

Harry Hopkins: Social Work Legacy and Role in New Deal Era Policies

Marcos J. Martinez, M.S.W.

Elisa Kawam, M.S.W.

Abstract

The early 20th century was rife with much social, political, and economic change both positive and negative. During this time, social work became a profession, cemented by great minds and visionaries who sought a better society. Harry Hopkins was one such visionary: he was a model leader in social service provision and was one of the New Deal architects. This essay considers the roots of Hopkin's influence, his experiences operating large federal agencies, his work in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt administration during the Great Depression and into World War II, and the dedication and commitment he displayed throughout his career as a public servant.

Keywords: social work, Harry Hopkins, New Deal, FDR Administration

"Now or never, boys—social security, minimum wage, work programs. Now or never." –Harry Hopkins (Sherwood, 1948 as cited in Goldberg & Collins, 2001, p.34)

Introduction

At the turn of the century and into the decades of the early 20th century that followed, the United States saw a time of great struggle and change. Known as the Progressive era, the years between 1875 and 1925 were marked by the obtainment of labor rights for workers and children, the Women's Suffrage movement, U.S. involvement in World War I (1914-1918) and the subsequent economic boom, and establishment of the social welfare system (Goldberg & Collins, 2001; Kawam, 2012; Segal, 2013). This time period encompassed major cultural and social trends that included a redefinition of womanhood (e.g., flappers), the rise of Jazz music, prohibition of alcohol, the Harlem Renaissance, and the penning of *Mein Kampf* by Adolf Hitler (Hakim, 2006). However, economic opportunity during the 'Roaring 20s' was not distributed evenly among the public as gaps in wealth and economic disparity increased, culminating in the largest stock market crash that U.S. had ever experienced in 1929 (Figueira-McDonough, 2007).

Given the economic and social foundation that was laid during this time, the Progressive era inspired the establishment of social work as a dignified profession most notably through of the Settlement House movement and Charity Organization Societies. The leaders of these movements, Jane Adams and Mary Richmond respectively, in addition to other numerous social workers such as Wilbur Cohen, Whitney Young Jr., Martha Eliot, Richard Cloward, Charlotte Towle, Dorothy Height, Sophia Breckenridge, Bertha Reynolds, Francis Perkins, and Harry Hopkins were responsible for the legitimate advancement of social work, particularly pushing social work ethics in the development of social policy (Chapin, 2011; Schneider & Netting, 1999). During the nascent stages of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) Administration, Harry Hopkins, Frances Perkins, and Dorothy Kahn were crucial to the planning and passing of New Deal policies, which significantly expanded the power of the federal government in providing

welfare programs to those in need (Dolgoff, Feldstein, & Skolnik, 1993). As representatives of social work values and ethics such as service, integrity, uplifting society through aid, and political action, these social workers understood what the key societal problems were and what could be done to help. In this manner, social workers might be considered the gatekeepers for social progression and a better future for all (NASW, 2008).

One such gatekeeper was Harry Hopkins. He was an advocate for the socially and economically dispossessed and was relentless in his dedication to uplifting society (Hopkins, 1999). Hopkins' leadership, political savvy, and decisiveness in providing emergency relief left a legacy and model for future generations of social workers and social service providers. Hopkins managed to bridge disparate bureaucracies to foster cooperative and positive work environments. Aside from his spirited motivation and promotion of collegiality among staff, Hopkins was methodical in the way he addressed social ills, including those brought on by the Great Depression. Together these traits of passion, focus, and teamwork undoubtedly made him effective as a social service administrator and as one of FDR's closest advisors.

The development of Hopkins' quality characteristics and social work skills were rooted in his experiences as a youth, his education at Grinnell College, and his work with state and federal governments. Thus, the purpose of this essay is threefold: (a) to discuss the historical contributions that Harry Hopkins made as a social work leader and policy reformer (Adams, 1977; Hopkins, 1999; McJimsey, 1987); (b) to understand Hopkins' traits and qualities that promoted his effectiveness in social change; and (c) to learn from Hopkins' passion, approach, and actions as it relates to social workers in the present day.

Taking Root: Early Influences

Born in Iowa in 1890, Harry Hopkins was the youngest of four siblings. His father, David 'Al' Hopkins, was a city councilman and his mother, Anna Hopkins, was a schoolteacher. Hopkins' political savvy has been attributed to his father and grandfather, who was also a noted politician. Both deeply religious, Al and Anna fostered a sense of community in their family through frequent church attendance multiple times throughout the week. Anna and Al stressed to their kids the importance of social responsibility, service to others, and intolerance for injustice (Adams, 1977). As role models to emulate, Al and Anna had a profound influence on Harry and his siblings, which enabled them to develop a critical consciousness and awareness not normally seen in young children (McJimsey, 1987).

