law school, but gained fame as one of the few Albany Assemblymen who actually read bills from start to finish.²⁰ Although Smith was in many ways Perkins' social and demographic opposite, he too was transformed by the Triangle Fire. He headed the legislature's four-year Fire Investigation Committee. The Committee expanded its mandate to study child labor, sanitary conditions, the minimum wage, and recommended the creation of the New York State Industrial Commission.

In 1918, Governor Smith appointed Perkins to the Commission. The odd couple never became close personal friends. They were separated by their contrasting class, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Smith, moreover, felt more at home in the men's club that was Tammany Hall than he did in the company of feminists. Still, over the course of Smith's tenure as governor, Perkins learned how to master the legislative process. She assisted in the writing of laws that established the forty-eight hour workweek for women, prohibited night work for women in industrial establishments, prohibited women's employment in treacherous jobs, and other protective measures long championed by second wave feminists. She also learned about ethnic and identity politics. In his 1928 bid for President of the

²⁰ Matthew and Hannah Josephson, *Al Smith: Hero of Our Cities A Political Portrait Drawing on the Papers of Frances Perkins* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin) 103. Smith gained notoriety as a reformer, but his sights were set on Catholic immigrants in the New York Bowery.

United States, Smith sent Perkins to eleven states in the South to campaign for him. The campaign hoped that her blue-blood credentials might mitigate southern distrust of Smith's Catholicism.²¹ Unfortunately for Smith, religious prejudice decided Hoover's victory. Reflecting upon his loss Smith later recalled, "The time has not yet come when a man can say his beads in the White House" and it was still too early for, "when a man from the city slums could be put into high office by the Democrats."²²

Perkins completed her political tutorial under the mentorship of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt succeeded Smith as Governor of New York in 1929 and made Frances Perkins his chief labor officer -- the State Industrial Commissioner. His eagerness to eclipse Smith's social reformist agenda may have prompted the appointment. FDR later recalled, "Al would never have thought of making a woman the head of the Department."²³ As the Great Depression worsened, she educated FDR about the concept of unemployment insurance, a reform she would later champion as Roosevelt's Secretary of Labor.

Perkins went from working with a wet Catholic to an egotistical patrician. Undoubtedly, she felt more comfortable with FDR, whose pedigree she admired. Roosevelt, while no feminist, felt more comfortable than his predecessor working with women. Perkins also enjoyed a warm relationship with the governor's wife. Eleanor Roosevelt traveled in the same women's reform circles as Perkins. She had been a long time acquaintance of Florence

²¹ *ibid.*, 201. A myriad of issues prevented the governor's victory. Smith was wet during Prohibition, which counted heavily against him in the South, his New York accent made him sound funny on the radio, and his Catholicism weighed him down during a time of extreme xenophobia in the America - the Immigration Act of 1924 limited the number of immigrants allowed to enter. Americans still felt paranoia from World War I, and directed it towards the Eastern European immigrants that flooded the U.S. espousing socialistic political views. Nevertheless, Hoover won the 1928 election in a landslide.

²² Martin, 203. Kennedy would be the first, but Smith was denied because of his ethnicity.

²³ Downey, 97. Downey makes it seem as FDR appointed her to one-up Smith, but I believe he knew her to be capable with the success they accomplished in New York. Perkins often thought that if reform could be accomplished in New York where industry and business reigned supreme, then her ideas would work for the entire country.

Kelly and a close friend of Molly Dewson – a long time suffragist who had served as Kelly’s principal assistant in the reformist National Consumers League. As president of the New York Consumer’s League from 1925-1931, Dewson worked with Perkins to push legislation through the state house establishing a forty-eight hour week for women. At Eleanor Roosevelt’s request, Dewson had also organized Democratic women for Al Smith’s presidential campaign in 1928 that sent Perkins into the supposedly “solid south.” Elevated to head the Democratic National Committee’s Women’s Division after working for Governor Roosevelt– she later played a pivotal role in Perkin’s appointment to FDR’s cabinet.

