

FEDERAL WORKS AGENCY
WORK PROJECTS ADMINISTRATION

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WHAT NATIONAL DEFENSE MEANS

The following address is for delivery by Mrs. Florence Kerr, Assistant Commissioner, Work Projects Administration, at a dinner meeting of the Arkansas Conference of Social Work at 7 P.M. Thursday, April 10, 1941, at the Marion Hotel, Little Rock, Arkansas.

We used to learn our history lessons out of books at school. If we didn't learn our lessons properly we got a low mark on our report cards. Now we are learning our history lessons in the newspaper headlines, and over the radio. And if we don't learn these lessons properly, the consequences will be immense and tragic.

But I think we here in America are learning our history lessons. Our teachers are those who have read these lessons by the light of their own blazing homes, set afire by incendiary bombs dropped from the air. We have come to understand that our nation must be fully prepared to defend itself by power of arms, if it is to survive. Yes, we have learned that first great history lesson of today. We are rapidly mustering and training a defense army, and rapidly producing modern defensive armaments of every kind.

And that is not all. We have been learning at the same time the second great history lesson of today. We have come to realize that the fate of our American democracy is linked up with that of the other democracies, here in our Western hemisphere and throughout the world.

We cannot afford to allow all the other democracies to be destroyed, one by one, until it is our turn at last. And that is why our nation, in self defense, is becoming a vast arsenal for the production of weapons of defense for the embattled democracies all over the world. We realize that these sister democracies are fighting our battles for us, and that we owe it to ourselves as well as to them to provide the weapons needed for their defense and ours. This aid to democracy abroad is a necessary part of our own national defense.

But that is not the last of the history lessons of today. There is another lesson that we are learning. It is that our national defense does not consist of armies and armaments alone. We must be a strong nation within our battlements. We must arm this whole nation with health, with education, with security, and with confidence in our democratic way of life.

For this internal defense of America we rely upon our communities. Every city and town and county has a share in this great task of strengthening our home defense program.

What is home defense? It does not at this moment mean air-raid precautions and drills. It does not, today, mean the evacuation of children from cities under bombardment. We hope and pray that it may not come to that here in America. If it does, the people of our towns and cities will do their part and the women of America will take as gallant a part in that final defense of their homes as the heroic women of Britain are now taking.--

But what does home defense mean to us today? What part can our communities take in strengthening the nation's internal defenses?

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There are many things that can be done. Some of them are new tasks. But many of them are old and familiar community services, in behalf of public health, education, and social welfare.

These familiar community services have always been important. But they have a new importance today, because they are urgently required as a part of our national defense program. We must, in the first place, continue the essential community services already established; and in second place, we must extend them -- we must provide more such services to more of the people that need them.

You may have heard it said that national defense requires us to drop our community welfare work. Do not believe it. There never was a more mistaken notion. And it would be a fatal mistake to adopt that false notion. It is sometimes said that these social services are "luxuries". Is health a luxury? Is education a luxury? That is not the view of those who are mustering an army for national defense. It is not the view of those who are using every possible means to speed up production in our defense industries.

We need more work on behalf of public health, education and social welfare -- not less. We need more community activities along these lines. We shall need more and more voluntary work along the home defense front. There will be need for more training, so that all willing hands can be usefully and efficiently employed on these home front tasks. And there will be need for greater coordination of all community services, so that none of our energies shall be wasted.

I don't need to tell you that the WPA has cooperated with every community, and with every separate public agency in every community,

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in such work in the past. I think I can assure you that American communities will continue to have an opportunity for this kind of cooperation during our national defense emergency.

It is true that the labor and skill of WPA workers are being turned increasingly to national defense work. And on this point let me quote General George Marshall, Chief of Staff of the United States Army. Said General Marshall (I quote) "In the great task of national defense, the WPA has proved itself to be an invaluable aid." General Marshall was referring specifically to the construction and improvement work done by WPA workers at airports and army camps. Such defense construction work is not a new task for the WPA. We have been doing just such work for five years and more. Now we are doing more of it.

And the same thing is true of the community service end of our WPA program. We have, among other things, provided personnel to assist and extend the work of public hospitals and clinics all over the country. Now it is recognized that national defense requires much more work of this kind. And the WPA has undertaken to train as many as 50,000 people this year for jobs as hospital orderlies and attendants.

The WPA has in the past worked to extend educational benefits to people not reached by our regular public school system. Now certain specific educational needs have arisen in connection with defense work. And the WPA has begun to train young men for jobs as ground service men at airports; about five thousand will be trained this year. And the WPA is putting thousands of selected workers from its rolls through special training courses in order to fit them for jobs in the defense industries.

There are many ways in which WPA community service projects are now helping the defense program. For example, there are WPA projects carrying on tabulation work for the use of the artillery; making highly technical maps of strategically important areas; and conducting experiments in camouflage work.

Our defense emergency is creating for WPA recreation projects two new fields of usefulness. Recreation work is greatly needed in towns near military training camps. It is also needed in cities swelled by the families of the new workers in our new defense industries. Everybody knows the civic value of opportunities for healthy recreation. And these values are now of importance in our national defense program.

