II. Hope, Recovery, Reform: The Great Depression and FDR’s New Deal

11. Harry Hopkins: New Deal Relief Czar and FDR’s Closest Advisor

During Franklin D. Roosevelt’s long term in the nation’s highest office, Harry Hopkins was his closest confidante. The fearless, tightly wound social worker from the Midwest was unique among FDR’s advisors in that he played an equally prominent role in shaping the domestic policies of the New Deal and in helping the president carry out the high-stakes foreign policy that allowed America to overcome its Axis enemies in World War II.

Born in 1890 in rural Sioux City, Iowa, Hopkins attended that state’s Grinnell College, a seedbed of the Social Gospel, a progressive, Protestant-based reform movement focusing on poverty, civil rights, and other social-justice issues. After graduating in 1912, Hopkins, like many energetic young reformers, moved to New York City’s teeming East Side slums, taking a job at a settlement house near Tompkins Square Park called the Christadora House. For nearly twenty years, he would continue working in poverty relief and reform in such organizations as the Red Cross and New York’s Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor.

At the outset of the Great Depression, FDR, then governor of New York, tapped the forty-two-year-old Hopkins to run the state’s model relief program. When FDR became president at the Depression’s nadir in 1933, Hopkins became the architect of federal relief, pushing successfully for an approach that would throw a lifeline to millions of desperate Americans without robbing them of their dignity: work relief.
Later Hopkins made initial contacts on FDR’s behalf with Allied leaders Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin, and became a vital link among the heads of state at the big wartime conferences. During this wartime work, Hopkins was desperately ill with complications from stomach cancer, but he maintained a punishing schedule of White House meetings and international travel at a time when the latter was unavoidably arduous.

Hopkins was intensely driven, politically opinionated, and, in his zeal to accomplish big things, dismissive of bureaucratic niceties. He became a lightning rod for his running of the Works Progress Administration, the New Deal’s costliest, most expansive program, and for his insistence on government’s role in keeping Americans fully employed.

Hopkins’s tenacity also found expression in a fierce personal devotion to FDR. The president could rely on Hopkins’s candor (Churchill affectionately called him “Lord Root of the Matter”) and enjoyed his company. When 1940 presidential candidate Wendell Willkie asked FDR why he kept Hopkins so close despite the resentment this engendered in some quarters, FDR told Willkie that if he ever became president, “You’ll learn what a lonely job this is, and you’ll discover the need for someone like Harry Hopkins who asks for nothing except to serve you.”

Indeed, as FDR’s years in the presidency wore on, his relationship with Hopkins took on the nature of a family tie. Hopkins moved into the White House with his small daughter in 1940; his second wife had died, and, after recovering from surgery to remove a stomach tumor in 1937, he was experiencing a renewed bout of digestive troubles, extreme weight loss, and weakness. Hopkins named Eleanor Roosevelt guardian of his daughter should he become incapacitated or die. When he remarried in the White House in 1942, FDR stood up as his best man.

The two men saw each other for the last time thousands of miles from Washington, DC, in the Crimea, at the Yalta meeting of Allied leaders in February 1945. After assisting the president by warding off many Russian demands, Hopkins, exhausted and in terrible pain, left by air rather than sail home with FDR aboard the USS Quincy. Hopkins spent the next several months recuperating at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where he received the shocking news that FDR had preceded him in death on April 12, 1945. Hopkins died the next year.
Harry Hopkins and Governor Roosevelt

In 1931, as the nation turned sharply into economic depression and Franklin D. Roosevelt hit his stride as governor of New York, he hired Harry Hopkins, then director of the New York Tuberculosis Association, to direct a new state agency that would coordinate relief for the impoverished unemployed.

The New York Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) was the first state agency of its kind, setting a key precedent for government—as opposed to tapped-out private charities—taking the responsibility to prevent utter destitution among people who were willing to work. “The duty of the State toward the citizen,” as FDR told the legislature in January 1931, “is the duty of the servant to its master.”