CHAPTER 2

CABINET APPOINTMENT

As a well connected, New York State social reformer, Perkins wanted the Secretary of Labor position and believed that her former governor was most likely open to the suggestion. In January 1933, Perkins' name started to circulate in the newspapers as a possible cabinet choice, but only as a slight chance. No woman had ever been named to such a high post in the Federal Government. Publicly, she denied the likelihood, but she quietly campaigned for the job.¹ She and her social network of like-minded feminists comprised of both progressive men and women solicited the appointment by planting stories in the press about Perkins's possible post. Dewson spearheaded the national letter-writing campaign to name a woman to the cabinet, and served as the key link to newspapers that wrote about Perkins as a possibility. Clara Beyer, a Labor Department official, invited Perkins to a gathering at the home of a wealthy Democratic activist. There, Perkins met with Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, as well as some female reporters.

Grace Abbott, Director of the Labor Department's Children Bureau, convinced the ambitious Perkins to address a conference on the effects of unemployment on the country's youth where Abbott also encouraged female journalists about the reformer's potential appointment. Abbott also arranged for Capitol Hill meetings with Senators and Congressmen closely affiliated with labor. Endorsement letters and petitions bearing dozens of signatures poured into FDR's office. Jane Addams of Hull House in Chicago wrote in

¹ Downey, 114. Perkins wanted the job, but believed it was too long of a shot for a woman in the 1930s to receive such an honor. Her friends pushed her until she decided she could significantly contribute to unemployment and reform labor in favor of the working class.

December 1932 that Perkins should have been in Hoover's Administration.² Ethelbert Stewart, exiled commissioner of labor statistics, and Lincoln Filene of Filene's Department Store agreed with Addams and wrote on Perkins' behalf, "I hope that it may be true that you are seriously considering her. She is the best equipped MAN for the job that I know of."³ In January 1933, the renowned liberal Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis had a meeting at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington D.C. where he urged Roosevelt to name Perkins as his Secretary of Labor.⁴ After that meeting, Mary Harriman Rumsey, a major Democratic Party contributor told Perkins of her certainty that Roosevelt would choose her.⁵

Perkins confided to Dewson that she thought Roosevelt did not want to take her to Washington. Dewson laid out the political calculation: so many women had sacrificed so much, including Perkins's recently deceased mentor, Florence Kelley, that the Democrats owed their women activists a substantial reward. She assured the future secretary that this appointment represented a unique chance to enact the social change they had crusaded for the last twenty years and that she must not lose heart. She appealed to Perkins's personal and feminist loyalties by emphasizing that a woman in the cabinet would vindicate Florence Kelley's philosophy. Perkins owed it to her fellow progressive first wave feminists. The responsibility now lay at Perkins's feet.

In an article from *The World Tomorrow* entitled, "Frances Perkins for the Cabinet," the author cited tempered enthusiasm upon the rumors of Perkins possible appointment to

² *ibid.*, 115. Addams thought if Perkins were in Hoover's camp, then she might have ameliorated the recession that turned into full-blown depression because of her concept of social justice.

³ *ibid.*, 115. Here is an example of some of the men who thought progressively. It was not only women who wanted Perkins for the job, but also successful businessmen considered Perkins more than capable of filling the post.

⁴ *ibid.*, 115 Brandeis was a progressive liberal appointee by President Woodrow Wilson and known as a crusader for his brand of social justice. His endorsement put FDR's mind at ease so he could pave the way for the first female cabinet member.

⁵ *ibid.*, 115 Rumsey also believed that a Brandeis approval meant certainty for Perkins to become Secretary of Labor over the front running men up for the job who were members of organized labor.

