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"WPA - A Bridge to Recovery"

The following address was delivered by Florence Kerr, Assistant Commissioner, Work Projects Administration, before the District of Columbia Branch of the American Association of University Women, at 5 P.M. February 12, 1940.

It is fitting today, on February 12th, to invoke the memory of the great American whose birthday this is. Abraham Lincoln was one of those leaders whose spirit ranged far above the narrow partisan controversies of the times in which he lived. His humanity, his understanding and his sympathies were so broad that he is to us more than a figure in our history books. It can be said of him that he lived not for his age alone, but for all time. His spirit, sad and tolerant, humorous and wise, infinitely courageous and hopeful, seems to brood over our troubled world today. His words still have power over our minds. So I am going to take some of his words as a kind of text.

The words that I am going to quote were jotted down in a notebook ninety-three years ago, in 1847, when Lincoln was a rising young Whig politician in Springfield, Illinois; and these particular notes were made for some speech on the tariff question. But in the midst of a prosaic argument, he turned abruptly to first principles, and his phrases took on a poetic and almost Biblical dignity and simplicity.

"Except the light and the air of heaven," he wrote, "no good thing has been or can be enjoyed by us without having first cost labor."

Another sentence that I want to quote from these same notes is not so poetic, but it is as deliberately impressive as Lincoln could make it.

"Universal idleness," he wrote, "would speedily result in universal ruin."

When he wrote that, Lincoln was not thinking of universal idleness as a prospect that the American people would ever have to face in actuality. It was a part of a logical argument that he was making -- a kind of reductio ad absurdum.

It is not my intention to tell again the story of those dark depression years after 1929, when we seemed to be going so rapidly and so far toward universal idleness here in the United States as to bring us face to face with the prospect of universal ruin.

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But I do want to say that I hope we have not forgotten what we learned in those dark years. And what we learned was that Lincoln was right. It was obvious to us then that if any of us were to continue to enjoy the good things of life, some way had to be found to get our unemployed back to work. All kinds of emergency measures were taken toward that end. One of the most significant of these measures was that undertaken jointly by the Federal government and our communities, of setting the most needy of our unemployed to work on public projects. The immediate effect of this was to revive private employment. And this process of economic recovery has continued, though it has been slower than we all had hoped, and not without one bad setback, in 1937 -- when our prosperity had increased to such an extent that we thought we could largely dispense with the assistance given by the government through our various public work programs. We found that we were mistaken.

Ever since the war started in Europe last fall, many sections of the American public have had large expectations of an immensely increased prosperity from war orders and increased foreign trade. I did not believe in these prospects last fall; and although I have rejoiced in such business expansion as has occurred in our domestic production and trade, I do not believe in those prospects now. I do not share the overweening confidence of those who believe that we can build an American prosperity on the miseries of war-torn Europe. And I shall not pretend that I think we are going to be able to dispense with a large program of public work for the unemployed in the near future.

Our economic recovery is still far from complete. I think our situation can best be stated in such simple terms as those used by Abraham Lincoln. We all know that very large numbers of the American people still lack any opportunity to use their hands, their skills and their training in work for wages. And we also know that even larger numbers -- the unemployed, the half-employed and the ill-paid -- lack their full share of the good things of life. We know that this situation cannot be remedied quickly. There is reason to believe that it will take twenty or thirty years to solve the problems that must be solved before that situation can be altered fundamentally. That task is going to require a great deal of courage, a great deal of wisdom and a great deal of patience.

And so I think we ought to look ahead a little -- look beyond our immediate problems of ways and means -- and ask ourselves, what is our goal? I will state my own views frankly. I think we must look for-

ward to opportunities of useful work for everybody, and a full share of the good things of life for everybody.

In times past, that might have seemed too ideal, too Utopian a goal to be discussed as a practical prospect. But I think that there exists today a plain practical reason why we must think of our American future in such terms. That reason, briefly, is this -- that our modern economic system needs our whole population as its customers. It cannot get along without our whole population as buyers and consumers of goods. It has broken down badly in the recent past because it was not geared successfully to bring in a large section of our population as customers. We have only begun to deal with that situation.

Let me urge you to get and read the recent report of Secretary of Commerce, Harry L. Hopkins, which deals more fully with this situation, and shows what private business can do to meet it. For it is essentially a problem of private business. But there are ways of solving it. And far-sighted business men are beginning to think out in practical detail their own possible contributions to the solution of the problem.

You have asked me to talk to you about the activities of the Professional and Service Projects of the Work Projects Administration, and I am always glad to do that. And on all occasions, when I discuss our program, I feel obliged to state and discuss also the general social purpose of which our efforts are a part.

