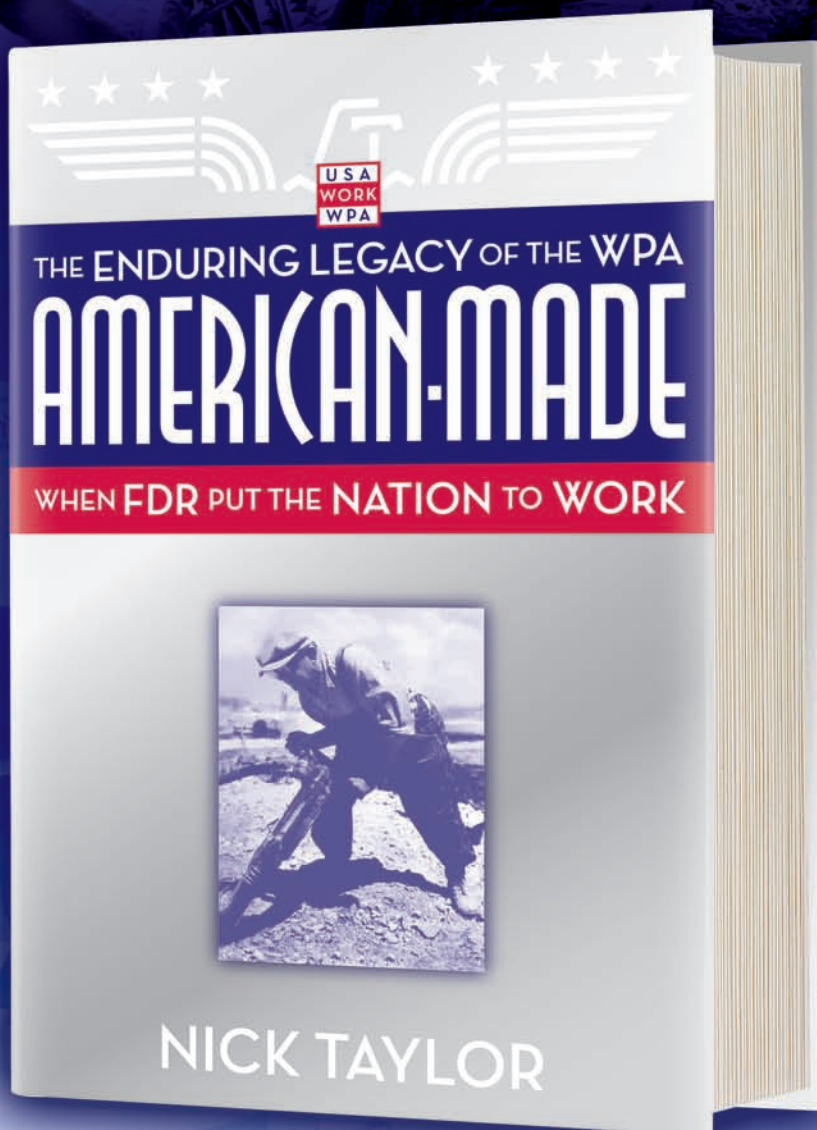


# REDISCOVERING THE WPA

## A Reader's Guide



Bantam Books

### AMERICAN-MADE

The Enduring Legacy of the WPA: When FDR Put the Nation to Work

Written by Nick Taylor | Includes 32 pages of photographs

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A Reader's Guide to

# AMERICAN-MADE

The Enduring Legacy of the WPA:  
When FDR Put the Nation Back to Work

By Nick Taylor



photo courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library

In his book, *AMERICAN-MADE*, Nick Taylor chronicles the history of the Works Progress Administration from its establishment in 1935 to its cancellation in 1943. Although this is the story of one of the most important achievements of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, *AMERICAN-MADE* also gives us a broader perspective on the Great Depression. Taylor's book begins in a "country that was on its knees" (4)\* in the years following the collapse of the stock market in October 1929, highlights the personalities and the policies of Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt, and then goes on to prove the author's point—that the WPA was "an extraordinary bet on ordinary people" (4) which brought out the best in Americans and proved without question that the millions of WPA workers, led by Harry Hopkins, "fulfilled the founding vision of a government by and for its people, all its people." (530)

\*All page references refer to the hardcover edition.  
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Taylor begins his narrative by referencing a passing *New York Times* “obituary” dated July 1, 1943, the date on which the WPA “sank virtually unnoticed,” (2) no longer deemed necessary since the fight against fascist aggression had stimulated the American economy and ended the scourge of unemployment. Taylor argues passionately that the WPA deserves far more than this passing mention. Indeed the story of the WPA demonstrates over and over again that “ordinary men” and women were indeed extraordinary beyond all expectations. The workers of the



WPA “clothed the threadbare, fed the hungry, taught the illiterate, [and] inoculated the vulnerable.” (530) They built LaGuardia Airport in New York, National Airport in Washington, DC, San Antonio’s River Walk, and the Cow Palace in San Francisco. The accom-

plishments of the WPA went far beyond buildings. WPA workers delivered library books to remote areas, aided victims of natural disasters, wrote travel guides, took iconic photographs, and preserved the arts in a time when they were most threatened. Yet, unfortunately, most Americans know little about the WPA.

The accomplishments of the WPA were not achieved without struggle and controversy. Vociferous critics accused it and its director, Harry Hopkins, of various sins, including misuse of public funds, inefficiency, and harboring communists. Demagogues such as Huey P. Long of Louisiana and Father Charles Coughlin of Michigan sought to undermine the efforts of FDR and his associates. Taylor addresses both the achievements of and the challenges faced by the WPA, its leaders, and its workers. He does this with extensive documentation and views the era not just through the lenses of the powerful but also through the words and reflections of ordinary Americans. All of this is written with the hope that as we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the WPA, Americans will be reintroduced to this extraordinary effort and its lasting impact.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

NICK TAYLOR is the author of seven nonfiction books and has collaborated with John Glenn on his memoir. He lives in New York City. Visit the author at: [www.nicktaylor.us/](http://www.nicktaylor.us/)



photo © Manny Millan

## THIS GUIDE

Taylor’s engaging narrative will appeal to many readers: educators, lovers of history, and all who are intrigued by this American saga of struggle, determination, and controversy. This guide is designed to assist in examining the text and moving beyond it. It is organized to parallel Taylor’s structure—in nine parts, moving from the 1920s into the 1940s. Each section of the guide will summarize content, pose questions for consideration, provide suggestions for classroom use, and, by moving beyond the text, establish connections to both past and present.

