

Defending the Republic: work, not soup kitchens

by Denise Henderson

Harry Hopkins: Sudden Hero, Brash Reformer

by June Hopkins

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Harry Hopkins is best known as the man who administered the work relief programs for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration during the Great Depression, and who, during World War II, was one of FDR's closest advisers, as well as his personal emissary on many diplomatic missions, including to the Soviet Union. Hopkins's career in the Roosevelt administration is excellently documented in Robert E. Sherwood's book *Roosevelt and Hopkins* (now out of print). But in this new contribution to the history of the Roosevelt era, June Hopkins tells the story of her grandfather Harry's early years, most crucially his years as a social worker and administrator in New York, through to his early years in the FDR administration as the Secretary of Commerce and administrator of the first New Deal work programs designed to alleviate the extreme hardship caused by the Depression.

Ms. Hopkins is currently an assistant professor of history at Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah, Georgia, and her work is part of The Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt Institute Series in Diplomatic and Economic History.

Her valuable contribution is to demonstrate that the ideas of the New Deal did not just suddenly appear in March 1933, when Roosevelt became President, but that people like Hopkins had used and tested many of these ideas in their public service in New York City and New York State.

Hopkins had had 20 years of experience in dealing with poverty, and had come to several conclusions. One was that the most effective way to ameliorate poverty, was to eliminate disease, such as tuberculosis, which was why he was made head of the New York Tuberculosis Association in 1922. Another was that the combined efforts of private charity and business could never be enough under extreme conditions like those of the Great Depression.

This new biography reminds us that it was individuals in positions of leadership, who had a commitment to do good, to learn to respond to crises as they came up, who ensured the

survival of this nation through the Depression and the wartime mobilization. As Ms. Hopkins reports, one of Hopkins's associates (whose overall outlook Hopkins rejected in later years), John Kingsbury, "wrote that Hopkins had 'that rare quality of boldness of mind combined with vigorous and courageous action.'" And novelist John Steinbeck said that Hopkins's legacy to the American people was the idea that "human welfare is the first and final task of government. It has no other."

Ms. Hopkins had access to both Harry's public papers and to letters and other documents in her grandmother's collection. She reports that her grandmother, whom Harry had divorced in the 1920s, has a rather complete file of anything and everything about Harry. She also made extensive use of the papers of various key members of the FDR administration.

Service and salvation

Harry Hopkins was born in Sioux City, Iowa on Aug. 17, 1890. From his mother, Ms. Hopkins tells us, he developed an idea of religion which "demanded service to others as a prerequisite for individual salvation." He attended a liberal college called Grinnell, in Grinnell, Iowa, which was known for its high-powered, if somewhat eclectic, teaching staff. After graduation, in 1913, he moved to New York City, where he learned to take on challenges that might have dented the will and ability of others less determined than he.

His first job was as a social worker in New York for Christadora House, a private, Christian, faith-based charity house on the Lower East Side, where immigrants were crowded into tenement buildings, attempting to survive.

Ms. Hopkins does not mention what was probably the most important aspect of Harry's intellectual life, which is mentioned numerous times by Sherwood. Harry had an abiding love for the poetry of John Keats, and when he visited England, he visited the house in which Keats had written "Ode To a Nightingale."

From 1917 to 1922, when Christadora could not pay him a salary large enough to meet the demands of his growing family, Hopkins became assistant director of the American Red Cross's Civilian Relief, Gulf division (New Orleans and the surrounding area). Ms. Hopkins writes: "The Hopkinses' understanding of race relations in the South was certainly not enlightened. Their limited experience with African Americans almost ensured that they would absorb some of the local attitudes, and, although they never demonstrated overt racial bigotry, they did seem to accept the idea of a segregated society. It seems that they also temporarily adopted the paternalistic attitude so prevalent in the Deep South. Yet Hopkins's New Deal work programs always mandated equal pay for blacks, especially in the South, and he insisted that his programs be free of any racial bias. His extensive traveling during this period may have moderated the negative effects of southern racial attitudes. In addition, his early religious training surely mitigated against racial prejudice."



Roosevelt adviser Harry Hopkins in 1934.

A can-do approach

From his social work experiences, and as he became involved in city positions related to administration of funds for relief, and then in 1922-31, when he became the head of the New York Tuberculosis Association — which under his guidance, and with the backing of Gov. Franklin Roosevelt, became a nascent city public health agency — Harry learned that the key to alleviating poverty, disease, and other social ills, was political power. He outgrew the concept of private charity very early on, and was not enamored of the ideas of the British Fabian Society's Beatrice and Sidney Webb. He had no interest in British methods of dealing with poverty and unemployment, because they consisted of keeping the ordinary citizen down, and rejected the idea that the individual was entitled to a living wage for himself and his family through productive work.