I shall tell you something about our WPA clinics and public health nurses and household aides; about our WPA adult education and nursery schools and recreation projects; about our WPA assistance to traffic surveys, municipal planning surveys and university research; about our WPA sewing rooms and our school lunch projects; about our WPA orchestras and music classes, our WPA murals and art classes and our other cultural projects.

Before I do so, I should like to talk a little about our American problems of work and unemployment in general. And I feel that on Lincoln's birthday, and with the encouragement of his example, I need make no further apology for dwelling upon first principles.

Work is a central fact in all civilizations, and in our modern civilization it is a very complex and many-sided fact. Few of us nowadays work for ourselves to any extent. That is, we don't ordinarily make and wear our own shoes, or dig and burn our own coal, or even raise

and eat our own food. We find it more convenient to make shoes for others, and let others dig coal and raise food for us. Everybody works for everybody else. And everybody is dependent upon everybody else in a thousand ways.

Back in the Middle Ages they had an ecclesiastical punishment of frightful severity which was sometimes inflicted upon wicked kings. The guilty one was expelled from the social order, and everybody was forbidden to give him food or fire. It brought the proudest monarch to his knees in short order. But today, unemployment constitutes a kind of gradual expulsion from the social order. The man who is out of a job for a while is shut out of the whole normal give-and-take of our society. He is no longer doing whatever it was that he used to do for others -- make shoes, dig coal, or raise food-crops. And nobody is doing for him what everybody used to do -- supply his needs, and his family's needs. The time comes when he is not welcome in the grocery store, or in the coal yard. He has been interdicted from food and fire. His children haven't any shoes to go to school in, so they drop out of school. The family has been excommunicated from the regular world.

Nowadays our communities try to halt this process of economic and social disintegration before it gets quite to the bitter end. At some point of desperate need, the family is put on the relief rolls; and employable heads of such needy families are assigned to WPA jobs. It is for them a step back into the real world. They can buy groceries again. The children can go to school. That bitter Victorian social critic, Carlyle, once complained of the "cash-nexus between man and man." There is a brighter side to that cash nexus, as we all know. And a WPA check does restore a jobless worker to the community. The corner grocer admits him to human fellowship. The coal-man is glad to see him.

And that cash-nexus is just as important to the corner grocer and the coal-man as it is to the WPA worker. Right here in the District of Columbia, since the WPA program has been in operation, the grocers and other food merchants have sold about nine million dollars worth of food to WPA workers. This estimate is based on our own WPA wage-figures, and on studies of how the low-income groups which include WPA workers spend their family income.

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Thus, to a significant extent, our neediest jobless workers remain customers of American industry and business. Back in depression days it was not so. And American industry and business felt the lack of those customers. When our jobless workers and desperate farmers fell over the economic precipice, they dragged American industry and business over with them.

The fact is that we support each other by consuming the products of each other's labor. If the producers of food and the makers of clothing do not consume each other's products, food and clothing pile up unused, while the producers of both go hungry and in rags. We are often more imperatively needed by our economic system as consumers of goods than as producers of goods -- for we have wonderful machines that can produce food and clothing with the aid of fewer human hands every year. But we have no machines that can eat the food they plant and reap, or wear the cloth they weave and spin. It still takes us human beings to enjoy and consume the good things of life.

At present our economic system can produce goods much more easily than it can find consumers for them. We have alarming surpluses of wheat and cotton, of butter and flour, of suits and overcoats from time to time. To keep these surpluses from burdening the market, the government recently has been buying them up and distributing them to people on the relief rolls. The food-stamp system that has been tried out in several cities is the latest method of getting these surpluses consumed.

This whole situation is one which has existed only in modern and recent times -- only since modern machinery has come widely into use. It is a situation so different from what used to exist, in the "scarcity economy" of former times, that many people still do not realize what the situation is. These dislocations of our economy were first called "paradoxes." It seemed a contradiction in terms that people should go hungry because there was too much food, or go in rags because there had been an overproduction of clothing. These paradoxes have been laughed

at scornfully, and wept over bitterly. Now business and industry are beginning to recognize that all the people who never have enough of anything constitute a vast potential market, and that the production and distribution of goods for this vast market will provide enough jobs to make our present mass unemployment a nightmare of the past.

It is because we have reached an advanced stage of development in our capacity for mass-production of goods, without having as yet developed any correspondingly extensive methods of mass-distribution of goods, that we now suffer from mass unemployment.

