Howard O. Hunter discusses relief needs on "Youth Meets Government" program over NBC network.

The following address on "Relief—More or Less?" was delivered by Howard O. Hunter, Deputy Administrator of the Works Progress Administration, on the "Youth Meets Government" program over the Red network of the National Broadcasting Company, from the studios of Station WRC, Washington, D.C., at 5:15 p.m., Eastern Standard Time, Saturday, February 25, 1939:

I am particularly glad this evening to take part in an open discussion of the greatest problem our Democracy faces and to have that discussion with representatives of the youth of America. I confess to a fear that your questions and your discussion may be much more pointed and intelligent than those we often get from audiences of older people. I hope that you are not too much confused in your study of this subject by partisan political debate or distorted and inaccurate comments in some of our leading newspapers.

I have at least two things in common with my friend Senator Wylie who is on this program with me. First we both come from the middle west, he from Wisconsin and I from Illinois, and second, we have both just recently come to Washington. I am sure we also have in common a desire not only to relieve the human and economic distress caused by unemployment but to do everything a Democracy can do to reduce unemployment itself.

The subject announced for this program was "Relief—More or Less". It is an intriguing title but perhaps a little vague and general. I am not sure whether it means more relief for John Smith or more relief to more people or the reverse. I am going to shift the title a bit and phrase it "How Much Relief to Whom and How".

Let me, for the purpose of this discussion, put aside one great
category of relief in one paragraph. I mean that form of relief which is now being given to certain groups of people who are unemployable, such as the aged, the blind and mothers of dependent children. Responsibility for giving public benefits to these people has now been accepted as a public duty and has been incorporated into the statutes of every state, and the federal government, and there is no longer much controversy over the justice of giving such benefits.

The question, therefore, which I assume is the field of possible controversy and discussion this evening is what is to be done about relief for the millions of fine, able-bodied American citizens who are able to work, who want to work, and who cannot find jobs.

Let me say a word about the facts of unemployment itself. Unemployment has existed for a long time in this country but up to 1929, except for a few short periods of time, it never affected enough people to make it the major social and economic problem that it is today. The best estimates indicate that in 1929 at the peak of business prosperity there were about two million unemployed people in the United States. From the beginning of the economic collapse of 1929 up to the winter of 1932-33 this number of unemployed grew to over 15 million, and there are over eleven million now. Incidentally, in the seven years since early 1933 there have been added to the labor market of America an average of five hundred thousand new workers a year — or a net increase of three and one-half million. Therefore, one encouraging item is that today seven and one-half million more workers have private jobs than had them in early 1933. But there are still over eleven million unemployed.

The very size of the unemployment load today makes it the most serious problem this country faces. I think we have to face unemployment as a fact. I think we have to face the fact that it is a national problem and not a local one. I wish as keenly as any listener tonight that all these unemployed could get jobs in private industry. Instead of "more or less" relief, I would wish that we did not need to give any relief at all in any form to able-bodied American citizens.
But I am not willing merely to sit around wishing this and doing nothing else about it while these unemployed are jobless. The unemployment problem is not going to be solved by waving wands, making speeches, or pulling out the old shopworn slogans of '29 and '32.

So then what to do about it? And how to do it?

First, let me emphasize again that the goal we all strive for in government and business is to cooperate in every way to see that the unemployed get productive jobs in private industry. But until that is done the unemployed cannot be left hanging out on a limb if we expect to maintain our Democratic form of government.

I have participated personally in every form of unemployment relief that has been attempted since 1929. For this reason I am not speaking as someone who knows the unemployment problem merely from the newspapers but as one who has engaged in the administration of several major unemployment relief programs. In the first year or two of the long depression I saw private charitable agencies try to meet this job and collapse. I saw the previous Administration in 1931 try a nationwide drive for private contributions for relief and fail even to touch the problem. At the same time the Federal Government between 1929 and 1933 consistently opposed any plan for the Federal Government's participation in the relief of the unemployed. I then saw this burden forcibly shifted to local public relief agencies. This did not work either, but it almost bankrupted many cities in the United States. Then I saw a few states come into the picture, led by New York and Illinois, and this was then followed in the early months of the present Administration, 1933, by federal grants-in-aid to states. Then the unemployed did begin to get something more approaching decent relief, but it was, in the main still in the form of grocery orders. I want to say, at this point, that considerable support is being gathered for a proposal that federal unemployment relief funds and the administration of these funds
be turned back to the states and local communities. This is no new idea because we had two years of experience with this plan, which experience, in the main, was bad both from the point of administration and the fact that there were 48 standards of relief instead of one. The unemployed were still meagerly fed and clothed in idleness.

