

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

For Release on Delivery,
Monday, September 26, 1938.

"MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF DISASTER"

The following address was delivered by Harry L. Hopkins, Works Progress Administrator, from Boston, Mass., over the Red network of the National Broadcasting Company, 11:30 to 11:45 p.m. E.S.T., Monday, September 26, 1938:

New England and portions of New York State are slowly but steadily digging themselves out from under the greatest hurricane disaster in the history of the North Atlantic area. Perhaps I should say the worst hurricane disaster in any region of our country. Death and destruction, through wind and water, have struck many times in other portions of the United States, but never on such a broad front as this, nor in such thickly-settled communities. The intensity, the location and the consequences of this storm are unprecedented. It is an appalling catastrophe.

I say it IS an appalling catastrophe, because the emergency is NOT over. By means of radio and moving picture, newspapers and photographs, the havoc caused by this tropical hurricane has been brought to your attention. For days you have read or listened to reports of tragic happenings over an area hundreds of miles in extent. You know that the winds have subsided, and that the Atlantic is again as smooth as the proverbial mill pond. You know that all the resources of the Federal Government have been rushed to the aid of states and local communities and that emergency work has been going on feverishly ever since last Wednesday night, when a stunned and prostrate section of our nation issued its appeal for help.

You are perhaps justified, therefore, in thinking it is all over; that given time, and a little help, houses will spring up where they stood before the wind hit them; that dams will be repaired, roads rebuilt, trees replanted, docks restored and communications reopened. But some of us have seen this thing. It's bad. It is going to take a long time, a lot of work and plenty of money to restore normal conditions. We have the time, we have the men and we have the money. But no power can restore the victims of drowning and accident.

Tonight, the death list approaches 1,000. What it will be eventually no one can foretell. There are forty-odd miles of shoreline in Rhode Island alone now being searched for bodies. Our WPA workers have been finding them buried under the debris which lines the southern coast of New England. They have been washed ashore, along with the houses and wreckage, just like so much driftwood. We've got to find them all, every single one, if humanly possible. We have got to search not only the beaches, where human beings and houses were tossed up together in one big jumbled mass, but we have got to explore with boats every creek and inlet in the path of the tidal wave.

I said that some of us have seen this thing. Who ever would have dreamed that a Carribean storm, born down among the West Indies, would some day lash the coast of Long Island and New England, kill many hundreds of unsuspecting people, wreak physical damage amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars and in some localities, change the entire shoreline?

The question answers itself. It was never believed within the realm of fantasy, much less reality. But on Sunday, accompanied by other federal and state officials, we saw the results of this storm from an airplane and were aghast at the fury of the elements when they are beyond control.

We flew over Long Island, where entire cottage communities were ruined. We flew over Thimble Islands, off New London, where the waves swept houses and humans into the sea. I thought of those terrorized residents who were seen waving sheets in the gale and then suddenly were seen no more. But their bodies came ashore at New London. They didn't have a chance.

We flew over Block Island, isolated out there in the ocean, cut off from the world. We flew up the Connecticut River Valley and saw, below us, water in the main business streets of Hartford, where a river flood had superimposed its menace on hurricane damage. Only the emergency work of thousands of WPA workers and other employees, toiling for two days and two nights on sandbag levees, saved the Capital of Connecticut from major disaster.

Even at that, twelve percent of the population had to be evacuated and must be quartered, fed, clothed and cared for until they can go back into their water-soaked dwellings.

We gazed down on Norwich, Connecticut, where mud rose ankle-deep in the main square when the Thames flooded. Norwich, too, was cut off but even before the residents needed personal aid the city needed chloride of lime for sanitation purposes - and it was rushed to them at once. WPA workers, boys from the NYA work projects, CCC enrollees, Boy Scouts and city employees cleaned up the square, removed the health threat, unblocked the main highways, and brought order out of chaos. That is the way, in fact, that every one of these stricken communities has gone about its task of meeting the emergency.

We flew over New London, where fire followed the flood-tide and gutted a whole row of stores and buildings on one of the main streets. Drinking water there still has to be boiled, as it does in many localities in the path of the storm. We flew over Westerly, Rhode Island, where the death toll was

extremely high and where the basement of an old building was converted into a public morgue.