Gaining an early understanding of the plight of others prompted three out of the four Hopkins children to enter into the social service field: Harry and his oldest sibling, Adah, became social workers while another sibling became a medical doctor. Adah herself was a successful and efficient administrator of various state social welfare programs, which had a substantial influence on Harry's decision to go into social work. Through her work in agency leadership, Adah's vision provided the blueprint for neighboring counties in the reduction of administrative costs in providing relief to those who most needed it (Hopkins, 1999; McJimsey, 1987). Using Adah's collective and pragmatic action as an example, Harry developed a deeper sense of duty and dedication to macro social work and community building, which laid the groundwork for his career in championing marginalized and vulnerable groups (Adams, 1977).

High School and Grinnell College: Social and Political Foundations

As an outgoing student and gifted athlete in high school, Harry helped others whenever possible. He even spearheaded a friend's campaign for school president, despite the fact that his friend was the underdog and had little chance of winning. Unsatisfied with this potential outcome, Harry remained committed and loyal to the campaign, which resulted in the eventual victory for his friend (Adams, 1977). This particular experience, most notably his persistence, was something that Harry referred back to during his future political campaigns and work in the White House (Adams, 1977; McJimsey, 1987). Upon completing high school, Harry attended the same school Adah had attended, Grinnell College (Hopkins, 1999), which was key in his development. Grinnell College, a small liberal arts institution founded in 1846 by congregational ministers, was known for its progressive position on social services and was at the center of the Social Gospel movement during the 1890's (Luker, 1977). Since Grinnell's core mission was rooted in the Social Gospel, the application of Christian principles to alleviate social problems was a consistent thread in Harry's education (White & Hopkins, 1976).

With Grinnell's focus on social progress, Harry expanded the way he constructed knowledge into his understanding of and passion for serving others while promoting the public good (Adams, 1977), critical factors that led to his success as a public servant and social work leader. For example, professors and administrators at Grinnell, who were at the cutting edges of their respective fields, cultivated a unique intellectual environment by promoting critical thinking and applied problem to social problems. Harry learned how the U.S government and the British parliamentary system worked; that the true purpose of social science was applying it to social problems; the importance of understanding the historical and individual contexts; and the Christian ethic of love thy neighbor (Adams, 1977; Hull, 2013; McJimsey, 1987; Steiner, 1914; Whelan, 1994). Further, through his studies Harry developed the belief that state and local governments were responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of its citizens, especially when unemployment was high, and that the ability to work and meet one's basic needs were not privileges but rather rights (Adams, 1977).

Growing Tall: Professional Social Worker and Administrator

After graduation from Grinnell, Harry planned on starting a newspaper with a friend in Montana. However, per the advice of a professor he instead chose to pursue a job lead at Christadora Settlement House in New York City (Adams, 1977). Harry was indeed hired and for the first time he experienced direct contact with ethnically diverse populations. Thanks to his education at Grinnell, Harry was methodical and pragmatic in understanding the plight of his clients, meaning he recognized key influential factors at micro, meso, and macro levels, which was novel thinking at that time. Despite his effectiveness at Christadora, Harry often wondered how such abject poverty could exist right next to incredible wealth and affluence (Adams, 1977; Hopkins, 1999). Christadora helped Harry critically think about vulnerable populations and in doing so he developed an intersectional understanding of economics and social conditions.

With these socio-economic macro concepts in mind, he left the settlement house and obtained a job with the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP). Not long after starting at AICP, he became a supervisor for the tuberculosis clinic where he further saw

the economic and health disparity, as well as overall lower quality of life (Adams, 1977). At the time, the AICP was experiencing a large increase in relief applications, which Hopkins reasoned was from lack of employment opportunities combined with fractured and inconsistent aid from other welfare providers in the area (McJimsey, 1987). Understanding that receiving aid from multiple sources may still not be enough to exist, Hopkins put forth a radical notion: instead of agencies and organizations struggling to provide assistance, the government should develop initiatives to create jobs and uplift those in poverty (Goldberg & Collins, 2001). This idea of centralized public aid would have great influence in his work with Roosevelt in the White House. In fact, Harry was able to obtain a large revitalization grant for the AICP, which employed many people who were in need of work (Adams, 1977; Hopkins, 1999; McJimsey, 1987), thus laying the groundwork for later New Deal employment policies under President Roosevelt's guidance.