FDR's cabinet. Perkins's qualifications were lauded, especially her focus on the protection of the underdog during her four year tenure as the head of the New York Department of Labor. The U.S. Department of Labor would be, "a far different institution from that which it has degenerated into under the stupid and heavy-handed ministrations of James J. Davis and William N. Doak," the piece editorialized in reference to the two previous Republican Labor secretaries.⁶ There were two hurdles to consider, according to the news report. First, the American Federation of Labor strongly favored Daniel J. Tobin, the President of the Teamsters Union for the position, and the writer suggested that the Department of Labor leadership slot might provide a form of a political kickback to the pro-FDR AFL. Secondly, it was thought that Roosevelt would load his cabinet with New Yorkers from his previous administration during his governorship. Prominent men, including John W Davis, Owen D. Young, and Al Smith ranked among the strongest contenders. But, the piece held out hope, noting that Perkins belonged to the entire country and not just one state. The article further observed that large groups of progressive Midwesterners were busy creating public sentiment for Perkins's appointment.⁷

According to her oral history, Perkins tried to talk Roosevelt out of the cabinet position and recommended men affiliated with labor for the post, but he would not budge. This self-effacing account seems likely to have been an example of Perkins own disingenuous public relations strategy. She in fact wanted the job, as the orchestrated network of lobbyists supporting her appointment strongly indicates. She knew that if she got the job she wanted to enact her progressive legislation. When FDR invited her to meet with

⁶ *The World Tomorrow*, Vol. 15, Dec. 12, 1932. 583. This article demonstrates evidence that some of the press worked in favor of her appointment.

⁷ *ibid.*, 583. Even the conservative mid-west began to soften to the notion of a female in the cabinet, and created more of a ground swell in favor of a woman over labor alums.

him to discuss the appointment, she outlined an extensive program to overhaul labor legislation in the hopes of improving the economy. The plan contained a federal minimum wage, a maximum workweek, unemployment and old – age insurance, the abolition of child labor, the creation of a federal employment service, immediate unemployment relief to the states, and health insurance.⁸ After she revealed her program, she asked, “Are you sure you want these things done? Because you don’t want me for Secretary of Labor if you don’t.”⁹ Roosevelt assured her he would back her.

Perkins discussed moving to Washington D.C. with her husband, Paul Wilson. In her personal life, she also had to juggle her career ambition with her traditional understanding of marriage and family. Wilson had worked for the Mayor of New York City, but suffered from what is known today as bipolar disorder. At the time, doctors had diagnosed his ailment as chronic depression. She told her husband she would commute every weekend to New York City and their daughter Susanna could help during the week. Secretly, Perkins feared the microscope her private life was about to go under. She dreaded the press finding out about her husband’s mental illness. This disease carried a heavy stigma during this period, but she brushed her fear aside and accepted the position.

February 28, 1933, four days before FDR’s inauguration, he announced Perkins and Daniel C. Roper as the last two appointees to his cabinet. Few noticed Secretary of Commerce Daniel C. Roper’s position compared to the news that a woman who was non-

⁸ Penny Colman. *A Woman Unafraid: the Achievements of Frances Perkins* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1993) 60. These are some of the components of the New Deal before the New Deal took shape. Historians agree, including Arthur Schlesinger, that the New Deal was a campaign promise that FDR was unsure how to deliver.

⁹ Perkins, 151-152. Downey also makes note of this exchange on pgs 121-123. Perkins outlined how to get the nation back to work. Perkins wanted to abolish child labor to create more jobs for adults, and she wanted maximum hours set to encourage hiring of more workers to fill the gaps created by the change from twelve-hour shifts to eight-hours. She believed that this could, “hold the wolf at bay,” while the federal government bought time to reduce unemployment more significantly.

union would head the Labor Department. The office carried a significant responsibility, which included the Women Bureau, the Children Bureau, and Bureau of Immigration. Perkins biographer, George Martin has explained that whereas women's organizations, professional groups, state labor officials, and individuals in the labor movement reveled, the AFL felt "fury"¹⁰ William Green decreed, "Labor can never become reconciled to the selection."¹¹ Green and his backers railed that Perkins had never even belonged to a union and could not effectively champion the cause of organized labor. The underlying assumption, moreover, had been that job was a political plum destined for the AFL. But much of the press marveled at the historic appointment of a woman to the cabinet and highlighted Perkins's experience in the labor field. The *Washington Post* commented, "He (FDR) treated the woman member on exactly the same terms as the men."¹² *The Washington Post* listed her qualifications as the former member of the State Industrial Commission, and *emphasized* that her "advice has been sought frequently on labor problems by congressional committees in Washington." The article went out of its way to mention her husband, Paul Wilson, and that she always used her maiden name.