Additionally, several themes resonate throughout Taylor’s book and deserve close examination. These themes include:

- the “proper” role of government, including the tension between federal and state government and between the public and the private spheres, the notion of the “welfare state,” and the role of the government in promoting the arts
- the responsibilities and challenges of leadership
- the nature of change: liberals and conservatives
- confrontation and dissent
- the power of personal narrative

AMERICAN-MADE and this guide will help bring the Works Progress Administration alive for readers, and allow them to better appreciate the lasting legacy given to us by the men and women put to work by the WPA.

## PART I – IN EXTREMIS

“The cure for unemployment is to find jobs.” —Herbert Hoover, December 5, 1929

### CONTENT

Part I provides the background to the Great Depression and details the tremendous suffering of the 1930s. It examines Herbert Hoover’s commitment to “the American system of rugged individualism,” (12) and the limited response of the government to Americans’ needs. Statistics on joblessness abound, coupled with poignant personal anecdotes. Taylor investigates the impact of the Great Depression in both rural and urban America and ties despair to the growing agitation, from organized labor, communists and socialists, as well as “spontaneous, home-grown anger” (43) that erupted throughout the nation. Part I concludes with a detailed description of the Bonus Army, the emergence on the national scene of Franklin D. Roosevelt, and his election in 1932.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Taylor notes that, “The optimism that Americans had distilled from the promise of the Constitution and learned to take as their birthright ... had disappeared.” (7) What was this optimism and in what way was it fostered by the Constitution? Do Americans still have this optimism?
- How did Hoover’s reliance on personal initiative and private action reflect the ethos of the 1920s?
- Is there a conflict between Hoover’s belief, as a Quaker, in social responsibility and his lack of action to address the problems of the depression? Explain.

### HIGHLIGHTING THE THEMES

- Taylor notes that the United States has long had a “revered American political philosophy that denied the central government a role in addressing social problems.” (8) Trace the development of this philosophy and give examples of its implementation.
- Hoover believed that, “The sole function of government is to bring about a condition of affairs favorable to the beneficial development of private enterprise.” (8) How was that belief reflected in Hoover’s approach to addressing the problems of the Great Depression?
- Taylor introduces the notion of a safety net provided by the federal government. How far should the government go in providing this net?
- As Franklin D. Roosevelt ascended onto the national stage, he projected an image “based less on what he said than on how he said it.” (72) How was he able to do this? Why did Roosevelt not offer many specific details of his plan to end the Depression?
- What forms did dissent take in the early years of the Depression? Why had the left been marginalized in the United States? Did dissent from both the right and the left threaten the fabric of American life during the Depression?
- How does John Glenn’s story add to the understanding of what life was like in the 1930s? What makes personal narrative effective?



October, 1929

The stock market crashes.



November, 1932

Roosevelt defeats Hoover.

1929

1932

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Ask students to examine U.S. Supreme Court cases that illustrate the conflict over the role and responsibility of government. Include *Lochner v. New York*, *Muller v. Oregon*, and *Hammer v. Degenhart*.
- Have your students, individually and then in groups, generate a list of the characteristics of an effective leader. As your class studies various leaders, evaluate their leadership based on these criteria.
- Introduce students to Depression era music. Compare two famous songs of the Depression era—"Brother, Can You Spare A Dime" and "Happy Days are Here Again." Account for the very different message in these songs.

## BEYOND THE TEXT: MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Frederick Winslow Taylor gave his name to a philosophy and method of production applauded by big business in the 1920s. In what ways did Hoover's actions during the Depression reflect his belief in "Taylorism?"
- Hoover famously asserted that "Nobody is actually starving." (31) Ronald Reagan once noted that the homeless are "homeless, you might say, by choice." Compare Hoover's and Reagan's views on how best to alleviate poverty.
- Every year the U.S. Supreme Court makes decisions that determine the proper scope of government. Investigate the cases on the current docket. Evaluate the Court's decisions in these cases.



photo courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library

### March, 1933

U.S. unemployment reaches 24.9 percent.  
FDR inaugurated.



photo courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library



### November, 1933

FDR signs executive order creating the Civil Works Administration to provide jobs on small construction projects over the winter of 1933-34.

## PART II – HOPE ON THE RISE

“Our greatest primary task is to put people to work.”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1933

### CONTENT

This section begins with the inauguration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, his selection of a cabinet, and his first days in office. Roosevelt’s administration started out running. As Roosevelt proposed to Congress the programs that would come to be called the Hundred Days the government “was no longer sitting on its hands,” (92) Taylor introduces Harry Hopkins, the key figure in Roosevelt’s plan to get Americans working again. He describes Hopkins as an intriguing public servant with “a fiery passion for the rights of the poor to decent treatment” (95) and unswerving dedication to the creation of jobs. As Taylor notes, Hopkins’s “singular talent was for creating organizations on the fly.” (95) Hopkins had previously worked for private social service groups and directed the New York Temporary Relief Administration. He was appointed to lead the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), and then, in 1935, was made the head of the newly established WPA. In only a few months with FERA, Hopkins distributed 51 million dollars in grants and matching funds, and in the process he encountered opposition from both the right and the left. Much of Part II comprises a detailed discussion of the programs of the Hundred Days, including the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the National Industrial Recovery Administration (NIRA), and others.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Hopkins disdained the paternalism of direct relief, which he regarded as demeaning to the unemployed worker and which he felt was always “given in a way to intensify his sense of shame.” (106) Why then, did it take so long for Roosevelt and the New Dealers to move away from direct relief and toward the creation of jobs as the touchstone of their program?
- Why did organized labor initially object to the Civilian Conservation Corps despite the fact that the CCC provided jobs?
- How did the backgrounds and personalities of Harold Ickes and Harry Hopkins shape their roles as New Dealers and contribute to the conflicts between them?
- In the 1930s African Americans in large part withdrew their allegiance to the Republican Party and became part of FDR’s constituency. Explain this in light of the failure of many New Deal programs to adequately address the needs of black Americans.



