The following address was delivered by Harry L. Hopkins, Works Progress Administrator, before the United States Conference of Mayors at 3:30 p.m. Tuesday, November 16, 1937, meeting in the Mayflower hotel, Washington, D.C.:

I am going to speak briefly about work relief, about the demand for security on the part of people, and about the new relationship of government to problems and people. 

First, I want to say that I am still a firm and very great believer in work for the unemployed. I believe in the competency of the unemployed. I believe in the quality of their endeavors. There are people who do not believe in those things. There are others who spread misleading information about them.

Very recently the United States Chamber of Commerce, through its magazine, The Nation's Business, released a survey of what they said was a typical group of people on the WPA and on relief, relative to their employability. You read the story. It was released in all the papers in the land. It said that 50 per cent of them had never held a job any length of time. It said that almost 90 per cent of them never had a savings account. I never knew what the point was on that. It gave these fellows a very bad name. So I decided to look it up to find out where they made this study. After considerable trouble I found that they made the study in the city of Baltimore, although they did not say anything in the article as to where they made the study.

Then I found out the 100 families that they picked out, with respect to which they made the study. I found that they did not study any cases on the WPA; that they took 100 cases from the direct-relief rolls; and that the relief administrator told them that 95 per cent of them were unemployable, that they had only 5 per cent employables. They lifted out these old and crippled and handicapped people, who cannot possibly work, and released that to the nation as a study of 100 typical cases. The papers all over the country picked it up. Long-winded
editorials were written about it, trying more and more to lead the public to believe that there must be something fundamentally wrong with these unemployed people.

The truth of the matter is that in the last 18 months one and a half million different people on the WPA have left the WPA and have taken private jobs. The phenomenon of unemployment is, in the main, not a phenomenon of permanent unemployment. The same people are not unemployed all the time. It is a constantly moving group of people. That phenomenon is proven by our experience on the WPA. About four per cent a month of all the people on the WPA have been leaving it to take private employment.

I do not care how much people talk about these people and say that they never want to work. It is not borne out by the facts, and it is not borne out by any intimate acquaintance with these people.

I think the work itself has improved; that is, I think the unit output per man per day has improved. I know that the quality of our projects has improved. I am fully convinced that there is work to be done in America, and plenty of it. I am convinced that you could lay out a program of work for 20 years in America—work that is socially useful, work that is desirable, work that it is important to us to have done.

I know that the final answer on the technique of work relief has not been worked out. I know that many rules and regulations that are now in force will not be in force two or three years from now—perhaps one year from now. I do not assume that we have found all the answers. I do not assume that we have found all the answers to hours of work, or to the problem of the security wage, or the problem of who is entitled to work and who is not entitled to work. So, let us not talk about the detail of this thing.

I am convinced that public opinion is with us, in terms of providing work for unemployed people in America that can not find work in industry. I am convinced of that. I am convinced that we have far more public opinion behind this than the so-called organs of public opinion would lead us to believe.

There are those who still would put these people on direct relief. But many of those people who would put them on direct relief do not at the same time admit their real convictions, namely, that they want these people cut down to a standard of living that is so shameful and so miserable that no one should be asked to live on it. Their motivation is this. They say that if you make this
dignified, if you make this decent, if you give these people a reasonable minimum to live on, they will get to like it. Therefore, make relief as shameful and degrading as you possibly can, so that people will want to get off, as they say. They have never explained how to perform the miracle. If you have 5 million unemployed, what are those 5 million going to get off to?

There are a few, to be sure, who object to us because we have done something about maintaining the wage scale. They say that if you have large numbers of unemployed waiting at the doors of every industry in America every morning labor will be cheap. Well, if we have helped to maintain the wage scale, I glory in it. Nor am I ashamed of the fact that people will take a government benefit in the form of work relief, and, when some of their neighbors ask them what they are doing, they will say "I am on the WPA." What if they are proud of it? Who is to say that the services of a man building a park in a city or paving a road are not as valuable as the services of a man who works in a night club? I cannot see, socially, why you should put a stigma upon a person who, with his hands, is laboring and working on something useful for the community. So, I believe in work relief.

I know and appreciate the importance of arriving at a formula that is reasonable and fair, to determine who shall pay for it. As Mayor Burton was talking it occurred to me that the thing upon which we must do some hard thinking is this: If you have X million people in need of relief of one kind or another, and if you admit that they should have relief, and if you agree on the total amount that should cost, whether it be an old-age pension, whether it be care of the sick, or whether it be work for the unemployed, what tax base is going to be used to pay for it?