It is not in the United States alone that this problem of general unemployment exists. It has existed increasingly for more than a quarter of a century all over that part of the world in which modern industry has been built up. Widespread and increasing unemployment existed before the last World War, and had much to do with bringing it about. War has not solved that problem for any nation, it has only made things worse all over the world. The situation today is that War is becoming the chief employer of mankind. War has an unlimited use for everybody -- first in manufacturing the implements of death, and then in using them.

Our own nation has rejected, and I hope and trust will continue to reject, this desperate solution of the unemployment problem. It has been our belief, and I hope it will continue to be our belief, that the purposes of Peace can provide full employment for our hands and minds. But if we really believe this, then we must prove it. Peace cannot long or successfully compete with War if Peace cannot offer the full employment that War always offers. For War is an employer that never takes down its "Men Wanted" sign.

So we must decide this question -- do we really have faith in Peace? Do we believe that Peace can offer full employment to our manual laborers, our skilled workers, our service workers, our professional and technical workers, our teachers and musicians and painters and all other cultural workers? And if we believe it, how can we help to prove it true?

Abraham Lincoln thought that it was the purpose and the

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function of democratic government -- of our own government -- to promote equality of opportunity and betterment of the conditions of life for our whole population. He solemnly declared of our United States government that its "leading object is" -- I quote -- "to elevate the condition of men; to lift artificial weights from all shoulders; to clear the paths of laudable pursuit for all; to afford all an unfettered start and a fair chance in the race of life."

If we have not abandoned that idea of the democratic purpose of our government, then we must be prepared to use and to keep on using the large powers and resources of our government in helping to solve this great problem of unemployment, which still today depresses the condition of men, which still rests as an artificial and intolerable weight upon millions, which still blocks the paths of laudable pursuit for youth, and which still denies to a great part of our population a fair chance in the race of life. If it is the obligation of our government to help create full economic opportunity in America, then I think we must not be discouraged because complete success has not yet crowned our efforts. The grim alternative to full employment in the constructive works of Peace will ultimately be -- here as elsewhere throughout the world -- full employment in the destructive works of War. And the costs of our constructive efforts in the works of Peace are small indeed in comparison to the infinite and tragic costs of War, which we will have to bear if we fail or falter in our present efforts, as Europe before us has faltered and failed.

And so, to me, the question of a WPA job for an unemployed and destitute musician, clerk, teacher, nurse or draftsman is more than a question of figures in the budget of a fiscal year. It is a question of what kind of civilization we have, what kind of civilization we want, what kind of civilization we are willing to struggle for and hand on to our children. If this is indeed a dying civilization, if we have no hope for the future, if it is not worth while to make any effort, then what we are doing in our WPA projects has no significance. But if we believe in the future, if we have faith in democracy, if we are work-

ing together in the common cause of a better America, then our humblest WPA projects are at once an act of faith and a practical contribution to the cause that we serve.

At first, seven years ago, in 1933, when, after our gigantic economic collapse, the work of economic rehabilitation was first undertaken by the Federal government, human distress was so vast and so acute that food, clothing and shelter had to be provided to the suffering millions of America, as to the victims of a cyclone or tornado. But that was not enough. Work had to be provided for them, and only the Federal government was in a position to provide work. Those who were jobless and in need were for the most part unskilled workers; and this has been true every since. The bulk of all work-relief projects, under the WPA and previous similar agencies, has necessarily been such as would provide work to such workers. And there has been no lack of useful work in our communities for them to do. They have constructed and improved our roads all over the nation, they have laid sewers and water-mains, dug drainage ditches, and created parks and playgrounds. There have always been skilled workers on the relief rolls, too, and they have worked for our communities in constructing and improving schools, hospitals and every other kind of needed public buildings. But unemployment and need were not confined to manual workers, nor to men workers. All classes and kinds of workers were found on the relief rolls, and a large proportion of them were, and still are, women workers.

It is one of the special advantages of the WPA type of work program, as compared with regular public works, that it provides employment for women. In a great many needy families it is a woman who is the breadwinner. There are at this time about 300,000 women on the WPA payrolls. Some are skilled, some are unskilled, some have had professional training, and some have had no previous work experience except as housewives. The Professional and Service Division, which is under my charge, includes projects in practically every field of work open to women -- health, education, recreation leadership, library extension work, research, laboratory work, clerical work, art, music, and cooking. Our two most widespread projects employing women are our sewing rooms and our school lunch projects.