**July, 1934**

Civil Works Administration officially closed down.

**January, 1935**

FDR calls for a “greatly enlarged” work program in his State of the Union speech.

1934

1935



## HIGHLIGHTING THE THEMES

- As governor of New York, Roosevelt argued that, “One of these duties of the state is that of caring for those of its citizens who find themselves the victims of such adverse circumstance as makes them unable to obtain even the necessities for mere existence without the aid of others. To these unfortunate citizens aid must be extended by government not as a matter of charity but as a social duty.” (98) How would Herbert Hoover have responded to this statement? In what ways did the New Deal usher in changes in the role of government that are still being debated today?
- Who makes a more effective leader—the individual driven by a set of beliefs, i.e. an ideology, or the pragmatist who overlooks ideology in favor of experimentation?
- “Hoover sent the army, Roosevelt sent his wife.” (108) How does this observation from a returning Bonus Army marcher illustrate the deep differences between the two men? Why are symbolic gestures like those of Eleanor Roosevelt so important?
- The best known collection of personal narratives from the Depression is Studs Terkel’s *Hard Times*. In what ways are narratives like these effective?
- What accounted for the observation that, “We saw a little less of sorrow and discontent and a little more of happiness.”? (122)

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Have students develop criteria on which to evaluate the success of New Deal programs and enter their evaluations of several New Deal initiatives on a chart.
- Conduct a readers’ theater where students select one of the narratives in *Hard Times* and read it to the class. Follow with discussion.
- Assign an oral history project where students interview relatives or elderly members of the community who lived during the Depression.

## BEYOND THE TEXT: MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Examine the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt is generally viewed as being more pragmatic, while Wilson is thought to have been more wedded to his personal set of beliefs. Who was the more effective leader and why?
- Read some works by prominent social Darwinists of the late 19th century, such as Herbert Spencer or William Graham Sumner. How would these men have reacted to Franklin D. Roosevelt’s statements on the proper role of government?
- Consider the debate that occurred during the Clinton administration over reform of the welfare system. Examine the legislation that was passed in response to this debate.



### May, 1935

FDR signs executive order creating the Works Progress Administration.



### August, 1935

Federal Project Number One, the umbrella agency for the federal art, music, theater, and writing projects, is established.

## PART III – THE DAWN OF THE WPA

“\$3,187,000 Relief is Spent Teaching Jobless to Play: ‘Boon Doggles’ Made”

—*New York Times*, April 4, 1935

“They are damn good projects—excellent projects.  
Dumb people criticize something they do not understand.”

—Harry Hopkins, April 4, 1935

### CONTENT

The year was 1935. Hopkins argued for an expanded jobs program that moved beyond FERA. Roosevelt’s programs were meeting increasing opposition from all sides. On the right were pro-business organizations like the American Liberty League and the National Association of Manufacturers. The New Deal was accused of creating boon-doggles with programs such as eurythmic dancing. The United States was witnessing the emergence of home-grown demagogues, particularly Huey P. Long and Father Charles Coughlin. Each of these men appealed to fear and discontent as he promoted his populist vision for the nation. Each appealed to the poor, despite the fact that he had acquired significant personal wealth. Roosevelt and his New Dealers argued for a transition from relief to job creation in an attempt to create an army of workers. Roosevelt saw two of his key initiatives—the National Industrial Recovery Administration (NIRA) and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA)—swept away by Supreme Court decisions. And in May, 1935, Harry Hopkins was appointed director of an expansive new program—the one that is the focus of this book—the Works Progress Administration.



**October, 1935**  
WPA Circus debuts  
in Brooklyn.

### QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

- One criteria for a WPA program was that it must be “useful.” Define useful. Determine which of the WPA programs were useful and which were not. Consider, for example, cage free habitats for monkeys, repair to the Statue of Liberty, expansion at the Louisiana State University stadium, and murals on hospital walls. These were just a few of the projects considered by the WPA.
- Was it really necessary for the government to establish another jobs program when it already had the CCC and the PWA? Why?
- In what ways did Roosevelt address the challenges posed by men like Francis Townsend, Father Charles Coughlin, and Huey P. Long?



**December, 1935**  
Proposal to build a ski lodge  
on Mt. Hood in Oregon  
with \$250,000 from the  
WPA is approved.



## HIGHLIGHTING THE THEMES

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- Examine the ways in which the Supreme Court influenced the New Deal. What message did the Court send about the role of government and the system of checks and balances?
- In his January 1935 state of the union address, Roosevelt asserted that long-term dependence on relief programs “induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fibre. To dole out relief in this way is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit.” (160) What had transpired that allowed FDR to make a substantive shift in his New Deal agenda? How did this statement pave the way for the WPA?
- Listen to a collection of Woody Guthrie songs. Carefully consider the lyrics and what they express about life during the Depression. One particularly poignant song is Guthrie’s “Dear Mrs. Roosevelt,” a letter to the first lady that tells us much about how she was viewed.