Labor, Class, Gender, and the Media

William Green was angered that another Secretary of Labor had been appointed without consultation from the AFL. Green had been a fierce critic of William Doak, the outgoing Republican Secretary of Labor – who had been openly hostile to organized labor.¹³ Thus, the new Secretary needed to placate Green and his 108 unions quickly. She called a

¹⁰ Martin, 3. Newspapers across the country reported Green's displeasure with FDR's selection.

¹¹ *New York Times, New York Herald Tribune, Chicago Daily Tribune. Los Angeles Times, Washington Post.* All reported on Perkins' appointment March 1, 1933

¹² "*Washington Post*, March 1, 1933. "3 Selections Close Roosevelt Cabinet"

¹³ Martin, 3. Perkins caught Hoover's Bureau of Labor Statistics padding the numbers in their favor to make the economy and employment seem better off than in reality.

press conference at the New York Industrial Commission office in New York City. About twenty reporters attended and heard Perkins announce, “Mr. Green and the American Federation of Labor are entirely within their rights. I am glad they expressed themselves openly and frankly.”¹⁴ She described Green as a man of integrity, vision, and patriotism, and refused to acknowledge any offense his comment may have made. She disclosed she was eager to speak with Green, as well as other representatives of organized labor. If they did not have time to see her, then she announced she would go to see them. One reporter asked her, “How do you feel to be the first woman in the cabinet?” She responded that she just felt a little odd about it, which was a common New England expression for the day. Questions intensified and grew increasingly personal when her husband and daughter became the focus. She blushed at first and then fidgeted with her pen. As the questions persisted, Perkins’s mood shifted from polite to apprehensive. She told the reporters that her family members were not in public life.¹⁵ The press continued with questions Perkins considered out of bounds and she finally responded, “Is this quite necessary?” Perkins often fired this question back at subjects she refused to discuss.

The *New York Times* on March 4, 1933 reported the swearing in of nine men and one woman to Roosevelt’s cabinet. Associate Justice Benjamin N. Cardozo swore in the cabinet members at the request of President Roosevelt.¹⁶ The paper highlighted the fact that all of the new cabinet members had taken the oath at one time, administered by the same official; this was the first time in history a cabinet took the oath of office in this manner. Roosevelt

¹⁴ Martin, 4. Perkins had an office in New York, and as soon as she heard about Green’s comment, she asked for a press conference where about twenty reporters attended to extend the olive branch to Green. She knew she needed his support if labor wanted to participate in the New Deal.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 4. In Perkins’ oral history at Columbia University, she revealed that Eleanor Roosevelt likely warned the reporters about Wilson’s condition and the media complied. However, it was a constant worry for Perkins that her family could become the target of those anxious about her new position of power.

¹⁶ *New York Times*, March 4, 1933. “Special to The New York Times”

summed up his attitude toward tradition and protocol: “This is strictly a family party, and I am glad all members of the cabinet are present. I am glad all of you were confirmed without opposition. Incidentally this is the inauguration of a new custom.”¹⁷

While class-conscious, ambitious labor leaders lashed out at Perkins’s appointment, the more feminist oriented, liberal press heaped praise on the new Secretary of Labor. In the March 8, 1933 edition of *The Nation*, Oswald Garrison Villard expressed overwhelming excitement about Perkins as the new Secretary of Labor. Villard was the son of the suffragist, Fanny Garrison Villard, who was the daughter of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Villard editorialized, “The news that Frances is to be appointed to the cabinet of the United States is one of the most inspiring and encouraging events of recent years.”¹⁸ The progressive journalist showed off his own feminist credentials by recalling his experience as one of the eighty-five men who had marched down Fifth Avenue in a woman’s suffrage parade years earlier.