Let me say that we did not invent the idea of serving school lunches to under-nourished children. It started, I believe, in the conservative State of Vermont, or at least was early established there as a normal community service; the distinguished novelist and Vermonter, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, has written about its Vermont beginnings; and I imagine that she had a good deal to do with getting it going there. But it sprang up spontaneously in a good many States during the depression. The school teachers couldn't bear it to see hungry children trying to study, and they took it up with the Parent-Teacher Associations, who supported it as well as they could until the WPA took over the work. Now we are doing it in thousands of schools all over the country and are expecting to do it in thousands more. It is something that very much needs to be done.

I hope you are acquainted with some of our WPA nursery schools. They are under the wing of expert school authorities in the localities where they exist, and I can assure you that they are as good nursery schools as you can find anywhere in this country. We do not have enough of them to make an impressive figure, but each one is important as a "demonstration program" in the locality. Our nursery schools need various kinds of assistance that the school authorities may not be able to give, and so we have Kiwanis Clubs and Rotary Clubs and Lions Clubs and American Legion Posts as co-sponsors, pledged to help the school in some way. And every once in a while a committee of business men comes around to see what it is all about. There is perhaps no human sight so enchanting as a nursery school. The committees usually never knew that such a thing existed, and they are charmed and thrilled, and they go away dazed -- wondering why they can't have nursery schools like that for their own children. Well, they can, whenever they make up their minds to it, and some day we will have them in every community, not under the WPA but as a part of our regular school system. We are just carrying the torch, showing communities what they can do, and providing some socially useful work to unemployed women, in addition to giving some of the benefits of civilized life to a limited number of children from relief homes.

There is no kind of local health program to which the WPA doesn't give some kind of assistance that enlarges its usefulness -- and

some of the work that we assist is of the utmost importance to the community. We are cooperating with the United States Health Service in the first great national effort to conquer venereal disease. On our own account we have WPA nurses and health aides making their rounds every day to families in which their services are badly needed.

At this point I want to draw your attention to something. None of this work is unnecessary. All of it is useful, and some of it is imperatively required. It brings benefits that at present could be secured in no other way. A great many of our WPA Professional and Service projects carry on a kind of work that ought to be conducted as a regular public service by our communities.

We are accustomed to thinking of increased Prosperity as meaning a return of WPA workers to private employment. An automobile mechanic who is working on a WPA road job would naturally return to his factory job if he got a chance. And the same thing may in many instances be true of the people working on our WPA Professional and Service projects. Some of them came from shops and offices, and will return there when they get a chance. Others will take private jobs in which they will continue to do the same kind of work for better pay. But still others may well be taken on as regular municipal or county employees. This is already occurring to some extent, and it should occur increasingly as our communities are able to increase their budgets. For increasing Prosperity will mean, not an abandonment of all the socially useful services that are now being conducted and assisted by the WPA, but a great increase in all those services, and a corresponding increase in regular public employment.

I wish to emphasize this fact, if only as a protest against a kind of hysteria which is unfortunately now rather widespread among people who ought to be more sensible. I mean the very silly notion that there is something vicious or wrong about public employment, as if it were a symptom of a diseased economy. Some people talk as if full Prosperity would mean doing away with practically every kind of public work that is being conducted at present, with a few traditional exceptions, such as the police and the postal services.

And so I want to say that the kind of Prosperity to which we have the right to look forward is not a kind that pertains exclusively

to private industry and business; it should be a Prosperity that includes the community as a governmental unit. The city and the State do more than govern their citizens; they also serve their citizens. They represent social cooperation in the provision of whatever may be essential to their welfare -- the provision of pure water being an example of one kind of essential public service, and education an example of another kind. Health work is a very important kind of essential public service. And these services cannot be provided by our municipalities on a starveling basis. I resent the idea that those who work for a municipality are parasites on the public. And I think there is almost no kind of ignorance that is more disastrous in its social consequences than the ignorance which prides itself on its policy of slashing municipal budgets at the expense of public health, education, recreation, and every other civilized benefit to which the public is rightfully entitled.

The public work program of the WPA is characteristic of our transition era. All, or practically all, of the work that we are now doing will need to be done in the future. It will not necessarily be done by the same kind of public agency. I hope most of it will be done on a regular basis, with regular wages. But it ought to be done by some means, and I am sure that it will be done. No return of business prosperity, however vast, will diminish the need for conservation work in this country. Prosperity in the future should mean that we will do not less but more public work in health, recreation and education. I am one of those people who look forward to the final absorption of the WPA program into the greater, more integrated, comprehensive social program of the country. Our identity may be lost, but our work will not.

We have learned that in a time of economic depression we can find money with which to build schools and teach illiterates to read and write. It would be a foolish kind of Prosperity that was too poor to continue such work.