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

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- Show all or substantial segments of two PBS videos from the series “The American Experience.” The first is “Huey Long” and the second “The Radio Priest.” These chronicle the lives, times and actions of the most prominent American demagogues. While viewing these films, students should complete a chart comparing the two men in terms of their backgrounds, constituencies, methods, successes, and shortcomings. In an essay, students should respond to the following: “Who posed a greater threat to the American political, economic, and social fabric, Long or Coughlin?” Support your answer with specific examples from the films.
- Divide the class into several groups, assigning each group a segment of the population that was affected by Roosevelt’s New Deal: women, African Americans, organized labor, big business, and farmers. Prepare a presentation on the ways in which each group was affected by the Depression and how its members reacted to the crises with which they were faced.

- Conduct a panel discussion on the best ways to bring the U.S. out of the Depression. Members of the panel could include Harold Ickes, Harry Hopkins, Franklin Roosevelt, Huey P. Long, a member of the American Liberty League.
- Designate several students to read excerpts from some of FDR’s “fireside chats.” Examine both the tone and the message and discuss the impact these chats had on the American public. Ask students to write a contemporary “fireside chat,” as might be given by a current political figure.

## BEYOND THE TEXT: MAKING CONNECTIONS

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- Discover more about Long and Coughlin, two dangerous yet fascinating figures in American history. What factors brought about their demise, and why were they so highly regarded by their followers?
- AMERICAN-MADE presents Long and Coughlin as populists. What role have populists played in American politics, from William Jennings Bryan to Pat Buchanan?
- Examine in more depth women’s roles during the Great Depression. One prominent, but lesser known depression era woman was Ellen S. Woodward. Martha H. Swain’s biography, *Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women*, published in 1995.
- The Depression witnessed considerable debate over the views of John Maynard Keynes and what came to be known as Keynesian economics. To what degree did FDR agree with Keynes’s ideas? Is Keynes relevant today?
- Taylor mentions the concept of “social gospel” with specific reference to Pope Leo XIII’s famous work, *Rerum Novarum*. (Primary source readers for European history often have excerpts from this work.) What is this “social gospel” and what conditions compelled Leo XIII to write it? Compare this vision of the social gospel with that promulgated in the U.S. in the late 19th century.

## PART IV – FOLLY AND TRIUMPH

“Our responsibility for the immediate necessities of the unemployed has been met by the Congress through the most comprehensive work plan in the history of the nation.”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, April 28, 1935

### CONTENT

This section begins with the assassination of Huey Long, whose death removed a significant obstacle to Roosevelt’s reelection. Roosevelt continued to introduce new programs in this, the Second New Deal. Taylor discusses the debate and passage of the Social Security Act and emphasizes that the WPA was the best hope for the near future. Despite its possibilities, the WPA engendered opposition, including some strikes and shutdowns, as some workers would be paid less than they were under FERA. The WPA’s first efforts were not without significant setbacks. A proposed canal through Florida was begun and scrapped, after 5 million dollars was spent on it. A system of dams was begun and halted in Maine. But before 1936 was over, the WPA employed workers in every county in the nation. Hopkins’ goal was to create jobs for all segments of the population. It seemed that he did. These workers responded to natural disasters, repaired toys for poor children during the Christmas season, rebound library books, recorded folk songs, and much, much more. The occasional boondoggle still occurred—building a lake in North Carolina without a source of water for it. But, by and large, WPA projects were done efficiently and “free of scandal.” (218)



**January, 1936**

Workers on the WPA payroll reach 2.8 million.

Roosevelt’s New Deal suffered a casualty when the Supreme Court declared the AAA unconstitutional. Meanwhile, the WPA continued to expand, as 2.8 million workers were on WPA rolls in 1936. Taylor chronicles in substantial detail the exploits of the “pack-horse” librarians and their portable libraries. In 10 counties in eastern Kentucky, 107 of these librarians delivered 33,000 books and magazines to 57,000 families.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Consider Ernie Pyle’s column detailing the image Hopkins presented. What did Pyle admire about Hopkins? Why are images so important in influencing one’s impression of powerful individuals? Contrast this very personal image with the criticism leveled at Hopkins and the WPA by Republican Robert Rutherford McCormick.
- How did the WPA attempt to alleviate the psychological impact of poverty by recognizing the importance of being “necessary?” As you read personal accounts of WPA workers, determine whether these workers felt necessary.
- Why did Al Smith, the Democratic candidate for president in 1928 support Alf Landon in his 1936 campaign against Roosevelt?



**March, 1936**

Floods in New England and the Ohio River valley leave 171 dead and 430,000 homeless. One-hundred thousand WPA workers join rescue, recovery, and clean-up efforts.

## HIGHLIGHTING THE THEMES

- Did the government's use of public funds for valuable WPA projects make its support for "boondoggles" less troubling?
- In his speech at the Democratic convention in 1936, Roosevelt articulated his beliefs about government. He argued that, "Better the occasional faults of a government that lives in a spirit of charity than the consistent omission of a government frozen in the ice of its own indifference?" (229)
- How does Albert Altofer's account of the Christmas dinner at the Timberline Lodge construction camp on Mt. Hood (238) demonstrate the power of personal narrative?

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Ask students to analyze several Depression era political cartoons. How do they compare to the famous political cartoons drawn by Thomas Nash in the late 19th century? Locate a number of recent political cartoons and compare to those of the late 19th century and the 1930s.
- Divide students into groups of three or four. Have them do research and then develop a presentation in which they create a virtual tour of four or six WPA projects and/or sites. Groups can be assigned projects that fall into a certain category, such as road building or the arts, or students can be required to demonstrate knowledge of several different types of projects.
- Signs and slogans were used to promote the WPA and its projects. Have students select a WPA project and create a slogan and a poster to promote that project.

- In his 1936 nomination speech, Roosevelt pronounced, "To some generations much is given. Of other generations much is expected. This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny." (229) Design an essay prompt requiring students to compare this assertion with similar statements made by John Kennedy in his 1961 inaugural address.