When you talk to mayors of cities about the tax base that is used by them, you are talking about real estate taxes. Eighty-five per cent of all the money raised in all the cities in the United States comes from taxes on real estate. How much can that tax be depended upon to provide for a social security program?

There is no sense in getting emotional about it and saying that the state, or the city, or the Federal Government, is not paying its fair share. Let us do some solid thinking on the basis of what tax source must be used for a program that is inevitable. Let us face, now, the problem on one front of the social security program, namely, the work-relief front, and consider what that formula should be.
As Mr. Johnstone has told you, a committee of the United States Senate is now considering objectively that very problem, and it is extremely important what that decision is, because throughout the breadth of this land there is a determination and a demand on the part of the people of America that that one-third of the population that the President talks about shall have real security.

Considering, first, old-age pensions, do you know that five years ago there were not twenty members of Congress who believed in old-age pensions paid out of Federal funds—not twenty? Today there is not one person in Congress that I know of who would say that he is opposed to Federal aid for old-age pensions. They might disagree about the method and the technique, but they are in favor of it. Old-age pensions are one of the techniques of social security. I do not know anybody who knows anything about them. If there are X number of old people getting old-age pensions today, there are going to be X plus tomorrow; and if the average old-age pension in America is today $14, it is going to be $14 plus tomorrow. It is in the cards.

Are these old people all over America going to be satisfied to rap on the door timidly and say, "Please, won't you give us an old-age pension"? I do not think so. Is there any reason why these old people should not have the same dignity and status as the rest of us? Is there any reason why they should hide the fact that they are getting an old-age pension? I do not think so. I think that old-age pensions are a great and powerful institution—one of the best to provide social security. I think it is all "bosh" and "eye wash" to say that because old people get old-age pensions, the rest of us will not save all through our lives for our old age. The whole of history and experience disproves it. How many people ever could save for their old age? I do not care what the economic conditions are. What percentage of the population have ever earned enough money so that they could each year put aside the money they need for old-age pensions?

One of the greatest forces in America has been the fear of old age, and one of the things that haunts most people is the fear of what is going to happen to them in their old age, in terms of how they are going to live. Well, I think one of the greatest things you can do in this country is to lift that fear from people, so that they will not be afraid of going into a dignified old age.

Now, somebody talks very glibly about the care of sickness in each family, and they ask us to budget the cost of sickness. There is no such thing in the cost of illness or sickness. The full cost falls on the people who are
ill, they do not share that with any family. I may go all through my life and never have any sickness; and I spend nothing. John Brown, on the other hand, may have sickness through his family all his life. Suppose John Brown tries to budget the average cost of illness, and then save it. You cannot budget it — you cannot budget it. And you people in the cities, out of city taxes and out of charitable gifts of your philanthropic people, are taking care of the problem of illness not very adequately, in my opinion. And I think one of the great problems in America that must be solved if we intend to solve the problem of security is to provide decent medical and hospital care for people who cannot afford it. And I hail that statement of those 480 doctors, made the other day, upon the problem of the government's responsibility for the care of the sick.

Well, you could talk about tenant farmers or farm laborers. Why should a tenant farmer and a farm laborer in America be asked to live on $150 or $200 a year forever? Can he forever be satisfied, if that is the way he has always lived? Can he be satisfied that he cannot lift himself up by his boot-strap; that he is not competent to do anything else, and therefore not only he but his children are to be condemned forever to that sort of a life? It does not make sense to me, and I do not think these people are going to stand for it. I do not think they are going to be willing to say that "we and our children are perfectly willing to have $150 a year all our lives because we are incompetent to do any better".

In the first place, I do not admit the thesis. In the second place, I do not admit the end-result of it.

As for the unemployed: The phenomena of our economic system provide for unemployment. There has never been a time in our history since the development of the factory system that there has not been unemployment — not once. There has always been unemployment. There was unemployment in 1929; there was unemployment in 1928; there will be unemployment in this country when the national income hits one hundred billion a year. Because it is on the cards that it should be. Look at the tremendous amount of seasonal unemployment: Where do you suppose California gets the people to pick its fruit? Let's say they start picking fruit on the first of February, and they want one hundred thousand people to go to work on the morning of February first: What were they doing on January 31st? Why, they were out of work; they were unemployed.

There is going to be unemployment; the size of the problem depends on
the amount of production in this country; the size of the unemployment problem is going to depend on the amount of the national income. But in my judgment, whatever that national income, there is going to be a problem, there, that has to be met — by unemployment insurance, by work relief, and what-not.