Villard attempted to put any of his sexist reader’s minds at ease, “We need not worry the least bit about this first woman cabinet member.”¹⁹ He praised her strength of character and her pledge to uphold the truth within the Department of Labor, a reference to the Hoover Administration’s penchant for misreporting of U.S. employment statistics. Indeed Villard took special note that it would be a welcome change to have her in place of the incredible Mr. Doak and the “money-grubbing” former Secretary of Labor and Senator from Pennsylvania James J. Davis who now awaited trial for the misuse of the postal system.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, There was a lot of work to undertake, but with FDR’s polio, it made more sense to swear the cabinet simultaneously. The ceremony marked a new inauguration for a New Deal.

¹⁸ Oswald Garrison Villard, *The Nation*, March 8, 1933. “Issues and Men and a Woman – Frances Perkins” Garrison was a progressive liberal who belonged to the arm of the press that welcomed Perkins, rather than vilified her.

¹⁹ *ibid.*

Villard went on to state these men were the “professional” labor men, who served labor’s mandates and the country “about as badly as possible.” “I for one,” he wrote, “pledge myself here and now, never to cease to be grateful to Franklin Roosevelt for this brave just and wise action – no matter what state may have in store for him and his Administration.”²⁰ For Villard and other liberals, the appointment of a woman to the cabinet represented a historic breakthrough. He even praised her for maintaining her maiden name and referred to her as a “Lucy Stoner.”²¹ Service in government will not “unsex” women. In fact, the liberal lion predicted that the day would soon come when women appeared regularly as speakers at national conventions and rise to high-ranking elective offices in government.

²⁰ibid., This article expressed adulation at FDR’s appointment to create a bandwagon other liberal members of the press could join.

²¹ ibid, A Lucy Stoner was a reference to Lucy Stone, considered one of the founders of the Women’s Suffrage Movement along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony. Villard meant this as a compliment.

CHAPTER 3

NEW DEAL ARCHITECTURE

While FDR and Perkins had broken an important gender barrier, the work at hand revolved around issues of class, economic recovery, and even upward mobility for urban dwelling ethnic groups. According to Perkins, the New Deal was a concept. It was not concrete, and it contained little form and content before Roosevelt took office. The phrase had been coined during Roosevelt's campaign as a psychological ploy to make people feel hopeful for what a Democratic administration might offer the Depression-plagued nation. Roosevelt described the New Deal to Perkins as an idea to help the forgotten man, the small man who no one knew much about, but who deserved a better deal from America. Perkins did not comment on the gendered verbiage but wrote, "That phrase, 'New Deal,' gave courage to all sorts of people, was merely a statement of policy and emphasis. It expressed a new attitude, not a fixed program."¹ In fact, the New Deal was orchestrated after Roosevelt assumed the White House. Neither Roosevelt, nor the Democratic Party, nor anyone else in the campaign was certain of the shape the New Deal would form. In her memoir, Perkins went so far as to write that the idea the New Deal had a preconceived theoretical position was ridiculous.² There were no preliminary meetings where party leaders worked out agreed details. The lack of precise definition gave Roosevelt's more politically skilled appointees, including the Secretary of Labor, to steer the program in directions they desired. As for Perkins, she believed that the 1933 mission was crystal clear. The Party needed to help the downtrodden in America.³

¹ Perkins, 166

² Ibid., 167

³ *ibid.*, 167

Even though the New Deal had not been conceptualized prior to FDR's inauguration, the President and his advisors had already committed themselves to the idea of a federal relief program – the kind that the conservative Herbert Hoover had doggedly opposed. During the first Cabinet meeting, Perkins remembered that John Garner, the Vice-President, spoke for nearly everyone in the room when he reminded Roosevelt of his campaign promise by saying, “I think that when we were campaigning we sort of made promises that we would do something for the poorer kind of people, and I think we have to do something for them. We have to remember them. We have to take account of that.”⁴ Indeed, while Garner and many others in the cabinet represented the administration's conservative wing, they and the progressives agreed that relief and jobs producing public works programs would have to be a priority regardless of what the rest of the New Deal might come to entail.⁵