The new program called for traditional “home relief” in the form of food, fuel, medical care, and the like, along with “an entirely new form of relief, to be known as work relief,” as the state attorney general put it. New Yorkers would be put to work at useful, government-sponsored jobs. FDR and Hopkins both favored this alternative to “the dole” as less destructive to workers’ sense of self-sufficiency. Hopkins had seen the concept in play while volunteering in a privately funded program that put the unemployed to work in New York City parks.

TERA eventually helped about 10 percent of New York families. Its innovation and success, under Hopkins’s efficient management, helped raise FDR’s national profile for the presidential campaign that began not long after TERA’s inception in late 1931. It was also during Hopkins’s time in Albany that he developed a close relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt, who would later advocate for his work-relief approach to the economic crisis and help Hopkins move into FDR’s inner circle.

Harry Hopkins arrives in Washington, DC, on September 24, 1938, after a trip to Los Angeles to survey the results of devastating flooding in the area. Hopkins’s massive work-relief program, the Works Progress Administration, would hire workers to rebuild roads, sewers, and other infrastructure damaged in the flood. This was the crux of the work-relief approach that Hopkins pioneered: the government creating jobs for Americans who desperately needed them, doing work that would benefit American communities.

“The duty of the State toward the citizen, is the duty of the servant to its master.”

FDR as governor, January 1931.
Harry Hopkins and the New Deal

Despite having directed New York State relief efforts while Franklin D. Roosevelt was governor, Harry Hopkins was still little more than an acquaintance to FDR when he became president in 1933. It was Hopkins who sold himself—and his ideas—to the new administration.

He traveled to Washington, DC, a few days after FDR’s inauguration, determined to meet with him. When he couldn’t get an appointment, Hopkins turned to newly minted labor secretary Frances Perkins, who agreed to meet Hopkins that night before she gave a speech. Seeking privacy under a crowded stairwell, the two caucused briefly. In minutes, Hopkins laid out the simple and practical relief plan that, only two weeks later, FDR would deliver as a bill to Congress.

Passed in May 1933, the legislation created the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which would issue grants to state programs giving direct cash relief and work-relief jobs to the unemployed. FDR appointed Hopkins to direct it.

When Hopkins reported for work, FDR’s brief instruction was to open the spigot, providing “immediate and adequate” relief to hungry, beleaguered families. That very afternoon Hopkins approved $5,336,317 to fund relief programs in Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, and Texas. No administrator had ever acted so quickly.

The press pounced, criticizing Hopkins as profligate. He was unapologetic. “I’m not going to last six months here,” he said, “so I’ll do as I please.”

But Hopkins’s real passion was work relief. With Eleanor Roosevelt’s support, he assiduously pressed for this approach among rival FDR advisors—budget hawks who favored direct relief as the cheapest approach, and proponents of large-scale public construction projects that, while not styled as relief, would create jobs and stimulate the economy.

The administration took all three approaches, but in early 1935, unemployment still rampant, Hopkins’s work relief became the centerpiece of the New Deal’s solution. On January 24, the House passed legislation establishing the Works Progress Administration (WPA) by an overwhelming majority. After hearings and extensive questioning of Hopkins, the Senate passed the bill on April 8, 1935. Congress authorized a whopping $4.8 billion—the largest single peacetime appropriation anywhere, ever—to support the new agency, which Hopkins would head.

As plans for the WPA took shape, FDR went on the radio on April 28 to deliver a fireside chat on work relief. “This,” he said, “is a great national crusade to destroy enforced idleness, which is an enemy of the human spirit generated by this depression. Our attack upon those enemies must be without stint and without discrimination.”

In its four years the WPA moved more than 3.3 million Americans from relief rolls into jobs, and employed many more jobless who hadn’t qualified for relief. The sixty-dollar monthly paycheck from a WPA job performing any of three hundred kinds of work provided the sole income for nearly twenty million Americans in all.