And now I want to speak of some projects which represent a kind of community service now in this country, though not unknown elsewhere in the world -- our cultural projects. We found that among the unemployed were musicians, artists, writers and actors. We set up Federal projects that put their special abilities to use for the public

benefit. Congress last summer ordered the discontinuance of our Federal theatre project, and required that our other cultural projects have the support of local sponsors' contribution. This meant that it was now up to our States and communities to say whether they wanted these cultural projects to go on.

What we find, I am glad to say, is that the people of this country do want our cultural projects to go on. Most of our cultural projects have found sponsors in all States, and all of them in some States.

To me this is a very encouraging sign. It means that the American people recognize these cultural benefits as among the public benefits to which they are rightfully entitled. It means that they view the enjoyment of music and of art not as aristocratic luxuries belonging only to those who have the private means to pay for them at luxury prices, but as fruits of civilization that should be democratically shared by all. It means that they regard artists and musicians as socially useful workers. It means that they reject the view that the only useful work a needy musician can perform for the community is with a pick and shovel.

I hope to see the time when such cultural work will be done for our communities on a regular basis, at regular salaries. Prosperity ought to provide us not only with work democratically available to all, but also, in the words of a great poet, "of joy in widest commonalty spread."

We are doing what we can to broaden the public's opportunities for culture, and for the enjoyment of cultural programs. One result of our efforts is seen in the more general use of school buildings and grounds by the community after school hours. The WPA did not originate the idea that these community facilities should have a wider use than has been customary in the past. But our adult education projects have been instrumental in securing such broader use of school buildings after school hours; and our recreation projects have had a similar effect in making school grounds available for community use after school hours. One of the ways in which this has come about is this. School principals and superintendents who have been accustomed in the past to behave toward school property as though it were a treasure and they were the

dragons set to guard it from public trespass -- these same school officials become responsible advisers and helpers in our adult education and recreation projects; and as such, they have to help find suitable rooms for the use of adult education classes, and suitable grounds for recreation projects. They look about anxiously, and suddenly to their surprise they find just the places they need, right in their own school buildings and on their own school grounds. They wonder why in the world nobody ever thought of using school property in this way before, and they strive earnestly to make it available for such broader community use. I mention this because I think we are all a little like that. When we join in new community activities, we change some of our former views about what should and should not be done. This is typical of the new era in which we are living. It takes time for us to orient ourselves. But we do wish to help our communities, and we do learn more every year about new ways of helping them.

Another special result of our work that I wish to mention has reference to one feature of our recreation projects. When we go into a community to set up a recreation project it is not only on official invitation, but on condition that our project has the guidance of a recreation council. There are some 5,000 of these councils in existence, with 35,000 members. About half the membership is made up of lay people -- possibly a housewife, a labor representative, a youth representative. Also on the councils are such technicians as representatives from the school board, the municipality, the Recreation department and the social agencies. There is a practical reason for this. Recreation touches our social and economic life at many vital points, nearly all of which are intimately concerned with childhood and youth.

It is still the Age of the Child, and I most heartily believe in doing everything possible for youth. However, I feel that recreation like education should begin to make itself a real power in its service to older groups. We have made a start in that direction, but we have not gone nearly far enough. The time is geared for high achievement along this line. Under our present labor laws not only the unemployed, but men and women with steady jobs, have much leisure which could be pleasurable, often profitably, spent at recreation activities. Every

community recreation center should make provision for the interests of older people. And the many avocations and hobbies now open to adults who like to work with their hands and plan with their brains, could, and should be, made a part of our recreation program.

A community to be healthy has to provide real benefits for all age groups.

And now in conclusion I want to say again how this great Federal work program, the WPA, fits into our hopes for a better America. I have already expressed my belief that private industry in America can - and must -- gear itself to produce and distribute its goods for the vast market of those who at present do not have enough to eat or enough to wear and who live in houses that are not fit to live in.

But what of the other good things of life -- education, health, recreation, books, music and art? I think that the widespread enthusiasm evoked by our WPA projects of this kind shows that there exists also a vast market, so to speak, for all these goods. Private industry and enterprise can have its full share in producing and distributing them, but in some respects they are a community responsibility and a proper field for governmental aid. What we are doing now is pointing the way toward a better civilization -- better because it will distribute its benefits more widely.

And our WPA projects of all kinds seem to me an important affirmation of our American belief in work. They are an affirmation of our American belief in Peace, and in the capacities of a democracy to produce and distribute the good things of life to all the people.

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