## BEYOND THE TEXT: MAKING CONNECTIONS

- "Boondoggle," used as both a noun and a verb, was popularized by WPA critics. Consider recent actions of governments in the United States—both federal and local. What projects do you consider to be boondoggles? Examine the types of projects, often called "earmarks" in contemporary jargon, that are frequently contained in federal legislation.
- Roosevelt's Social Security program was controversial in the 1930s; it remains a subject of much debate today. What difficulties face our Social Security system today, what caused them, and what solutions have been proposed?
- Investigate the role of the WPA in your area. Visit any existing sites and develop a program on WPA projects to deliver to groups in your community.
- Roosevelt and Hopkins aided rural residents in gaining access to library services. How are library services delivered to those residents in your area who have difficulty visiting your local library? How has technology expanded access to library services in your area? Has funding for libraries in your area been maintained in the recent years? Account for any changes in funding.
- Roosevelt was faced with continued pressure to address veterans' concerns. Veterans' issues are front page news today. What issues face veterans in your area? What are government and private agencies doing to address these issues?



### April, 1936

The WPA's Negro Theatre premiere its "voodoo" Macbeth to a sellout crowd in Harlem.

### Summer, 1936

WPA workers become firefighters as forest fires strike across upper Midwest.

### October, 1936

WPA crews begin effort to fight fires burning in coal shafts in Ohio. Federal Theatre Project opens stage version of "It Can't Happen Here," by Sinclair Lewis, simultaneously in sixteen cities.



## PART V – THE ARTS PROGRAM

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“We don’t think a good musician should be asked to turn second-rate laborer.”

—Aubrey Williams, WPA Deputy Administrator

### CONTENT

One of the unique aspects of the WPA was its creation of projects to foster the arts and to put writers, artists, musicians, and actors to work. Not only were these efforts destined to provide meaningful labor for these men and women, but they also reflected the view that a lively artistic and literary culture is good for the nation. It was not sufficient to confine the arts to major urban areas; indeed, the WPA was committed to “take the arts to the people.” (247) Taylor argues that this mission was “by most measures a complete success.” (247) The scope of Federal Project Number One, which included divisions in the theater, art, music and writing, was astounding, employing thousands of men and women. Projects included circuses for children, the New York Negro Theatre Unit, the Yiddish Theatre, the Living Newspaper, funds that paid immigrants to give new life to traditional arts such as tapestry, compilation of photographs and grassroots songs, travel guides, and much more. The WPA fostered the careers of many soon-to-be well known artists, actors, and literary figures. These included Orson Welles, Burt Lancaster, Sidney Lumet, Jackson Pollock, John Cheever, Richard Wright, and Gordon Parks.

Of course, controversy accompanied the WPA’s endorsement of the arts. Even determining pay scales for workers in the arts proved difficult. Many felt that it was not the government’s role to promote the arts; government money should go, the critics argued, to engineering projects instead. Artists and writers were regarded as too bohemian and too difficult to tame. The most ardent critics viewed those who

produced literature, art, and drama as leaning much too far to the left; the WPA was even accused of being too soft on communism. But it was not solely ideology that brought about decreases in funds for Federal Project Number One. By 1936 the economic crisis in America was lessening. Roosevelt was pressured to call for less federal spending, and in July 1936, the WPA budget was slashed by 25% and the Federal One budget by a third. Protests erupted, and even though the WPA would remain in existence for several more years, opposition to reform and to spending grew. Additionally, other projects grabbed the attention of the WPA, and as World War II loomed, the writing was on the wall.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- The first chapter of Part V is titled, “The Dilemma of Art and Politics.” What was that dilemma in the 1930s and what is it today?
- Why does Taylor refer to theaters, concert halls, and museums as “temples?”
- In what ways did the artists’ demand for artistic freedom conflict with the use of public funds to finance their work? To what extent should public sensibilities dictate what writers and artists produce?
- Why was the Federal Writers’ Project most often targeted as leftist?
- Who determines what is “good” art?

#### January, 1937

*Idaho: A Guide in Word and Picture*, is the first of the state guides in the Federal Writers Project American Guide series to be published. By the end of 1941, the series would cover all 48 states (Alaska and Hawaii were not yet states) and the District of Columbia. FDR inaugurated for a second term.

## HIGHLIGHTING THE THEMES

- Federal and state agencies vied for control over the WPA's artistic projects. Who "won" and why?
- Examine the role of politics in government sponsorship of the arts. What are the tensions between artistic freedom and government authority? Consider this response in a discussion among WPA officials: "Because the kids I want to reach in this plan are tomorrow's voters." (269)
- What methods were implemented by those who opposed government funding of the arts? What methods were used by artists, writers, and other employees of Federal One when funds and jobs were cut?
- There are several compelling personal stories told in this section of the book. Pay particular attention to the stories of Dorothy Sherwood and Frank Goodman. How do these narratives depict the tragedy and the triumphs of the 1930s?

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Commissioned by the Rockefellers to paint a mural in New York, the artist Diego Rivera angered his patrons by including a portrait of Lenin in his massive work. Help your students find out what happened in this controversy. Conduct a debate over just how this should have been resolved.
- Introduce your students to the Living Newspaper project. Have groups design and present their own Living Newspaper.
- The WPA frequently commissioned murals. Have your class create a mural reflecting your school community.
- Assign students to plan a family vacation using a WPA guidebook.



## BEYOND THE TEXT: MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Public funding of the arts remains a highly controversial issue. Examine the tensions that have surfaced in the past few decades over the efforts of the National Endowment for the Arts and programming decisions made by public television stations.
- Why was the Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit a lightning rod for controversy over the role of the government in supporting the arts?
- Joseph McCarthy targeted writers, directors and actors in his Senate investigations into communism. Exactly whom did he target and why? What were the long-term effects of McCarthy's attacks?
- Government supported and privately funded programs have helped preserve traditional arts throughout the United States. Investigate one of these projects.
- What is the state of arts education in the schools in your area? What has made maintenance of programs in art and music more difficult? What are some success stories? What efforts are being made to enhance arts education?
- Read Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*? Can it?
- How did paintings of artists like Edward Hopper, Thomas Hart Benton, and Grant Wood reflect the mood, the tensions, the despair, and the hopes of the 1930s?