Road to the White House: Prelude to the New Deal

In 1914, Harry campaigned for and helped John Mitchel win the Mayoral race in New York City. Upon winning, Mitchel passed initiatives providing temporary work for jobless men and established a Board of Child Welfare (Adams, 1977). Harry was appointed as the Executive Secretary of this Board and was very active in recruiting staff and volunteers, communicating with city officials, attending conferences, and holding weekly meetings with his work team (McJimsey, 1987). Harry, who demonstrated his integrity and loyalty as a public servant by placing the need of the people before politics in the provision of services, was known for nurturing and preserving relationships with others who were also committed to social change (Adams, 1977; McJimsey, 1987). These relationships proved crucial as Harry went on to lead other large organizations such as the American Red Cross Division of Civilian Relief, American Red Cross Disaster Relief of the Gulf States, and the New York Tuberculosis Association (NYTA) where he pioneered new community based health programs (Adams, 1977; McJimsey, 1987).

During his time with the Red Cross, Harry was able to increase communication between local chapters and save money, created volunteer training programs, and provided a shared sense of purpose and culture to his staff (Adams, 1977; Hopkins, 1999; McJimsey, 1987). Harry's collective approach to problem solving and genuineness was unique to his leadership as he was able to inspire loyalty, optimism, and dedication during times of emergency and crisis. These experiences of and characteristics would be critical during the tumultuous and infamous first 100 days of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) Administration.

While attending the first International Social Work Conference in Europe in 1928, Hopkins first met FDR. The two formed an instant bond as they shared the same passion for service, justice, and poverty relief; the pair became quick friends and Harry served as FDR's personal advisor during his campaign for Governor, which he eventually won (Austin, 2000). Upon his gubernatorial election, FDR charged Hopkins to establish an unemployment relief agency to provide jobs for displaced workers; known as the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA), this endeavor served as the model for the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).

As a result of Harry's interagency collaborative work with state agencies, he came into contact with Francis Perkins, who would eventually become FDR's Secretary of Labor. Much

like his bond with FDR, Perkins and Harry became instant friends, cemented together through their commitment to service and pursuit of social justice (Kawam, 2012). Similarly, Harry also grew close with Eleanor Roosevelt, another social worker concerned with the plight of vulnerable populations. Later, when FDR was elected president, Eleanor insisted that Harry be part of his cabinet (Adams, 1977). Eleanor would also be a fiery proponent of Perkins' and Harry's New Deal policies given their track records, specifically their quick and decisive actions in delivering aid to those in need (Ware, 1981).

Standing Strong: National and Global Impact

In 1933, FDR was elected the 32nd President of the United States, yet there was little time to celebrate: knowing the fragility of the country, FDR immediately brought Harry, Perkins, and others together to begin brainstorming potential ideas for major relief legislation, culminating in the New Deal (Chapin, 2011; Kawam, 2012; Walsh, 2009). One of the major ideas proposed was specific to Harry's specialty: centralized aid for local unemployment relief (Adams, 1977). Harry's diversified experiences in crisis and relentlessness undoubtedly supported President Roosevelt in passing the largest social welfare legislation in U.S. history (Sherwood, 1948). Eleanor's support of Harry also proved valuable as she insisted that he oversee New Deal policy efforts with minimal interference from politicians (McJimsey, 1987).

Harry spearheaded the creation and administration of reform efforts concerning the banking industry as well as in the creation of the Workers Progress Administration (WPA), FERA, and Civil Works Administration (CWA) (Fisher, 1980; Kawam, 2012; Segal, 2013). After just seven months into Roosevelt's presidency Harry was appointed the administrator for FERA, the first program of its kind to share direct costs with the state in providing services to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). Importantly, FERA provided unemployment relief in national and state parks and through the construction or renovation of hundreds of thousands public buildings, airports, roads, and bridges (Axinn & Levin, 1992; Fisher, 1980; Piven & Cloward, 1993). Demonstrating his prowess in this position Harry was soon appointed to lead the WPA (Segal, 2013). Within hours of accepting the position, Harry allocated over 5 million dollars to several states, ultimately employing millions of Americans nationwide (Axinn & Levin, 1992), and marked the first time in U.S. history that there was wide sweeping national support concerning anti-poverty and general welfare efforts (Goldberg & Collins, 2001).

The New Deal broke all records in American history for relief provision, laying the groundwork for social programs today (Piven & Cloward, 1993). After his work on the New Deal, Harry became the Secretary of Commerce in 1938 yet was forced to resign in 1940 due to complications from stomach cancer (Sherwood, 1948). Despite his resignation, Harry remained FDR's closest confidant and even became one of his foreign diplomats and war advisors during World War II. Harry, rumored to be honest and blunt but respected by the majority of the White House, did not hesitate to let FDR and his cabinet know how we felt on particular issues (Sherwood, 1948). In his role as personal advisor and foreign diplomat to FDR, Hopkins traveled the world and established important relationships with many world leaders including the UK, Russia, Egypt, and Iran (Adams, 1977; Hopkins, 1999; McJimsey, 1987). Due to his honesty and openness regarding FDR's war plans, both Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin had deep respect and trust for Harry's judgment of international politics (Adams, 1977).