The idea of "the Dole," as it was called in Great Britain, became anathema to him, as it was to many Americans. He always emphasized that what every American wanted to be able to do was *to work with dignity*, and to be able to provide for his or her family, not simply to receive handouts. Americans wanted to know that the work they were doing was useful and contributed to the development of their community. Britain's "bread and circuses" idea of the Dole, on the other hand — give 'em enough to barely survive, keep 'em amused, and cull the troublemakers out from the herd — became anathema to Harry.

In early 20th-century New York City, as Harry arrived on the scene, conditions of life were horrendous. In addition to the sweatshops and the overcrowded tenements, there was an ongoing "downward economic trend."

Ms. Hopkins reports that as early as 1893, "during a severe economic depression, trade union leader Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labor, had asked the New York City government to develop public works programs in order to alleviate hardships caused by unemployment, but was turned down." Gompers, says Ms. Hopkins, told New York's Governor that "labor wanted work, not soup houses." The labor unions had called for so-called make-work programs to be developed for just such hard times. But in 1893, Gompers's proposal was rejected.

But Hopkins, in 1915, was able to try such a program successfully, as the head of the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor's Family Welfare Division, a program which revolved around the Bronx Zoo. Later, Harry was to use his New York programs to argue that there was a precedent for the work relief programs he began to administer under President Roosevelt.

But these alleged "make-work" programs, many times, were not such. That is, they usually employed the head of the family household, usually the male head, in public works such as road repair, building or repairing schools, hospitals, and so forth. In these early years of public relief efforts, unfortunately, the usefulness of such work was little understood. A further problem was that the unemployed could not, should not, and would not be used as cheap replacement labor for those already employed in similar work. That was one of Hopkins's firm tenets.

However, public works, as part of a safety net during difficult economic times, was little understood at that time, and so the argument was that private charities should dole out, and the business sector should employ these unemployed heads of household. But with the economy in bad shape, there was no way that business could absorb all of the unemployed.

Confronting this attitude, Hopkins quickly realized that the key was the government's role: at first on the city level, then the state, and finally the Federal, under President Roosevelt.

The New Deal years

Ms. Hopkins concludes her book with two chapters summarizing Harry Hopkins's early years in the Roosevelt administration. She quotes Hopkins in 1934: "We are going to meet this situation whatever it costs. We are going to take care of the victims of civilization. They are the first charges on our honor as a nation."

One of Hopkins's first measures in the Roosevelt administration was to make a regulation stating that charity would no longer be issued by private organizations. The need was too great, and the relief had to get out to the people immediately, and Harry knew that this could only be done with top-down supervision.

Harry became the head, first, of the Civil Works Administration, then of the Works Progress Administration. He administered millions of dollars in aid, and always made that

sure it got out as fast as possible to those who needed it. As he said in 1934, "When a house is on fire, you don't call a conference, you put it out." (It should also be noted that Harry died in 1949, in debt. The man who had administered billions of dollars for programs to provide work for Americans in desperate circumstances, died with not even a penny to his name.)

Ms. Hopkins reports on her grandfather's can-do attitude, and his grasp of the fact that the political process was the way to get things done. My favorite story is the following, because it demonstrates Hopkins's lack of fear of the unknown, his concern for the average citizen, and his determination to get things done:

"Hopkins demonstrated the nature of his administrative style—a style he later perfected in Washington—in 1928. He and his colleague, former health commissioner for New York City Dr. Haven Emerson, were walking past a worksite on 42nd Street where men were drilling in the roadway. Dr. Emerson mentioned that these men were very susceptible to a disease called silicosis because of the silica dust that arose while they were drilling. Although Hopkins did not know what silicosis was, he immediately got as much information as he could about the disease and set out to remedy what he saw as the workers' needless suffering. He initiated a study of the incidence of the disease among city construction work-

ers. As a result of this study, within one year a vacuum device was developed that successfully eliminated the dangerous dust. Furthermore, silicosis was designated as a compensable disease under workmen's compensation laws. Such was Hopkins's rather straightforward method of dealing with an immediate problem—find out as much as he could about it, formulate solutions, and select alternatives."

There was a problem to be solved; science was needed to define and solve the problem, and then the machine-tool builders were needed to create the equipment, and government was needed to implement other crucial measures.

I close with the following to emphasize just how living this history is today. In 1939, in a speech at his alma mater, "he told the young men and women of Grinnell, most of whom had experienced the hardships of the Great Depression, that 'the government is going to treat people in ways we have never dreamed of before, and, therefore the government should be good.' The government, as 'the last stronghold of Democracy,' deserved to be honored, he declared. 'Don't treat it as something to sneer at; treat it as something that belongs to you. We have got to find a way of living in America in which every person in it shares in the national income, in such a way, that poverty in America is abolished. There is no reason why the people of America should dwell in poverty. A way must be found, and a way will be found.'"

Video-Game Violence Turns Children Into Killers

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Speech to Schiller Institute conference, Feb. 20, 2000.

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