

WORKS PROGRESS ADMINISTRATION

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## "THE OUTLOOK FOR THE WPA"

The following address was delivered by Colonel F. C. Harrington, Works Progress Administrator, over the Blue network of the National Broadcasting Company, at 8:00 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, Saturday, February 4, 1939, from the studios of Station WMAL, Washington, D.C.:

This is my first radio talk since becoming Works Progress Administrator, and I simply want to outline, for all interested citizens, the attitude in which I am approaching the job.

There is a great deal of difference of opinion concerning the WPA and the way it operates. This feeling is expressed very freely, as it should be in a free democracy. But I should like to recall a little of the program's history.

There were no guideposts or precedents in America, in 1933, to indicate how to meet the problem of 15 million unemployed workers. But the government recognized that what it faced was a national and not a local problem. It recognized that our economic system had grown very complicated -- so complicated, for example, that when people in Florida or Maine or Oregon did not have money to buy automobiles, the resulting unemployment occurred principally in Michigan.

Moreover, it realized, when one out of every four or five workers in the country had no work -- the bulk of them with good past records in industry -- that this was something beyond the control of the workers themselves. Indeed, the point became inescapable that it was an economic problem, rather than a welfare problem.

So the government decided to provide temporary public work for those able to work and in need who could not find private jobs. To do this, on such a scale, took courage and a fine sense of the public responsibility inherent in a democracy.

To devise such a program in a really democratic way is such a complex task that it deserves the patient tolerance of every sincere American. It must

avoid competition with industry, yet the work must be useful. All workers must be encouraged to return to private jobs at the first opportunity, yet the WPA work must be efficient. It must give due regard to the plans and wishes of each locality, and obtain local cooperation. It must do this without projecting its operations more than one year ahead, and sometimes ~~--- as now ---~~ for an even shorter period. It must protect private wage levels, yet not compete with private enterprise in total earnings. It must employ the jobless in their home communities, at work as nearly related to their industrial experience as possible ~~---~~ work which will be usable in private jobs later. These are only a few of literally scores of operating problems faced by such a program.

I do not mean to imply that the WPA represents the government's entire experience in attacking unemployment, or that in its present form it is above reproach. But it is the biggest part of that attack, and it consistently takes advantage of its own experience to improve itself.

The supplemental appropriation bill, for example, which has just been completed to finance this program until July first, contains several provisions that will be extremely helpful.

In this measure, Congress heeded the emphatic request of the President to enact legal penalties against political coercion of WPA workers. President Roosevelt's message on January 5 included this paragraph (I quote):

"It is my belief that improper political practices can be eliminated only by the imposition of rigid statutory regulations and penalties by the Congress, and that this should be done. Such penalties should be imposed not only upon persons within the administrative organization of the Works Progress Administration, but also upon outsiders who have in fact in many instances been the principal offenders in this regard. My only reservation in this matter is that no legislation should be enacted which will in any way deprive workers on the Works Progress Administration program of the civil rights to which they are entitled in common with other citizens."

That is what the President said to Congress one month ago, and I am glad that Congress adopted provisions along that line, because up to this time there has been no law under which such offenders could be punished.

These provisions, simplified, make it a felony for any one, inside or outside the WPA, to promise any job or benefit in this program, or to deprive or threaten to deprive any one of employment or benefit in this program, for political reasons, or to solicit campaign contributions from any one paid from these funds. Any of these offenses is punishable by a fine of not more than \$1000 or one year's imprisonment, or both. The legislation also provides immediate dismissal of any administrative or supervisory employee who uses his official authority or influence to interfere in an election. These conditions are particularly welcome to me, for I watched first-hand the remarkable fight which Harry Hopkins made for years to keep politics out of this program. I know he did everything within his power, and I am happy that Congress has strengthened my own hand with this new law.

Congress also has ordered, in the supplemental bill, an immediate investigation of the WPA rolls, to eliminate any relief workers who are not in actual need. We are now perfecting our plans for this very large undertaking, and it will be carried out with dispatch. I hope to have a definite answer to deliver to Congress when it begins consideration of the new appropriation for the next fiscal year.

I am well aware that three million WPA workers and their families -- perhaps twelve million persons in all -- are very anxious to learn just what the deficiency appropriation means in terms of jobs for the next five months.

