

Since it seems clear we will be deciding whether we want to preserve the Social Security Act by our choice of leaders in the next few elections, I thought it not unreasonable to reprint this piece from last year about why people in the 1930s thought the measure was imperative. There is more news about the classified material at Mar-a-Lago, but nothing that can't wait another day so I can catch this anniversary.

By the time most of you will read this, it will be August 14, and on this day in 1935, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act into law. While FDR's New Deal had put in place new measures to regulate business and banking and had provided temporary work relief to combat the Depression, this law permanently changed the nature of the American government.

The Social Security Act is known for its payments to older Americans, but it did far more than that. It established unemployment insurance; aid to homeless, dependent, and neglected children; funds to promote maternal and child welfare; and public health services. It was a sweeping reworking of the relationship between the government and its citizens, using the power of taxation to pool funds to provide a basic social safety net.

The driving force behind the law was FDR's Secretary of Labor, Frances Perkins. She was the first woman to

hold a position in the U.S. Cabinet and still holds the record for having the longest tenure in that job: she lasted from 1933 to 1945.

She brought to the position a vision of government very different from that of the Republicans who had run it in the 1920s. While men like President Herbert Hoover had harped on the idea of a “rugged individualism” in which men worked their way up, providing for their families on their own, Perkins recognized that people in communities had always supported each other. The vision of a hardworking man supporting his wife and children was more myth than reality: her own husband suffered from bipolar disorder, making her the family’s primary support.

As a child, Perkins spent summers with her grandmother, with whom she was very close, in the small town of Newcastle, Maine, where the old-fashioned, close-knit community supported those in need. In college, at Mount Holyoke, she majored in chemistry and physics, but after a professor required students to tour a factory to observe working conditions, Perkins became committed to improving the lives of those trapped in industrial jobs. After college, Perkins became a social worker and, in 1910, earned a masters degree in economics and sociology from Columbia University. She became the head of the New York office of the National Consumers League, urging consumers to use their buying power to demand better conditions and wages for the workers who made the products they were buying.

The next year, in 1911, she witnessed the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire in which 146 workers, mostly women and girls, died. They were trapped in the building when the fire broke out because the factory owner had ordered the doors to the stairwells and exits locked to make sure no one slipped outside for a break. Unable to escape the smoke and fire in the factory, the workers—some of them on fire—leaped from the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors of the building, dying on the pavement.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire turned Perkins away from voluntary organizations to improve workers' lives and toward using the government to adjust the harsh conditions of industrialization. She began to work with the Democratic politicians at Tammany Hall, who presided over communities in the city that mirrored rural towns and who exercised a form of social welfare for their voters, making sure they had jobs, food, and shelter and that wives and children had a support network if a husband and father died. In that system, the voices of women like Perkins were valuable, for their work in the immigrant wards of the city meant that they were the ones who knew what working families needed to survive.

The overwhelming unemployment, hunger, and suffering caused by the Great Depression made Perkins realize that state governments alone could not adjust the conditions of the modern world to create a safe, supportive community for ordinary people. She came to believe, as she said: "The people are what matter to government, and a government should aim to give all the people under its jurisdiction the best possible life."

Through her Tammany connections, Perkins met FDR, and when he asked her to be his Secretary of Labor, she told him that she wanted the federal government to provide unemployment insurance, health insurance, and old-age insurance. She later recalled: “I remember he looked so startled, and he said, ‘Well, do you think it can be done?’”

Creating federal unemployment insurance became her primary concern. Congressmen had little interest in passing such legislation. They said they worried that unemployment insurance and federal aid to dependent families would undermine a man’s willingness to work. But Perkins recognized that those displaced by the Depression had added new pressure to the idea of old-age insurance.

In Long Beach, California, Dr. Francis Townsend had looked out of his window one day to see elderly women rooting through garbage cans for food. Appalled, he came up with a plan to help the elderly and stimulate the economy at the same time. Townsend proposed that the government provide every retired person over 60 years old with \$200 a month, on the condition that they spend it within 30 days, a condition designed to stimulate the economy.

Townsend’s plan was wildly popular. More than that, though, it sparked people across the country to start coming up with their own plans for protecting the elderly and the nation’s social fabric, and together, they began to change the public conversation about social welfare

policies.

They spurred Congress to action. Perkins recalled that Townsend “startled the Congress of the United States because the aged have votes. The wandering boys didn't have any votes; the evicted women and their children had very few votes. If the unemployed didn't stay long enough in any one place, they didn't have a vote. But the aged people lived in one place and they had votes, so every Congressman had heard from the Townsend Plan people.”

FDR put together a committee to come up with a plan to create a basic social safety net, but committee members could not make up their minds how to move forward. Perkins continued to hammer on the idea they must come up with a final plan, and finally locked the members of the committee in a room. As she recalled: “Well, we locked the door and we had a lot of talk. I laid out a couple of bottles of something or other to cheer their lagging spirits. Anyhow, we stayed in session until about 2 a.m. We then voted finally, having taken our solemn oath that this was the end; we were never going to review it again.”

By the time the bill came to a vote in Congress, it was hugely popular. The vote was 371 to 33 in the House and 77 to 6 in the Senate.

When asked to describe the origins of the Social Security Act, Perkins mused that its roots came from the very beginnings of the nation. When Alexis de Tocqueville wrote *Democracy in America* in 1835, she noted, he

thought Americans were uniquely “so generous, so kind, so charitably disposed.” “Well, I don't know anything about the times in which De Tocqueville visited America,” she said, but “I do know that at the time I came into the field of social work, these feelings were real.”

With the Social Security Act, Perkins helped to write into our laws a longstanding political impulse in America that stood in dramatic contrast to the 1920s philosophy of rugged individualism. She recognized that the ideas of community values and pooling resources to keep the economic playing field level and take care of everyone are at least as deeply seated in our political philosophy as the idea of every man for himself.

When she recalled the origins of the Social Security Act, Perkins recalled: “Of course, the Act had to be amended, and has been amended, and amended, and amended, and amended, until it has now grown into a large and important project, for which, by the way, I think the people of the United States are deeply thankful. One thing I know: Social Security is so firmly embedded in the American psychology today that no politician, no political party, no political group could possibly destroy this Act and still maintain our democratic system. It is safe. It is safe forever, and for the everlasting benefit of the people of the United States.”

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Notes:

<https://www.ssa.gov/history/35actinx.html>

<https://www.ssa.gov/history/perkins5.html>

<https://francesperkinscenter.org/life-new/>

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