Another given, among both conservative and liberal New Dealers was that FDR's program would feature an enlarged federal government that would intervene massively in the daily lives of the American people. FDR had already used the apparatus of state government in New York to provide relief to the poor, to regulate public utilities, and to manage water resources. FDR – and Perkins in her advisory capacity – had legislated in the place where “sovereign states” really meant something. Perkins compared the federally operated United States Employment Service as, “a feeble non-entity,” to the New York Public Employment Office.⁶ However, FDR understood that much of the nation had long depended on the federal government to provide basic services, whether it was the railroad subsidies that

⁴ *ibid.*, 168

⁵ *Ibid.*, 168

⁶ *ibid.*, 168

helped settle the West, or the federal abolition of slavery that extinguished the institution in the South.⁷

Even while still a sitting governor, Roosevelt had started to think that Washington ought to assume leadership for the responsibility to develop America. He cited Georgia's feeble tax revenue and recognized it was impossible for a state like that to compete with the income of New York. Perkins proved initially cautious. The citizens of revenue rich states like New York and Massachusetts might take exception to the notion that their taxes funded federal government subsidies for other states' roads. It was the president who insisted that by spending federal dollars in the revenue poor states economic and social improvements help all states, rich and poor, rise and enhance tax revenues everywhere.⁸

Roosevelt became so fascinated with the idea that the states and federal government could cooperate that he planned to work directly with state governors. As one of her first duties, he asked Perkins to arrange a governor's conference and fill out the agenda. Again, Perkins treaded lightly at first – concerned that Senators and members of Congress might resent the President's elevation of state governors as federal policymakers, or at least as consultants to the federal government. But she soon convinced herself that turf politics would be cast aside in favor of reform. In her memoir, she later admitted she was wrong. "No U.S. Senator, even if belongs to the same party," she recalled the president saying, "likes to be ousted by the superior prestige and patronage which the expenditure of federal of federal money may get for the governor."⁹

⁷ *ibid.*, 170

⁸ *Ibid.*, 171

⁹ *Ibid.*, 172

Legislative Achievements

That the New Deal would feature an enlarged federal government and some kind of relief programs registered as givens, but the specifics were very much up in the air in March 1933. Much of the existing scholarly literature credits FDR's "Brains Trust" of economic advisers with the development of some of the particulars. FDR's political instincts and his receptiveness to ideas advanced by Progressives in Congress – including New York Senator Robert Wagner and Nebraska's George Norris – are also frequently cited often cited as determinants of New Deal legislation. But few scholars have acknowledged the critical role that Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins played in giving life to the New Deal's First One Hundred Days. She wove together her own feminist ideology with the understanding of class and ethnic based politics she had obtained in Al Smith's New York to build the New Deal machine.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) aimed to preserve the nation's natural resources and created more than three million jobs from 1933-1942. It passed March 31, 1933. As a first wave feminist, who had long championed protective legislation for women workers, Perkins believed that only single men should work in the national forests. She could not imagine married men leaving their families – let alone the prospect of ax-wielding women. The Labor Department recruited the young men, the War Department trained them, and the Department of Agriculture placed them for employment. Planting trees, building flood barriers, fighting fires, and maintaining roads and trails encapsulated the duties performed. In nine years, the CCC planted three billion trees. Most important, it provided badly needed paychecks to the youthful foresters and required them to send the money home where it could be spent and help stimulate the economy.

While scholars have correctly emphasized how FDR and the New Deal steered clear of most African American civil rights issues, and highlighted the CCC's policy of maintaining racially segregated camps, many African Americans at the time praised both FDR and the CCC.¹⁰ The CCC represented the first time in U.S. history that unemployed blacks had been given federal assistance. Frances Perkins played an important role in making it happen. The African American newspaper, *Chicago Defender*, reported in late April 1933 that the Urban League's Executive Secretary Eugene Kinckle and the League's Director of Industrial Relations T. Arnold Hill had met with Perkins in Washington DC to present evidence that blacks had encountered repeated acts of racial discrimination in the doling out of New Deal relief benefits. They sought to gain assurances that African Americans would not be discriminated against in New Deal programming. The Urban League's representatives, according to the *Defender* minced few words. They simply demanded "unprejudiced, indiscriminate consideration of race workers and urged proper representation of our people by official appointments to staff positions."¹¹ Perkins specifically assured Jones and Hill that the reforestation law could not discriminate because of race, color, or creed and she pledged to pass the word to CCC recruiters.