### September, 1937

Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia breaks ground on New York City's first commercial airport, to be funded by the WPA.

## PART VI – THE PHANTOM OF RECOVERY

“The WPA is proud that from the ranks of those who can’t find jobs it can provide the shock troops of disaster.”

—WPA Newsreel, *Man Against the River*, 1937

### CONTENT

When we come to the events of 1937. In the face of natural disasters, WPA workers were called upon to risk their lives to rescue victims of hurricanes and floods. WPA workers died in these attempts. WPA work rolls were down to 2.2 million from a 1936 peak of 3 million. But work on a variety of projects continued. Even golfer Bobby Jones was brought in to consult on the building of WPA funded golf courses. WPA labor worked on at least 600 municipal golf courses in 1937. FDR, frustrated that the Supreme Court had overturned two of his key initiatives, the AAA and the NIRA, proposed an ill-conceived plan to increase the number of members on the Supreme Court so that he could place friendlier justices on the Court. This plan soon died but took a bit of Roosevelt’s reputation with it. The Supreme Court did uphold the Wagner Act, the cornerstone of FDR’s effort to support organized labor. Roosevelt found himself increasingly caught between the pressure to decrease deficit spending and the desire to keep Americans working. Following the “Roosevelt Recession” of 1937, Roosevelt renewed efforts to create jobs, although he was hindered by persistent opposition from business. Harry Hopkins had his own crises; his wife died and Hopkins was diagnosed with cancer, whereby he moved into the White House. In 1938, there was a resurgence of the WPA, now funding 3.3 million workers and standing by its policy of hiring without regard to workers’ political affiliation.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Roosevelt attacked the Supreme Court for overstepping its role by engaging in policy making. That accusation is frequently leveled at the court system. How do you see the role of the Supreme Court, and do you think it is moving in the right direction?
- Were Roosevelt’s attacks on the “economic royalists” justified?
- Roosevelt claimed that the Fair Employment Standards Act was “the most far-reaching, most far-sighted program for the benefit of workers ever adopted here or in any other country.” (359) But did it impose unfair regulations on business? Why, despite Roosevelt’s successes did opposition to him continue to mount?

### HIGHLIGHTING THE THEMES

- Consider the labels that were placed on various groups and programs. How do these fall on the left-center-right continuum? Have the definitions of left-center-right changed in the years since the Great Depression? If so, in what ways?
- Yet another compelling personal story is that of Johnny Mills who built roads in North Carolina. How does his experience reflect the goals of the WPA?

#### September, 1938

A hurricane hits Long Island and much of New England, taking 680 lives. The WPA assigns 100,000 workers to flood-control and recovery efforts.



#### November, 1938

WPA employment reaches its highest point, with 3,334,594 people on the rolls.



## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Ask students to select one of the many natural disasters to which the WPA responded. Choose a more recent disaster faced by the federal government and compare the methods, accomplishments, and challenges faced by relief workers and agencies with the responses of the WPA to similar disasters.
- Using several pieces of butcher paper, affix a continuum, from left to right, on a wall of your classroom. Work with your students to ensure that they understand the meaning of left, center, and right. You might use this to discuss communism and fascism as well as

the political divisions that dominate contemporary politics. On strips of paper, write the names of people, agencies, legislation, and groups referred to in AMERICAN-MADE and have students place these on the political continuum.

## BEYOND THE TEXT: MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Despite the passage of legislation such as the Wagner Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, organized labor continued to confront big business in the 1930s. Why did union activity increase during the 1930s? Analyze the impact of the formation of the CIO and the tensions between it and the AFL.

# PART VII – THE WPA UNDER ATTACK

“A government agency, supported by public funds, has become part and parcel of the Communist party.” —Rep. J. Parnell Thomas

## CONTENT

1938 witnessed a degree of turbulence that cut to the heart of the Democratic Party and impelled Roosevelt to launch a “battle for its soul.” (385) Southern Democrats produced a “Conservative Manifesto” that expressed, among other things, their fears that the New Deal would result in a “permanent welfare class.” (385) FDR lashed out against these “Copperheads among us,” (385) but he also could not afford to lose southern Democratic support. This helped account for Roosevelt’s lack of adequate support for an anti-lynching bill despite a rash of lynchings. Attacks also came from the North, where the *Chicago Tribune* attacked the WPA as a “vampire political machine.” (388) The WPA was also accused of using politics to further its interests and of putting political pressure on employees. In the 1938 primaries, New Deal candidates eked out a slim victory, and Democrats maintained solid control of Congress despite some GOP gains.

It was clear that the beginning of the end of the New Deal had arrived. The public’s “taste for reform had soured, and the nation chose to catch its breath.” (391) A House committee investigating “Un-American activities” was revived, chaired by Rep. Martin Dies, Jr., D-Texas. In its investigations of communist activity, it did not take long for Dies’s committee to target the WPA, especially its writing and theater projects. After all, in the politically charged climate of the day, even the Boy Scouts were accused of being “Communitistic.” (396) As Taylor notes, one of the “singular moments in the theatrical history of the United States” (398) was the crisis over the theatrical production of *The Cradle Will Rock*. Additionally, a new WPA regulation mandated that only American citizens could work for the WPA. Painter Willem de Kooning, among others, was forced to resign. Even a work as seemingly uncontroversial as a WPA travel guide for Massachusetts came under attack for its treatment of the Sacco and Vanzetti case. Harry Hopkins, the guiding light of the WPA, resigned to become Secretary of Commerce, and the WPA was never the same.