To assist military authorities and city officials in meeting these needs, the WPA has assigned 4,000 of its 36,000 trained recreation leaders to conduct programs which include athletics, handicrafts, dramatics, and dancing. Civic clubs and churches are co-sponsoring many of these activities. Camp Robinson here in Arkansas is one of many army camps where WPA recreation programs are already under way.

And now let me read to you what Surgeon General Dr. Parran has said on the subject of health and national defense.

"America," says Dr. Parran, "has moved forward in improving the peoples' health. The cooperation of the WPA during recent years has helped greatly. But extra effort is needed to protect the health of the people during our urgent defense preparations. Healthy, vigorous manpower is a vital factor in national defense."

And Dr. Parran goes on to say this: "If our workers are malnourished, they cannot be efficient in producing what we need for defense. A third of our people are not getting a diet adequate to maintain health

and vigor.... Through proper nutrition we have it in our power to build a new race of people in America." (end of quotation).

This calls our attention to the WPA school lunch program for undernourished children. Two million children a day are now being fed by this program. The work done in the past five years is now recognized as a valuable contribution to our national defense. This work must go on. And there must be more of it done -- not less.

What this means is that our American communities can take an important part in the national defense program by continuing, and increasing, the essential services on behalf of health and welfare that they have been providing to the underprivileged during recent years.

There will be various opportunities to make this work of direct use to our army and our navy, and every such opportunity will, of course, be welcomed. For example, the WPA has been cooperating with many communities by extending library services to people who are remote from libraries. Such extension services are now greatly needed in cities that are defense industry centers; and books need to be provided for soldiers in camps. The WPA is providing such services at many camps and defense centers.

Another example. WPA clerical workers are being made available to the Army for emergency duties at induction centers, where the regular personnel cannot meet sudden emergency needs for clerical work.

Most of these home defense tasks -- feeding undernourished children, making garments for the needy in sewing rooms, helping at clinics, sending housekeeping aides into families when a parent is ill, and similar community services -- these are homely tasks. They are none-the-less important to our national defense.

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That is the chief thing I have to tell you today -- that national defense includes the home front, and that the home front needs a lot of good, honest, simple community housekeeping. National defense here in our communities means feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, providing young people with educational benefits, willing workers with useful jobs, and the aged and helpless with protection, and security.

But there is one thing more that I wish to say. I want to emphasize the need of training and the need for volunteer work on the home front. I have spoken chiefly of those community services in which the WPA has helped -- and there are few, I think, in which we haven't helped. But I have tried to indicate that the need for community services now exceeds, and will exceed, any amount of help that the WPA and all other Federal, State and local agencies of government can provide. This is not an excuse for any of us slacking on our job. It is a statement of needs so large that all efforts, official and private, will be welcome.

I have referred frequently to "our communities," meaning, of course, our communities as organized into local governments. But everyone knows that our communities are wider than that. Our local governments are actually only an official arm of our communities. And there is another arm that should not be left out of our considerations. It is the private arm. It is important to have both arms at work on this job, and working together.

Our American communities have always done many important things through private organizations, and often on a volunteer basis.

It is our traditional way of doing many good works, and it is a good way in itself. But we frequently find it necessary to organize these same activities as public services. A familiar example is our local fire-companies, which were first organized on a volunteer basis, and then established as a public service. Another example is our school system. And a more recent example is the establishment of many kinds of social welfare work as public services. We change from a volunteer basis to a public basis of community work when the need is so great that public funds and more systematic methods are required. In recent years, as a result of the great depression, our communities have asked for, and received, systematic Federal assistance and Federal funds to help in carrying on their work on behalf of their citizens.

Now the point that I wish to make is that private and volunteer work has not vanished from the community picture. I do not think it will ever vanish. The community picture is changing, certainly, in two ways. Some kinds of community work are changing from a private and volunteer to a public basis. And community efforts of all kinds, private and public, are becoming more closely coordinated with each other. The phrase "community service" necessarily includes every kind of community service. The word "community" does not mean simply the official agencies that perform various kinds of work. It means the actual community, its people, its citizens, acting through both private organizations and public agencies, on behalf of their common welfare.

It is in the sphere of private effort, and especially in the field of unselfish volunteer effort, that most good works have begun. It is the fountain whence they have flowed for many centuries. At times it may seem that that fountain has dried up, and that everything worth doing has been organized on an official basis. It may seem so, but it is not so. In time of new need, the fountain bursts again from the rocks. And these are such times. Let us welcome private effort, and volunteer effort, and make the most of it.

The way to make the most of such private and volunteer efforts can be expressed succinctly in three words: (1) Training. (2) Training. (3) Training.

National defense needs us all. It needs the enthusiasm of youth and the experience of maturer years. It needs the help of women no less than of men. It needs women's patience and devotion, their skill and wisdom. But national defense calls upon us all to take our part. And most of us can learn best how to use our abilities by learning how to fit them into the pattern of community needs and organized community efforts.

National defense, let me repeat, needs us all. It needs the labor and the skill of the unemployed in every community. It needs their devotion and their faith in democracy. We have given the unemployed of this nation a stake in our democracy. We have made this their nation to improve and to defend. I am proud of their contribution through construction projects of all kinds to our safety and well being, and through community service projects of all kinds to our social welfare. I am

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proud of our communities for providing them with useful public work and wages. This has been, and this is now more than ever, a vital community contribution to national defense.

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