For Release on Delivery—Scheduled For
3:30 p.m. (Eastern Daylight Time)
Monday, May 15, 1939.

COLONEL HARRINGTON ADDRESSES U. S. CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

The following address was delivered by Colonel F. C. Harrington, Works Progress Administrator, before the United States Conference of Mayors at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York City, at 3:30 P. M., Eastern Daylight Saving Time, Monday, May 15, 1939:

It is a pleasure as well as an honor to appear before the United States Conference of Mayors. And it is for me a pleasure as well as a duty to talk about the Works Progress Administration.

In discussing our work program, I shall bear in mind that you gentlemen know more than I do about the specific situation in your respective cities, and I shall confine myself to the general or total situation throughout the nation. The city governments which you represent, and the Federal agency which I represent have now been working together for almost four years, and I think that by this time we understand one another pretty well. The work which we have been doing together is to my mind a remarkable example of cooperation. I think it can truthfully be described as not only the largest and most successful achievement in peacetime cooperation in the history of our nation, but one of the greatest in the history of the world.

I am very proud of my connection, past and present, with this great collaboration between the Federal government and local governments in providing work for the needy unemployed and in providing municipalities with needed improvements and services. And I am in a position to know that it is because of the administrative diligence and skill of the officials of local governments that this gigantic and complex collaboration has been so successful.

It is inevitable that in carrying out such a program there should be differences of emphasis. I am aware that we in Washington and you in your various localities do not always see eye to eye in regard to particular details of WPA administration and policy. But I shall not attempt to anticipate any criticisms that you may wish to make. If you have questions to ask me at the end of these remarks,
I shall answer them frankly to the best of my ability. What I propose
to do now is to take up several aspects of the WPA program that seem
to me most important at the present juncture, and comment on them briefly.

The first thing I feel obliged to mention is one that con­
cerns the degree of adequacy of our employment program. WPA national
employment stands for the moment—as of May 2—at 2,600,000. This
figure does not represent the extent of the current need. It is simply
the number of jobs that the WPA can provide with the funds appropriated
to us by Congress. We know that there are additional large numbers of
men and women certified by local governments as able to work and in
need—who are not being provided with WPA employment. The cooperation
of the WPA with communities in dealing with such needs is necessarily
limited by the funds available for wages.

All of us have had to make up our minds as citizens upon
what to do about unemployment. And once it was decided that government
had an obligation in that direction, there has been little doubt that it
should take two distinct forms—one, toward needy unemployable
people, and another toward needy employable people. The first large
group is now being given Federal and State assistance, where the
proper cooperation is forthcoming, through Social Security benefits,
or through local direct relief. Most of the other group is being
provided with work on public projects. This is being done by our
States and localities with the help of the Federal government. I
think you will agree with me in saying that our public-work program
is now under the effective control of the States and localities in
the respects in which such control is desirable and practicable.

It is the broad general policy that your local government
relief agencies shall determine what workers are in need of WPA work,
and that your local governments shall plan and initiate projects.
Since you help pay for them, it is to be presumed that you are getting
what you want.

The President's message to Congress on April 27 supported
our present arrangement as to sharing the costs of projects between
the Federal and local governments. The rightful amount of the sponsor's
contribution has, naturally, been a subject of frequent dispute between
us in Washington and you in your localities. We have often thought
that you should contribute somewhat more, while you have often thought
that you should contribute less. But we have usually been able to come to a satisfactory understanding. That was possible because we on our part had no arbitrarily fixed requirements, except the very reasonable one set by Congress in 1938, which limits the expenditure of Federal funds for other-than-labor costs to a maximum of $7 per month worker in any State.

It is my opinion that this type of control—namely the limitation of Federal non-labor funds in terms of dollars—is far more advantageous than any limitation in percentage of total cost. We have thus been able to meet, far better than would otherwise have been possible, the varying needs and capacities of local sponsors. I think you will agree that to set up arbitrary, unalterable percentage requirements for sponsors’ contributions at the present time would not only make it quite impossible for many of your communities to continue various projects of undoubted value, but would go far to cripple the work program as a whole.

Fundamentally we have to choose between continuing our work program along its present lines, and abandoning it in favor of the dole. The latter, in my opinion, would be a mistake of the most unfortunate kind. The President’s message of April 27 contained these words: "I firmly believe that the advantages which accrue from the maintenance of the morale and self-respect of the worker and the creation of permanent public assets fully justify this increased cost, and that the adoption of the dole as the solution of this problem would be disastrous."