### February, 1939

Golden Gate International Exposition opens on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. The island and its access via the Bay Bridge were projects of the WPA.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Taylor refers to “the ever present dilemma confronting publicly funded arts: the tension between creative freedom of expression and political sensibilities.” (397) In what ways was the WPA a victim of this dilemma? Was the WPA Theater Project complicit in its own demise?
- Taylor obviously has great admiration for Harry Hopkins. Do you share his admiration?

## HIGHLIGHTING THE THEMES

- How were demagogues able to manipulate those who had concerns about the work of the WPA?
- The on-going tensions in any society between liberty and security was played out in the conflict between the Federal Theatre Project and the Dies committee. Could these warring factions have come to some viable compromise? Did the attacks on suspected communists in the artistic community serve to keep the nation safer?

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Assign groups of students to study artists who lived and worked during the Depression. Include Diego Rivera, Thomas Hart Benton, Edward Hopper, and Grant Wood. Students are to prepare a presentation for the class on these artists, their works, and how they reflected the trials and tensions of the 1930s.
- Conduct a simulation of a hearing of the House Un-American Activities Committee as it conducts its investigation into communist influence in the arts. Include Martin Dies, Hallie Flanagan, and Orson Welles, as well as other participants.



## BEYOND THE TEXT: MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Investigate the debate over an anti-lynching bill that divided Americans in the first three decades of the 20th century. Account for Roosevelt’s position.
- Taylor argues that the struggle between FDR and Southern legislatures would “animate the political divide into the next century.”(387) What is this political divide, and how has it been reflected in contemporary politics? In what ways is the 2008 presidential campaign also animated by this divide?
- The New Deal was one of several reform movements that has changed the nation. Study the major reform movements Americans have witnessed: the reforms of the early-mid 19th century many of which were stimulated by the Second Great Awakening, populism and progressivism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the New Deal, and the Great Society of the 1960s. Compare these movements and account for their emergence at distinctive periods in American history.
- The WPA’s projects in the arts fell prey to an investigative committee. Several other investigative committees have been established in the past few decades. Assess their impact.

### June, 1939

Congress makes major changes in the WPA and, in a reaction to the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, bars funding for the Federal Theatre Project. Federal Theatre Project gives its last performances.

### October, 1939

WPA construction begins on the San Antonio River Walk, including 17,000 feet of walkways, 20 bridges and extensive plantings.

1939

## PART VIII – WAR PREPARATION AGENCY

“In the years 1935 to 1939, when regular appropriations for the armed forces were so meager, it was the WPA workers who saved many Army posts and Naval stations from obsolescence.”

—*The Army and Navy Register*, May 16, 1947

### CONTENT

The essence of this chapter is the approach of World War II, the emergence of the nation from isolationism to involvement, and the efforts to increase military readiness. In the years between 1939, when World War II began in Europe, and 1943 when the WPA died a quiet death, unemployment plummeted, WPA work rolls experienced a parallel decrease, and existing WPA projects focused extensively on military related projects. Roosevelt recognized the necessity of moving away from neutrality. Shortly before he resigned his WPA position, Roosevelt’s friend, Harry Hopkins, called for an increased role for the WPA in national defense projects. Among the first of these projects was the rehabilitation of the Picatinny Arsenal in New Jersey.

Father Coughlin, Charles Lindbergh, and other supporters of Germany decried Roosevelt’s alignment with the British and French. Attacks on FDR and his wife multiplied. The WPA had experienced a resurgence in the wake of the Roosevelt recession, but its authority was limited by Congressional actions such as a ban on all political activity

by WPA workers and by changes in the WPA wage structure. Roosevelt, to the surprise of some, decided to run for a third term and was reelected in November 1940. As war drew closer, the WPA became a “virtual adjunct” (492) of the military. Military projects expanded, although the WPA already had laid the groundwork for such efforts through its work on large projects such as building airports. As the nation moved toward war, the threat of the erosion of civil liberties increased. Roosevelt declared the United States the “arsenal of democracy,” and even the remaining WPA projects focused on the arts turned their attention to military related projects. By 1942, shortly after U.S. entry into World War II, the WPA rolls were down to 355,000, only 10% of what they had been only four years earlier. In December, 1942, FDR called for the elimination of the WPA, and it closed its doors the following spring. And on July 1, 1943 the WPA officially faded from existence. “The most extensive and equalitarian jobs program ever seen in a democracy” (520) was gone.



photo courtesy of wikipedia.org

#### September, 1940

Congress establishes the country's first peacetime draft.



#### November, 1940

FDR elected to an unprecedented third term.

#### December, 1940

FDR says the U.S. must be the world’s “arsenal of democracy.” WPA workers turn increasingly to training for military production and WPA construction work focuses on military bases, housing, roads, and airports.



## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What did the *Washington Post* view as “perhaps the most momentous utterance of his [FDR’s] career?” (452) Why was this so significant?
- What do you consider the most important achievements of the WPA?
- Had the WPA truly outlived its usefulness, or should a permanent jobs agency have been created to replace it?
- How did the attacks directed toward Eleanor Roosevelt reflect both racial prejudice and gender bias? What gains and setbacks did racial minorities and women experience in the 1930s?

## HIGHLIGHTING THE THEMES

- How did continuing economic instability and the coming of war work together to threaten civil liberties in the later years of the Depression?
- How did the experiences of Jimmy Bonanno illustrate the uncertainty of life in the 1930s?

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Conduct a debate on the U.S. policy of isolation as World War II began in Europe?
- Discuss with students the U.S. selective service system created shortly before the U.S. entered World War II. How did this draft differ from all others the nation had imposed? Divide students into four or eight groups. Each group is to create a poster supporting or opposing the draft—in 1940 and in 2008.



**July, 1941**

WPA employment drops to around 1 million.

- Show students a copy of the painting *Guernica*. In their journals or notebooks ask them to respond to the images that Picasso painted in this work.
- Organize a seminar on the merits and criticisms of loyalty oaths, mandatory fingerprinting, and recitation of the pledge of allegiance.
- Organize students in groups of four. Assign each of the four group members one of FDR’s “four freedoms.” Each student should determine why Roosevelt selected that particular freedom and assess its importance during the 1930s and into the present.