Death of Harry Hopkins: Takeaway for Social Workers

Sadly, Harry Hopkins, only 56 years old, passed away from stomach cancer in 1946. As FDR's closest friend, advisor, and part architect of the New Deal, Harry dedicated his career to social work values such as social justice and bettering the social welfare of society. His ability to foster relationships and his collective approach to problem solving gained him the trust and loyalty of many and provided a framework for social workers aiming to work in governmental and non-governmental arenas. He developed a deep understanding at an early age of the interplay between economic conditions and social problems and his exemplary work provides an important example for social workers. His ability to integrate social work values and collaboration, particularly in the development of social policy and social service provision, is an inspiration for social workers aspiring to work in government today, especially given his influence at the highest level of government, something not experienced by social workers since FDR. Harry Hopkins, one of the early leaders in social work thought and major contributors to the modern United States social welfare system, continues to provide a relevant model for social workers today and for many years to come.

References

- Adams, H.H. (1977). *Harry Hopkins*. Longman Canada Limited, Toronto.
- Austin, D.M. (2000). Social work and social welfare administration: A historical perspective. In R.J. Patti (Ed.). *The Handbook of Social Welfare Management*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Axinn, J., & Levin, H. (1992). *Social Welfare: A history of the American response to need*. New York, NY: Longman Publishing Group.
- Chapin, R.K. (2011). *Social policy for effective practice: A strengths approach* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Taylor and Francis.
- Dolgoff, R.L., Feldstein, D., & Skalonik, L. (1993). *Understanding social welfare* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Longman Publishing Group.
- Goldberg, G.S., & Collins, S.D. (2001). *Washington's new poor law: Welfare "reform" and the roads not taken, 1935 to present*. New York, NY: Apex Press.
- Figueira-McDonough, J. (2007). *The welfare state and social work: Pursuing social justice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Fisher, J. (1980). *The response of social work to the depression*. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company.
- Hakim, J. (2006). *A history of US book nine: War, peace, and all that Jazz 1918-1947*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press
- Hopkins, J. (1999). *Harry Hopkins: Sudden hero, brash reformer*. New York, NY: St. Martins Press.
- Hull, R.T. (2013). Biography: John Dashiell Stoops. *The American Philosophical Association Centennial Series*, 259-260.
- Kawam, E. (2012). Remembering Francis Perkins: The past, present, and future of social work. *Perspectives on Social Work*, 9(1), 53-59.
- Luker, R.E. (1977). The social gospel and the failure of racial reform, 1877-1898. *Church History*, 46(1), 80-99.
- McJimsey, G. (1987). *Harry Hopkins: Ally of the poor and defender of democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- National Association of Social Workers (2008). Code of ethics of the national association of social workers. Retrieved from: <https://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>

- Piven, F.F., & Cloward, R.A. (1993). *Regulating the poor: The functions of public welfare*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Schneider, R.L., & Netting, F.E. (1999). Influencing social policy in a time of devolution: Upholding social works great tradition. *Social Work*, 44(4), 349-357.
- Segal, E. (2013). *Social welfare policy and social programs: A values perspective* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Cengage Learning.
- Sherwood, R.E. (1948). *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An intimate history*. New York, NY: Harper and Brothers.
- Steiner, E.A. (1914). *From alien to citizen: The story of my life in America*. New York, NY: Library of the University of Virginia.
- Walsh, K.T. (2009). The first 100 days: Franklin Roosevelt pioneered the 100 day concept. U.S. News. Retrieved on March 10th: <http://www.usnews.com/news/history/articles/2009/02/12/the-first-100-days-franklin-roosevelt-pioneered-the-100-day-concept>
- Ware, S. (1981). *Beyond suffrage: Women in the new deal*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Whelan, M. (1994). Albert Bushnell Hart and the origins of social studies education. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 22, 423-440.
- White, R.C., & Hopkins, C.C. (1976). *The social gospel: Religion and reform in changing America*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Marcos J. Martinez is a doctoral candidate in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University. He has an MSW from New Mexico Highlands University, with a concentration in Government Non-Profit, and a BSW from Dana College. Marcos' research focuses on the etiology and prevention of health risk behavior among minority adolescent youth, specifically substance use and risky sexual behavior. Marcos was previously a National Institute on Drug Abuse and National Hispanic Science Network, Interdisciplinary Research Training Institute on Hispanic Drug Abuse Fellow.

Elisa Kawam is a Ph.D. candidate in the School of Social Work at Arizona State University, where she also received her BSW and MSW. Her specific interest lies in trauma etiology and intergenerational cycles of child maltreatment. Her work is funded by a dissertation grant through the Doris Duke Charitable Trust. Aside from her research, Elisa also teaches trauma informed micro and macro practice in the undergraduate and graduate social work programs at Arizona State.