We grounded our plane at the Airport in Providence, where National Guardsmen patrol the streets and highways and martial law extends throughout the entire stricken section. Water stood eight or ten feet in the business heart of the city during the height of the gale. Providence is going about the job of restoration with its head up, although deprived for days of light and power, and with its principal stores closed until the water can be pumped from the basements. It is over 100 years since anything like the flood of last Wednesday had occurred in Providence. Is it any wonder the second city in New England was unprepared for a catastrophe of this kind?

From Providence we toured the hard-hit section of Narragansett Bay by motor car, accompanied by Governor Quinn, of Rhode Island. At Narragansett Pier, neighbors saw their next-door dwellers torn away by the surf and drowned. At Charlestown and adjoining beaches, hundreds of cottages were demolished and swept back inland almost to the main highway by the huge wave.

Tales of heroism have come to light showing the courage and self-sacrifice of storm victims. Men and women formed human-chains in the effort to make their way to safety. Others manned boats in the raging creeks in the attempt to rescue friends. One fleeing couple in an automobile stopped to assist friends --- all were drowned. Everywhere in the storm sections, the people of New England and New York have shown a splendid example of courage and self-reliance. Not all the relief and salvage work has been done by public agencies; residents in the devastated areas have shown the way, by taking in fellow sufferers and victims and doing all in their power to help their relatives and neighbors. It is typically New England, typically American.

Today, at least 100,000 WPA workers are engaged in emergency activity. On behalf of the President, I have assured the Governors and the

people of New England and New York that the fullest cooperation will be given by the United States Government in this catastrophe. We realize that we are dealing with thousands of people who have never been called upon to ask for relief. But this is an unprecedented calamity. Many of them will now seek aid and we will act with a full understanding of their attitude. It is not a question of being asked for money, as if it were charity. I happen only to be the Administrator, and I do not like the idea that the people of the devastated sections think they are asking the government for money. I do not feel that way about it, and I told the governors so at our conference today. I feel that Congress has appropriated part of your own money for a purpose and that this purpose includes meeting and taking care of disasters; that it is your money, in every sense of the word, and I happen to be, for the moment, a public official who has the responsibility of administering it. We wish to assure you that we approach this with the full knowledge of the public trust that we hold, and that we are going to use every avenue to meet this end promptly and at once. It is the people's money and it is going to be used for the people's benefit.

There is a big job to be done. Not least among the tasks is to control the menace to health and life from disease. As everyone knows, the efficient, faithful, ever-reliable American Red Cross is on the job and that means the situation will be in hand. True to its tradition and its record, Red Cross officials were early on the scene, with doctors, nurses, ambulances, first-aid and field equipment, prepared to set up field stations, inoculation clinics and otherwise make all provisions against the spread of disease. It is the American Red Cross that will go into the homes of victims, supply them with food and necessities, and undertake the humane and intimate task of

family rehabilitation. May I add my own appeal to that of President Roosevelt and others that you help make its drive for funds for this necessary work successful. The American Red Cross has never yet let us down; we cannot afford to let the Red Cross down.

The amount of property damage to a great section of our country cannot be estimated yet with any degree of accuracy. The loss of trees in many instances has been irreparable. Historic elms and oaks have been destroyed in many of the famous parks and greens of New England. Thousands of structures have been badly damaged or reduced to wreckage. Roads and culverts have been injured, bridges and small dams washed out. The destruction of small shipping has been tremendous. In some fishing localities whole fleets of small boats have been practically wiped out.

Thus in the rural as well as in the more thickly-populated areas, many have been thrown out of employment or rendered unable to pursue their ordinary means of livelihood. This is an aftermath of the storm itself that constitutes a responsibility which the WPA willingly assumes with the communities themselves and which its resources are pledged to meet. In many waterfront sections, work is imperative at once. This is because cold weather is not far removed and docks, bulkheads and breakwaters should be repaired as soon as possible. There is a great work to be done and I can assure the people and the officials of the regions affected, that the government will do its share in every way possible.

From this disaster has sprung a spirit of cooperation and unanimous will to bring about rehabilitation and restoration. All public and private agencies are working as one toward that achievement. The WPA, like other federal units, will do all in its power to assist in this emergency. We are cutting red tape for action. We are after results. This job is going to be done