The vague phrase, "return relief to the States," is often heard these days. This ambiguous slogan covers the proposal to turn Federal work-relief funds over to the States and let them decide whether to use these funds in conducting a work program, or, if they prefer, to stop providing work and merely distribute Federal funds as a dole to the able-bodied unemployed. The significance of the whole proposal seems to lie in the latter alternative—the prospective abandonment and destruction of the work program within the various States.

The present method of Federal-State-and-local collaboration on a public-work program, though doubtless capable of improvement, seems to me worth preserving and defending.
And this brings me to another matter, the question of how to increase WPA efficiency. In comparing the efficiency of WPA workers with those in private industry, it is customary for many of our critics to overlook several important aspects of the situations they are comparing. We are sometimes criticized for making less use of labor-saving machinery and equipment than does private industry. This criticism ignores the fact that the purchase or rental of machinery and equipment costs money, and that Federal work-relief funds have to be expended chiefly in the payment of wages to the project workers. I know that we in Washington have no objection to you in your localities providing all the labor-saving machinery you may wish on WPA projects—the more the better. And if anyone should propose that special and separate Federal funds should be appropriated to provide WPA workers with the most modern machine equipment on every project, I am sure that neither you in your localities nor we in Washington will have any objection to that.

In the meantime it is difficult to compare the efficiency of WPA workers with those in private industry. In some instances that are directly comparable, WPA projects have cost less money than contract work would have cost, with equally good results. But we all know that those projects are exceptional. We know the reasons why WPA workers do not, by and large, produce as much results per man-hour as those in private industry. The weather is one of those reasons. Unemployment tends to be greatest in winter, the most unfavorable season for nearly every kind of outdoor work. Private construction can pick and choose its weather for working, and the WPA cannot.

Another reason is the fact that we cannot hold on to our best workers by offering them higher wages. We have to let them go—in fact, we make them go—when they have a chance to get a private job. And, contrary to what some people think, our workers do leave WPA projects for private jobs, sometimes at the rate of several hundred thousand a month. Their places are taken by other needy unemployed workers, who have been waiting on your local relief rolls for a WPA vacancy. No work organization can attain a maximum efficiency with a high labor turnover. And our high turnover is one of the things that we must put up with and welcome, as an essential part of the whole scheme of emergency work relief.
It is true that the WPA is spending a great deal of money on this project. It is, in fact, the largest project the WPA has so far undertaken. Some fourteen million dollars of Federal funds already have been spent by the WPA on this project. But—and this is a fact seldom included—the city of New York has spent almost as much of its own money to date.

This is not a new type of WPA project. The WPA, as you know, has been working on airport projects for years. Hundreds of airports and landing fields were completed before the North Beach airport was begun. North Beach is simply the latest, the largest, and the most costly. It is a necessary addition to our network of airports and airways, not only commercially but also as a part of our system of national defense.

We are accused of paying high rates to skilled workers on this project. The fact is, we pay merely the prevailing rates in New York City, as required by Congress. We also are accused of working WPA workers full-time, five days a week, every week.

Gentlemen, I wish it were possible for me to admit the truth of this charge not only for the North Beach airport, but for every other WPA project in the whole country. But the truth is that those regular five-day-a-week workers at North Beach are not WPA workers, but contract workers whose wages are paid entirely by the City of New York.

And, finally, as to the number of WPA workers on this project, if they were not working here they would be working on some other project. They have been certified to the WPA by the relief agency of the City of New York as in need, and capable of work. The WPA puts them on one project or another project. Why not on this airport project? The quota for New York remains the same.

In short, what is the point of these criticisms? In part they are not true, and as a whole they are irrelevant. The North Beach airport project is one of about 35,000 WPA projects scattered all over the United States. It should be judged in the light of the purpose of the whole program. This purpose, I repeat, is to set the needy unemployed at suitable public work for the benefit of the communities in which they live. Undoubtedly these projects are of varying degrees of social value, and certainly they are conducted with varying degrees of efficiency. Criticism along these lines would be useful. But our current critics do not seem concerned with whether we do our job well or badly. Their grievance appears to be that we are
doing our job at all—that we actually are providing public work for the unemployed, and actually are helping to create civic improvements and services. If that is a crime, we are certainly guilty of it.

I have been frankly disappointed at the apparent motivation of the investigators who have been sent out by the Congressional committee now investigating the WPA. These investigators seem entirely absorbed in hunting things to criticize. So far as I can learn, not one of them has yet told the committee anything about the accomplishments of this program, or the good it has done the unemployed. Small faults have been magnified and great virtues entirely omitted.