Now, I do not mean to say that we cannot favorably affect the amount of unemployment. Because I think you can. I think if you can bring the national income up, I think if you can increase production, I think if you can properly distribute the national income from year to year to a purchasing power in the hands of people so that they can buy radios and buy shirts, so that you can get the total amount of the national income into the hands of the right people, who in turn can buy the produce of the farmers and the factories, you can favorably affect the problem of unemployment. And obviously it is better for everybody to earn their income and get their income through the normal processes of our system rather than any type of government benefit. There is no question about that.

But I am unwilling to throw these unemployed people and other people in need to the wolves because somebody says that if you do so and so and so and so, these people will get jobs in private industry—and therefore do not worry about the unemployed. I am willing to stop worrying about the unemployed when there are no more unemployed, but not until then.

Now, why is it that government, why is it that a person like myself, representing the Federal government—and you, representing cities and counties, and governors representing states, have become interested in the problem of social security and relief? Why, it is because there has been built up and developed in this country a new relationship between government and problems and people. I read editorials, I hear speeches over the radio and otherwise, in which people get up and say, "We object to the fact that millions of people are beginning to depend on the government." Well, may I ask on whom they would depend? Who is going to give old age pensions? Who is going to take care of the sick? Who is going to take care of the unemployed? Is it any responsibility of modern industry to take care of the unemployed? Have they got to take upon themselves, in addition to running their own business at a fair and decent profit, the business of taking care of the unemployed and the aged? I don't think so. I think it is properly a responsibility of the government. And the fact that people are becoming articulate and demanding that the government do certain things about them, does not disturb me.

Why, all the great, powerful forces in America for years have had lobbies-
this hotel has been full of them—lobbying for all kinds of special interests—and altogether appropriate, altogether proper. I do not object to it. Well, when a flock of poor, bedraggled unemployed came here last summer and asked for something for themselves, a lot of people got terribly disturbed about the "pressure group," the "special interest group." Did you ever try to count the special interest groups in this country—and some of them are pretty hard operators, too. I do not quarrel with them; I think any group has a right to come to this city any time it wants to. This is the proper place to come. I do not quarrel with Dr. Townsend when he comes here, and when the old people want old age pensions, any more than I quarrel with the aluminum trust when it comes here to fix up things about aluminum. They have a right to do it.

Well, these old people are becoming more and more articulate. And I think it is a proper thing, and I think it is proper that the government should have acquired—through force of circumstances, perhaps—a new relationship with the people of this country.

In conclusion I want to say that I know where the poor people in America go when they do not eat. I know whom they go to see, perfectly well, and I have known it ever since I have been here. I know the headache and the heat that you people take. Governors are a long way off, and Washington is farther away. But you fellows are all in City Hall, and everybody knows where you are. And the patience and courtesy that you people have shown these people, and the patience and the courtesy that you have extended me when I must have tried your patience beyond words, when you must have been disturbed about what you thought was the bureaucracy and red tape of this thing—I know how you felt. And during these last four years there have been many times when some of you have tried to get me on the phone late at night, when I have not been reached. And I know that at the other end of the phone was a man who was telling me, "Hopkins, there are people who are hungry in this town, and you can do something about it, and won't you do something about it?"

And the things I am always going to regret all of my life are the times when I have not answered that phone, the times when I did not move fast enough. Because you never can catch up with yourself on those fronts; you never can go back, tomorrow, and help these people to eat everyday. If I am going to be sorry for anything I have done, it is to be sorry for the things I have failed to do for these people—not sorry for giving them too much.
And I want you to know that I understand the problems that you people have—you people on the firing line of this thing—the problems that you have every day, whether anybody likes it or not. They live right in your home town, and the problem is on your neck. And I know you appreciate the problem. We may not always see eye to eye on the exact methods or the techniques; but I have yet to see a man who did not appreciate the problem.

Now I want to say this finally: I do not believe in taking this out in talk. If one-third of the population of America is improperly housed and fed and clothed, the only answer to that is to do something about it. I think it is a scandal and a shame—the housing we permit millions of our people to live in. I think the fact that one-third of the population has no real security, so that they scarcely know how they are to exist from day to day—I glory in the fact that governments have provided insurance in old age, beginnings in housing. And I am not willing to have these things postponed until a new generation, so that another set of children can enjoy them. I see no reason why in America we should not move forward steadily toward the complete abolition of poverty, why people should not live in decent houses, and every child in America be well fed, be well clothed, have the opportunity of a decent education, and live in decent American fashion. I am convinced it is going to be done.