Congress has just passed a joint resolution providing 725 million dollars for use in the next five months, and it is now ready for action by the President. In this connection Congress has adopted a provision which for the time being will prevent any severe reduction in the WPA rolls. This provision specifies that during the months of February and March, administrative reductions of the WPA rolls shall not exceed five per cent of the total now employed. After April first, however, the amount of money remaining, if not supplemented, will require very drastic curtailment of the program.

Next to the question of immediate funds, I presume most of you would like to know what an army engineer thinks about when he is set down in a chair

and given the job of administering perhaps the most complex labor problem in the history of the world.

On that score, I ask you, to remember that I am not a newcomer to the WPA; I have been its chief engineer and an assistant administrator since the autumn of 1935. For more than three years I have watched my predecessor, Mr. Hopkins, handle the diverse and perplexing policy problems of this organization, and I have the greatest respect for his achievements. I am sure he never believed at any time, any more than I did, that this program represents the ideal or ultimate way to provide public jobs to able-bodied Americans who need work. We have never felt that it was a fixed program with fixed methods. It has, in fact, been changed and improved from year to year. It is still subject, in the course of its natural development, to further change and improvement. But as its administrator, I do not propose to upset the apple cart. Whatever improvements I can make must evolve logically out of the program's actual operations.

Our work program necessarily includes a great many kinds of projects. I would rather not single out any particular type of project in these remarks, which are intended to cover the whole program. But perhaps I should offer special reassurance to any workers, sponsors or interested citizens who may have special anxieties about the nonconstruction part of our work.

Let me say that, although the construction part of the program has always been the largest part of it, I am well aware that there are many capable people on the relief rolls who are not construction workers but white-collar workers. And for these white-collar workers there will continue to be due provision made, within the limits of our funds. There is, in particular, no reason to fear that workers in the field of the arts will be neglected. These workers, though a very small proportion of our total employment, have as musicians, artists, actors and writers, made a large and significant contribution to public needs, which is deeply appreciated. The Works Progress Administration is proud of having had the opportunity to place their abilities and training at the service of the public. And such workers, equally with all other

needy unemployed workers; will be given as far as possible an opportunity to earn a security wage in employment on public projects.

As the engineer in charge of the construction end of the WPA, which aggregates from 75 to 80 per cent of the total program, I have been glad to see our work gain steadily in efficiency every year. But I am not blind to the fact that it can stand further improvement.

I should like, as administrator, to make a real contribution toward the maximum efficiency of which we are capable. But I will need the help, not only of the administrative staff, but of the rank and file of WPA workers out on the job. It seems to me that we are all agreed on what we want this program to be.

We want these jobs to go without any partisan bias or political coercion to the people who really need them, the people that Congress intended to have such emergency employment. I believe I can help in that.

We want the projects upon which we cooperate with local communities to be well-planned and of the utmost value to those communities. I believe we can insist upon it, and make sure of it. For we are under obligation to the American people not only to provide jobs for the unemployed, but to make certain that the nation gets its full money's worth out of the public work that the unemployed are given to do.

And there is one important part of our general efficiency, upon which the entire WPA must help me -- I mean the efficiency of the workers themselves in their daily work on the projects. I know that the efficiency of WPA workers is, in general, worthy of great praise. This has been said many times by friends of this program. However, I do not intend now to emphasize such examples of efficiency, except to say that they prove what we can do, and constitute a standard to which the whole program should measure up. I know, too, that there are many explanations and excuses for such inefficiency as does exist among WPA workers -- but I do not intend to offer those explanations or excuses. I feel that the day of apologies for the WPA now has passed. We can justify ourselves fully by our work, and we must do so.

The right of jobless men and women to public employment is a right which is just being established in America. For its preservation as an element of future public policy, I want to urge that it is now and henceforth up to every WPA worker to put in a good day's work for his day's pay --- just as good a day's work as he can, whatever his rate of pay may be.

For my own part, I will do everything I can to give this program added prestige in the minds of the American people by carrying out what I conceive to be my two primary responsibilities:

First, to see that the people whom Congress intended to get these jobs --- the people who really need them --- actually get them.

And second, to see that the country gets from this program the best and most valuable work that can be done.

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