Hopkins had come to view gainful employment as a right. And though his lead part in the New Deal incited the wrath of conservative New Deal critics—spawning theories that Hopkins was a communist, for example—his point of view profoundly influenced such American institutions as Social Security, as well as FDR’s decision to include basic material well-being—“freedom from want”—as one of the four fundamental human freedoms he identified in his celebrated 1941 speech.
Harry Hopkins as Wartime Emissary and Counselor

As criticism of Harry Hopkins’s role in domestic policy reached a high pitch in 1938, Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed him secretary of commerce, a position Hopkins had to resign the next year because of failing health. Not long after, with no income or home of his own, he moved into the White House. From this perch, Hopkins would help FDR win reelection to an unprecedented third term and Hopkins would be constantly on hand to advise the president in the matter that now topped his agenda: the coming war.

In January 1941, as FDR urged Congress to approve his Lend-Lease bill to supply arms to the British in their stand against the Nazis, the president needed information about these would-be allies and their voluble leader, Winston Churchill. He sent Hopkins to London as his personal representative “so that he can talk to Churchill like an Iowa farmer,” as he explained. “Harry is the perfect ambassador for my purposes,” the president went on. “He doesn’t even know the meaning of the word ‘protocol.’ When he sees a piece of red tape he just pulls out those old garden shears of his and snips it.”

Hopkins and Churchill got along extremely well. Hopkins assured Churchill of the president’s readiness to back the war effort and told the president the British could be counted on to hold the line against the Nazis. Thanks in part to Hopkins’s efforts, the Lend-Lease bill passed; he would become its chief administrator, carrying out FDR’s broad-stroke concept with characteristic attention to detail.

After returning to London in July to begin moving FDR and Churchill—the “two prima donnas,” as Hopkins put it privately—toward a first face-to-face meeting, Hopkins traveled on to Moscow to meet with Joseph Stalin in the perilous first weeks of Operation Barbarossa, the German blitzkrieg (“lightning war”) into the Soviet Union. Stalin, largely an unknown quantity to Americans, was unusually open with Hopkins about the state of Soviet military preparations. Hopkins relayed to the president the information most critical to American security at the time: the Soviet Union needed help but showed no indication of folding to the German assault. With Hopkins’s recommendation, the United States would soon extend its Lend-Lease war aid to the Russians.

A chain-smoking, inelegant midwesterner who began the war with no diplomatic, foreign policy, or military experience, Hopkins pulled off quite a feat in winning the confidence and respect of three such different and outsized personalities as FDR, Churchill, and Stalin. His intelligence and humorous, familiar style were vital to keeping the alliance together. He also played an important part in war strategy, helping convince American commanders to put off an invasion of Europe in favor of attacking North Africa in 1942, and then persuading a reluctant Churchill to finally commit to the invasion of Nazi-occupied Europe in 1944.
After Franklin D. Roosevelt’s death, President Harry Truman sent Harry Hopkins back to Moscow to press Joseph Stalin on Soviet participation in the continuing war against Japan, coordinate the Allied occupation of a defeated Germany, discuss the use of the veto in the newly forming United Nations Security Council, and iron out differences over the future government of Poland. Hopkins returned convinced that if the United States adopted a patient, straightforward approach that recognized Russia’s legitimate interests, Russia and the United States could get along.

By the fall of 1945, however, Hopkins feared that Truman’s aggressive stance toward Moscow would end the wartime alliance, a concern Eleanor Roosevelt shared. As his health and his financial condition declined, Hopkins resigned from government on July 2, 1945. He accepted a position as mediator between labor and management in the coat and suit industry and planned to write his memoirs. But his health grew even more fragile, and he died at the age of fifty-five on January 29, 1946.

“President Roosevelt had the gift of choosing generous and noble spirits to help him in peace and war,” Winston Churchill said of Hopkins after news of his demise reached England. “In Harry Hopkins he found a man of not only wide ranging vision, but piercing eye. . . . We do well to salute his memory. We shall not see his like again.”

Harry Hopkins and Winston Churchill during the Atlantic Conference, August 1941. Hopkins had been instrumental in arranging the shipboard rendezvous between Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt, their first face-to-face meeting. Early on the British leader affectionately dubbed FDR’s plainspoken emissary “Lord Root of the Matter” and, on Hopkins’s death, eulogized him as “a man of not only ranging vision, but piercing eye.” Atlantic Charter Foundation