The true and the fair story of the WPA is to be had from thousands of sources, merely for the asking. Several of your own membership gave very effective parts of it to the Congressional committee on May 8 and 9—testimony in strange contrast to that the investigators are bringing in.

Your conference, also, is one of eleven national organizations which have just completed a nationwide survey of the WPA, gathering independent testimony from 8,000 local officials in 42 states. Your President was chairman of a committee which took this report to the White House about a week ago.

This survey contains knocks as well as boosts, and plenty of frank talk. I do not wish to go into great detail about it, but the overwhelming endorsement of the WPA which came from these thousands of mayors and county officials and educators and engineers ought, somehow, to be made known to the American people.

More than 90 per cent of these reports stated that their WPA projects were badly needed, of benefit to the communities, and of permanent value. Over 80 per cent of them said WPA workmanship has been good, and that the work has maintained the skill and the employability of the workers.

I want to express our gratitude to your Conference and the other agencies which helped carry out this appraisal. You have erected an enduring monument upon which the actual public opinion of the nation’s communities is inscribed, to inform those who are uninformed and to confute those who misrepresent.

I should like to say a word about the white-collar projects of the WPA. Here are the four questions and answers concerning them...
in the Appraisal.

"Have the education activities of the WPA been worthwhile?" Over 95 per cent of the answers were "Yes".

"Have the public health activities of the WPA been worthwhile?" Over 95 per cent of the answers were "Yes".

"Have the public recreation activities of the WPA been worthwhile?" Over 91 per cent of the answers were "Yes".

"Have the other non-construction activities of the WPA been worthwhile?" Over 95 per cent of the answers were "Yes".

It is hardly necessary to say that all these white-collar, non-construction projects of the WPA stand upon the same footing as our construction projects. Unemployment is not confined to manual workers, nor is it confined to men. Employment on public works should include work for white-collar workers and women workers. These account for at least 20 per cent of the nation's total unemployment, and it is only just that they should receive about 20 per cent of the jobs in our work program.

This has been the policy of the work program from the beginning, and nothing has occurred to change our view as to the justice and practical necessity of providing work for needy unemployed white-collar workers and women.

In this matter we have the reassurance given by the President in his recent message, when he said:

"I wish to state with emphasis, since the opposite view is frequently expressed, that the Works Progress Administration should, as at present, include some projects of the non-construction type to meet the needs of those unemployed workers whose training is such that they are not adapted to employment on construction projects. This provision of work for those people at occupations that will conserve their skills is of prime importance, and the emphasis placed on construction projects should not obscure the necessity for this portion of the program."

Many white-collar projects are concerned with the preservation of important cultural values of our civilization—whether they are education projects, music projects, art projects, or historical record surveys projects. If we really respect civilization and really
believe in it, we will welcome and encourage the projects which use
the special training and preserve the special values that represent
the flowering of long ages of cultural effort in the past.

If we care nothing for either the past or the future, we
will set our artists to digging ditches and think nothing of it.
But I am deeply convinced that we do care culturally for the world's
past and for our American future.

If there were time, I should like to discuss the problems of
community planning. We in America, with our vast resources, have
done too little planning in the past. We are only just beginning as a
nation to realize the necessity for planning. You have made a
beginning in the communities that you represent. I am glad to know
that the WPA has been of assistance to you in carrying out your plans.
I know, however, that we have not been of as much help as we might
have been, because of the emergency character of our own work, and the
impossibility of counting upon us for longer than the end of any
current fiscal year. Both your special interest in providing communi-
ty improvements, and our special interest in meeting the unemployment
situation in a constructive way, have been severely hampered by the
lack of any long-term basis for our joint efforts. As to the future,
that will depend on a fuller recognition by the American people of the
fact that unemployment is a long-term problem. I know of no better
brief statement of the need for facing the facts, than that made by
the President in his recent message.

I wish to quote that passage from his message, and with it I
will conclude my remarks, except for answers to any questions which
those here may wish to ask me.

Said the President: "In any consideration of the problem
of unemployment relief, it must be borne in mind that the program
adopted to meet it must be envisioned to extend over a considerable
period of time. The reason for this is that this nation, in common
with the entire world, is undergoing a process of readjustment,
particularly in connection with the production and distribution of
goods. Until our American machinery can be realigned to meet present-
day conditions, the problem of unemployment will persist, and the
measures adopted to deal with it must, therefore, be carefully thought
out and their operation planned to extend well into the future."

I thank you for your attention.