Finally in 1935 came the decision of the federal government to furnish jobs on useful public projects to the needy unemployed who could work and this answer was distilled out of all of the previous experience and has continued to be the answer of your government to date.

From these seven years of observation and close association with the unemployment problem I have formed a deep conviction that as long as able-bodied unemployed citizens cannot find jobs in private industry the only decent answer, in a Democracy, is to give them jobs on useful public work. I have even stopped calling this relief, and I think logically so. It is work and it is real work for wages and for the public good. It is a democracy's answer to the needs of its citizens.

In your discussion period tonight, if you care to, I would be glad to tell you more of what kind of work it is, and under what kind of conditions.

I want to say just a word about who these WPA workers are.
The three million people now on WPA are not an isolated group in any sense, nor are they frozen into a separate economy of their own. As a matter of fact the flow of workers in and out of the WPA is continuous. Over seven million different people have worked for WPA in the last four years. This represents about 25 million people in the families of these workers. In other words, people go in and out of WPA, depending on the ups and downs of private employment. The WPA workers are a real cross-section of all the trades, professions and occupations in the United States.
May I give you very briefly three main reasons why I like the answer of public work for the needs of the unemployed. First, I like it because it is the only decent way to treat American citizens who want to work. I hope and believe that we are forever through with the indignities which were heaped upon the unemployed a few years ago in the form of grocery orders or cash doles.

The second reason I like this plan is because I am convinced from the experience and the statistics of the last few years that it is a vitally useful factor in our economic scheme. Putting three million people at work into the economic life-stream of the country with purchasing power, has been a demonstrable stabilizing force in our business life and a force in sustaining our national income. Every time we have materially reduced the rolls of those who work for the WPA, private employment and business have dropped. On the other hand, every time we have increased the number of people employed by the WPA, private employment and business have immediately gone up. This is a matter which is easily demonstrated and on which you, as students of our present day economics, should get the clear facts.

The third reason I like a real work program for the unemployed is because these wage checks to unemployed people produce real wealth for all of us. The roads, the bridges, the water mains, the sewers, the parks and playgrounds, the great work on public health, education, -- all of these things have added untold wealth to the nation and don't fool yourself about this. Don't let yourselves be fooled by shopworn jokes or partisan and false attacks on WPA workers because the people really know. Over 90% of the Mayors in the United States have testified to the value of this work program. Shovel-leaners just can't build the Los Angeles Airport, the Chicago Outer Drive, the parks in New Orleans and the East Side Drive in New York, the thousands of miles of improved roads, the thousands of new school houses. These things are all important assets in the form of increased national wealth to balance off any expenditures that have been made.
Now, on the subject of more or less relief, the intelligent answer, of course, is that the amount should be related to the demonstrable need. In spite of our best efforts the need has never been met. Never more than 30% of the unemployed have been on the WPA at one time. This point must be emphasized -- never more than one-third of the unemployed have been given WPA jobs. We are faced at this very moment with the necessity of arbitrarily firing between one and one and one-half million people from the WPA between now and June. This will mean that only 12 to 15 percent of the unemployed will have WPA jobs in June. The recent action of Congress in deducting $150,000,000 from the President's request for the WPA between now and the end of June was at no time debated on the merits of the case. It might as well have been fifty million or three hundred million as far as the debate went. It could not help but appear to be a political move simply to make what we might admit was a laudable gesture toward economy, but the arbitrary saving of this $150,000,000 means the deliberate loss of well-being for one million families. There is absolutely nothing in the cards to indicate that any of these people can do else but beg to get on local relief rolls. As a matter of fact there are still another million people, able-bodied and willing to work, and in need, who are not able to get WPA jobs even now.

So, finally, I say that the question as to whether relief is more, or less, not only depends on the need but on the willingness of the people of this country to meet the need. I think any student of current history will come to the conclusion that any nation's treatment of its unemployed and the problem of unemployment will be the largest single factor in determining that nation's political set-up. It has been answered in one way by dictatorship nations. It can be answered by us in a democracy in another and more decent way. It cannot be answered by ignoring the problem because then we will willy-nilly get an answer we don't like. I say it can be answered within the frame work of democracy and freedom only by recognising the citizenship rights of the unemployed and their right to work.