## BEYOND THE TEXT: MAKING CONNECTIONS

- Read Philip Roth’s 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*, predicated on the election of Charles Lindbergh to the presidency.
- What constitutional restrictions are placed on the president’s ability to take the nation to war? Why did Congress find it necessary, through the 1973 War Powers Act, to further limit the president’s authority? Should there be further restrictions placed or more discretion given to the Commander-in-Chief when armed conflict is likely?



**December, 1941**

U.S. declares war on Japan.  
Germany and Italy declare war on U.S.

## EPILOGUE: THE LEGACY OF THE WPA

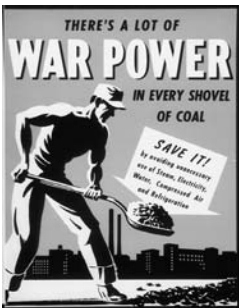
“I am sure that the accomplishments of the WPA will never be known by any one person. It has simply been too large in figures and volume and things done to get it all in one brief statement.”

—Howard O. Hunter, WPA commissioner, January 13, 1942

As the war ended, and life began to normalize, few Americans any longer thought about the WPA. The programs “were so familiar as to go unnoticed. Their ubiquity rendered them invisible.” (523) Taylor brings us back to the stories of many of those whose personal recollections were recorded in this book. We get to know a bit about them in the years after the war and the WPA ended. Harry Hopkins, ill for many of the last years of his life, died on January 29, 1946 at age 55. Many WPA projects fell into disuse and disrepair.

However, in the late 1960s, many people began to revisit the WPA. Restoration projects at such WPA sites as the San Antonio River Walk and the Timberline Lodge in Oregon were begun. WPA travel guides were reissued. Art collectors and historians are still seeking the lost canvases done by WPA artists and later discarded.

The stunning legacy of the WPA will remain if we continue to learn about this unique initiative and pledge to pass to our children and grandchildren the knowledge and appreciation of what the millions of WPA workers did in their efforts to support their families but also to benefit the nation.



**January, 1942**

Almost all WPA work is defense related. Arts workers create civil defense posters, while construction workers continue to improve the military infrastructure.



**December, 1942**

Roosevelt orders abolition of the WPA. Only 354,619 are on the payrolls as of November 24.



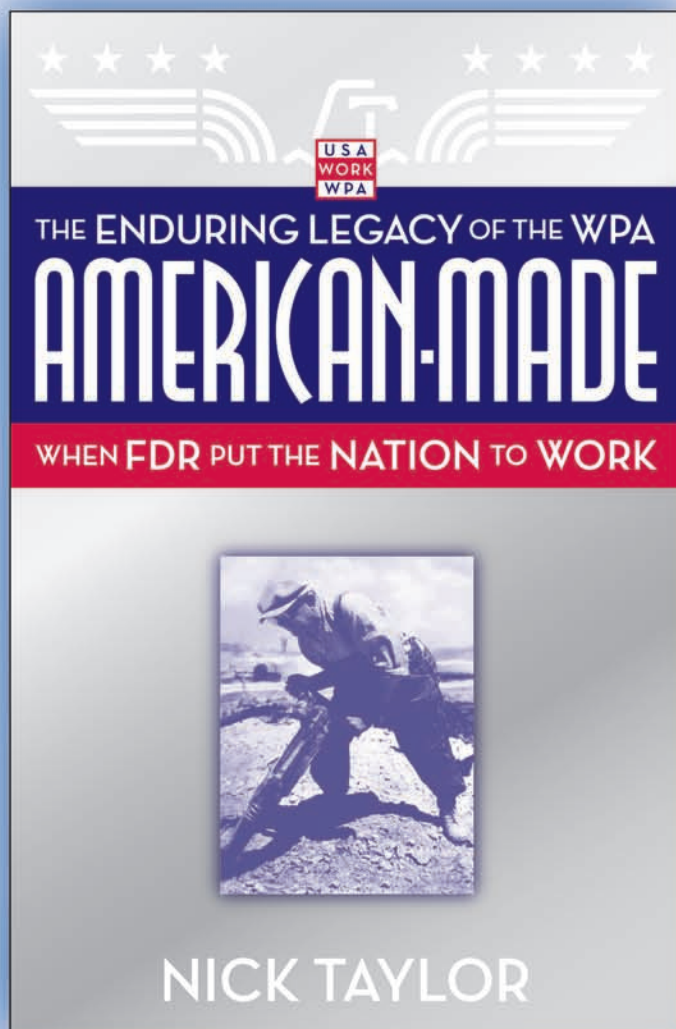
**June, 1943**

WPA is abolished.

### ABOUT THE GUIDE'S WRITER

Nancy Schick, a graduate of Michigan State and the University of Pittsburgh, taught history and mathematics in public schools for 38 years, including, most recently, 20 years at Los Alamos High School in New Mexico. She retired in 2006.

Co-author of the recently published AP U.S. History Teacher's Guide, she is a College Board “national leader” and consultant and has spent four years on the Advanced Placement United States History Development Committee. Schick has received three grants from National Endowment for the Humanities, served as the master teacher for a fourth NEH program, Worlds of the Renaissance, was a Fulbright-Hays fellow for summer study and travel in Thailand and Laos, studied in Cambridge, England through a grant from the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, and participated in a United States Institute of Peace summer program. She has been recognized five times by the White House as a Presidential Scholar Distinguished Teacher, named by her students who were Presidential Scholars as their most influential teacher. She was selected by the Gilder Lehrman Institute as the New Mexico United States History Teacher of the Year and was the 2005 New Mexico Teacher of the Year.



## AMERICAN-MADE

The Enduring Legacy of the WPA:  
When FDR Put the Nation to Work

By Nick Taylor

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