In the end, the CCC employed a percentage of black workers commensurate to the overall African American population. By late summer, the *Chicago Defender* was even more generous in its praise of the Secretary of Labor. "You ought to be thankful to President Delano Roosevelt for appointing Mrs. Frances Perkins as his Secretary of Labor," the paper editorialized to its black readership on August 5. Never before in history, the piece

¹⁰ Michael Hiltzik. *The New Deal: A Modern History* (New York: Free Press, 2011) 312-313. In a chapter entitled, "The Most Forgotten Man," the New Deal employed 250,000 African Americans, but Hiltzik downplays FDR's outreach to the black community. Segregated camps are just one example.

¹¹ *Chicago Defender* April 29, 1933. "Urban League Officials Confer with Labor Secretary."

continued, had a member of a President's cabinet dared to ask, "Are not colored people also consumers?" Perkins, in short, had given blacks as well as whites "a chance for a new deal." For the first time, the black community had an advocate in the cabinet: "She is for you, she stands on your issues, and by the same token you ought to be for her."¹²

The CCC was a works program, not simply a relief initiative, and those who were not able bodied, or who some other condition preventing them from work, still needed help. The Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA) passed on May 12, 1933, and it provided state assistance for the unemployed and their families. The House of Representatives voted three hundred twenty-six to forty-two in favor, while the Senate agreed and voted fifty-five to seventeen.¹³ Whereas the conservative Herbert Hoover had adamantly opposed federal relief as a budget-busting program that would promote dependency, FERA granted matching federal funds to local and state agencies. The language of the bill had been composed largely by Perkins – based on relief legislation that she had authored working with Roosevelt in New York. In addition to providing relief, it also funded jobs in construction, consumer goods production, and projects for those out of work in the arts and used unskilled labor to fill these positions. The trade unions did not favor the use of unskilled labor, but the country was in crisis mode. FERA provided employment to over twenty million people and granted states and municipalities \$3.1 billion from 1933-1935. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Social Security Administration replaced FERA in 1935.

The National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) is considered by most historians to have constituted the centerpiece of the early New Deal. Through a combination of bold

¹² *Chicago Defender* August 5, 1933. "The Week" A weekly editorial about current events that was applicable to the African American community to keep them aware of any social gain or loss that occurred during the week.

¹³ Arthur Schlesinger, *The Coming of the New Deal* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1958.) pg 264

economic planning, public works spending, and labor reform, FDR hoped the NIRA would spur the economic recovery the nation so badly needed. This bill passed June 16, 1933. NIRA contained two titles. Title I, entitled “Industrial Recovery” demonstrated the administration’s and Congress’s desire for the federal government to now partner with private industry to organize and to cooperate with the trade groups. It created a federal agency called the National Recovery Administration (NRA) that coordinated efforts in each major industry to establish voluntary codes to regulate production and prices. The goal was to curtail production, spur shortages and price hikes, and turn back the debilitating deflationary cycle that had gripped the economy. To facilitate industrial price setting, it also called for the suspension of antitrust laws.

When organized labor and its allies in Washington protested the suspension of anti-trust laws, Perkins went to work drafting the bill’s historic Section 7a of Title I, which pledged minimum wages, maximum hours, and most important, the promise of collective bargaining – something organized labor dared only dream. Title II established additional Public Works and Construction programs. When drafting this bill Perkins brought in labor, namely AFL President William Green to get labor’s view and support. This is where Perkins and Green became political allies – and to a certain degree even friends – and where gender politics and class politics came together in the history of the New Deal. Green applauded the recovery goals in the NIRA, but saw room for more labor reform. After conferring with Perkins and his fellow union organizers Green changed the language of 7a to read, “Employees shall have the right to bargain collectively... free of interference by employers...”¹⁴ Future appointee as head of the NRA, General Hugh Johnson, the bill’s

¹⁴ Downey, 177

sponsor Senator Robert Wagner of New York, and Perkins all agreed with Green's wording and it became the heart and soul of Section 7a.

When Perkins presented the revised NIRA to FDR, he initially approved. But he allowed budget chief Lewis Williams Douglas to split the bill into two sections with the NRA as a separate component. Due to the \$3.5 billion price tag of the public works portion, the budget conscious Roosevelt vacillated. When Perkins revisited the issue with the president and she asked him if he wanted both provisions or not, he gave her the dreaded response of, "We'll see."¹⁵ The Secretary then pleaded that when constructing a bridge, the steel workers, bricklayers, engineers, and all the trades in between gain employment. She reminded him that they had worked as a team to public works programs to relieve working families and spur recovery in New York, and it had worked well. She told him it was now or never. After hours of further convincing, Roosevelt agreed to reinsert the provision of public works and told her to instruct Wagner that this was the final bill to be submitted.

It was the right to bargain collectively that Green and organized labor most cherished. When the US Supreme Court unanimously struck down the NIRA as unconstitutional in 1935, Roosevelt and Perkins renewed the alliance with labor by throwing their support behind the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, which guaranteed workers the right to organize and collectively bargain. The rapidly growing, more class-conscious Congress of Industrial Organizations benefitted as much if not more than the AFL from Section 7a and then the Wagner Act. Perkins, the second wave feminist who had initially been dismissed by organized labor as a lightweight, ended up a hero to become the Joan of Arc of the labor movement.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 177

CONCLUSION

Perkins craftily maneuvered the political arena dominated by men. She never tired of her commitment to social justice. She never sought accolades, there are hundreds of biographies on FDR, but Perkins' role is diminished as just another cabinet member. Her technique of personal investigation into the working conditions of children, immigrants, women, and the working class rank and file triumphed to improve the destructive sexism, racism, and ethnocentrism that had been considered business as usual by corporate, government, and labor entities up to the 1930s. Her social agenda for New York, given shape by her savvy political alliances with Smith and Roosevelt, served as a model for the nation-wide, early New Deal. Indeed, the list of reforms that she had handed to President-elect Roosevelt just prior to her appointment in early 1933 still underpin labor-management relations today. Unemployment insurance, abolition of child labor, a minimum wage, and maximum hours were all part of her agenda before they became FDR's.

Most notably, Perkins' reform agenda arose from her own personal struggles to negotiate the shoals of gender, class, ethnic, and racial politics in the United States. Her initial foray into the world of social activism had brought her into touch with Second Wave Feminism. Her work in New York following the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire took her from the female-led Consumer's League into the masculine hard-knuckled world of Tammany where she learned to write legislation for her boss Assemblyman and then Governor Al Smith. A middle class, Protestant New Englander by birth, she not only promoted reforms that benefitted working class ethnics, she became comfortable with Smith and his followers – even delving into the hurly burly of identity politics in Smith's failed crusade to become America's first Catholic Chief Executive.

Perkins continued her tutelage under Smith's successor FDR. She became one of the most politically connected Second Wave reformers of her generation and used her network of contacts adroitly to win an appointment as the first woman ever to serve in a presidential cabinet – and to take a place in the succession to the presidency. She initially faced the staunch opposition of organized labor, especially AF of L president William Green. But she steeled her resolve and within months of accepting her position, William Green and she collaborated to achieve section 7a of the National Industrial Recovery Act, which allowed for collective bargaining. She also anticipated that one day African Americans would become a part of the modern day Democratic Party coalition – reaching out to Urban League representatives who appreciated her work to recruit young black men into the New Deal's popular Civilian Conservation Corps.

Perkins was indeed a powerful agent who molded the New Deal and refused to accept marginalization for herself or for the working class men and women for whom she advocated. When Perkins first came to Washington, she said she had a mission to work for God, FDR, and the millions common forgotten working people. She transformed American society, and Americans owe her a huge debt of gratitude.

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