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# THE INFAMOUS BRAD

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## Yes We Can Put Americans Back to Work. We Probably Won't, Though.

Jan. 28th, 2009 at 4:26 PM



The American way of life depends, in part, on a specific illusion. It's a lie that we tell ourselves, and tell our children. What we just did last Tuesday, an orderly, peaceful, even civil transition of power from one generation to the next, from one ethnic group to another, from one political party to another political party with a different political agenda? We lie to ourselves, and lie even harder to our children, that that is something we can count on, something we have always been able to count on, that any alternative is so unthinkable and unnatural for Americans that we need have no fear whatsoever of any alternative.



"CWA: 6,000 Men and a Scenic Boulevard"

Historians know that that's a lie. Even if one accepts the incredible claim that every US President who has ever been assassinated was killed by a deranged lone gunman, acting out of personal motives, with no political motive, and with no encouragement or assistance by anyone else, the fact remains: historians know that it can get so bad in the United States, economically, that the American people will withdraw their consent to be governed. We call one particular financial industry collapse that rippled outward around the globe (among other things, ultimately bringing the Nazis to power in Germany) not just any recession or depression, but the Great Depression, because the number of people needing work in the US rose to about 3.5 million, or about 20% of all working-age heads of households. In the hardest-hit parts of the country, it reached 50%. And it's not a coincidence that the next several years saw three credible attempts to topple the United States government: a half-million man general strike called by Soviet-influenced CIO labor unions aimed at sparking a general uprising and Communist revolution that couldn't quite hold out long enough to get their revolution before it collapsed, Huey Long's astronomically-growing Poor People's Army that aimed at overthrowing the Constitution which was only thwarted via its leader's assassination, and an attempt by the 1930s equivalent of the [Democratic Leadership Council](#), then called the [American Liberty League](#), to use corporate money to bribe US military generals into placing them in power via coup d'etat. No, we know as a matter of objective fact: somewhere in the near vicinity of 20% prolonged unemployment, the USA starts running a serious risk of anarchy followed by totalitarianism.

We also know that by the same measure of unemployment that was in use at the time, as of this month the US unemployment rate is somewhere in the near vicinity of 15%. And rising. Fast. As in perhaps as much as 1% per month. No, really, trust me on this: everybody in both political parties now understands what everybody in both political parties understood as of 1933, when centrist (and wealthy) Democratic former New York governor Frank Roosevelt was sworn in as President: they were doomed if they didn't find some way to lower unemployment. And trust me on this, both Republicans and Democrats in our own time understand that the clock is ticking on this now, too. What remains is the question: how do we do that? Nor are today's Republican and Democratic leaders the first politicians to be faced with this question, it is the exact same question that was asked in 1933. And the political elites

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and the professional economists of our time agree 100% with the political elites and the professional economists of 1933. Our ruling class, just like the ruling class of 1933, believes that government by definition screws up everything it touches. That all government intervention in the economy is inherently bad, that the best it can possibly be is a short-term necessary evil. That the reason that big corporations are big is that they are lead by people who know how to make the best use of money and how to get the best work out of employees. Therefore the political elites and professional economists of our time 100% agree with Frank Roosevelt of early 1933 and with the American Liberty League of the 1930s that what we need is something like the [Public Works Administration](#). What we need, they are 100% sure, is a public-private partnership: government identifies legitimate government needs that aren't currently being met, and bids that work out to private contractors, and audits those programs and those contractors to make sure that not one thin dime of taxpayer money is wasted on any project that's unnecessary or on any expense that can't be justified. And in a sign of bipartisanship, Franklin Roosevelt appointed left-wing Republican Harold Ickes to do just that.

As Timothy Noah pointed out yesterday in a lovely pair of articles on Slate.com, "[Wrong Harry](#): Four million jobs in two years? FDR did it in two months" (with Charles Peters) and an almost immediate follow-up piece when a news item proved his point for him even better, "[CBO, Meet CWA](#): More evidence that Obama's stimulus falls short," FDR, congressional Republicans lead by [Harold Ickes](#), and right-wing Democrats lead by Al Smith *were wrong* in exactly the same way that Barack Obama, congressional Republicans, and the Democratic Leadership Council are wrong right now. The Public Works Administration did its job. It did it under budget. It wasted not a single dollar. It attracted not a single critic. *And it created almost no jobs*. In 1933, it turned out that there just plain weren't that many legitimate government jobs that weren't being funded already. As Ickes took his sweet time coming up with more, lest he be criticized for wasting taxpayer money, he found out that there also weren't a whole lot of companies out there begging for the chance to bid on PWA contracts. They weren't crazy about the contract stipulations, and they weren't all that interested in retooling and reorganizing their entire corporate structures to service contracts there were guaranteed to end as soon as the Great Depression ended. As an anti-poverty, anti-violent-revolution government program, the Public Works Administration was an unvarnished, absolute, indefensible disaster. Period. End of story. Nobody even tries to defend it any more; its supporters just pretend it never happened, so they can recommend the same thing the next time without anybody knowing it's been tried before, because by their politics, it's the right thing to do whether it works or not.

And along about the time that Roosevelt was about to lose his temper over this, the First Lady talked him into talking to a very successful social worker named [Harry Hopkins](#), who only wanted a few minutes of the President's time so he could ask one question. He showed the President figures (that he later showed Congress) showing that there were about 3.5 million Americans in 1933 who were heads of households between the ages of 18 and 64 that no employer was going to hire, no way, no how, not for any amount of money, and he asked: "Can you give one legal reason why we can't just hire those people ourselves?" The thing is, he got that estimate of 3.5 million people by going through the state-by-state lists of people who were *already on the dole*, people who were already receiving some kind of charitable or government cash hand-out because they weren't working. And what Hopkins realized was that not only did the American people deeply resent those people for taking money and doing nothing all day, the recipients weren't any happier about it, either: *they wanted to work*. So FDR shoe-horned a program through Congress, first as pilot program called the [Civil Works Administration](#), to raise about \$1200 (1933 US dollars) per year per unemployed head of household: \$1000 per worker per year for wages, \$24 per worker per year for administrative costs, the rest for hand tools and raw materials for whatever projects he could make up. To get CWA funding, a job had to be something that no corporation was interested in providing, and that no government agency was interested in funding, and it had to be as labor-intensive as possible (see photograph above right).

Conservatives in both parties *hated it*. And still do. And campaigned hard against it in the 1934 congressional primaries. Al Smith's right-wing Democrats convinced FDR that if he kept the CWA, it would cost him his majority in Congress, so he shut it down after only four months. In that four months, CWA workers had already built 1,000 rural airports, built 40,000 school buildings, built or resurfaced a quarter-million miles of roads, and laid twelve million miles of sanitary sewer lines, some of the first sewer lines laid in most counties. *In four months*. Right-wing Democrats and anti-tax pro-corporate Republicans screamed bloody murder about all the money that the CWA was "wasting," but (and this is a point I'll come back to again) *we're still using almost all of that stuff today*. 75 years later, those "worthless" "make-work" projects are turning out to be some of the most valuable stuff the government had done in its first 150 years of existence. So contrary to what the right-wing Democrats in Congress were telling FDR he "needed" to do to "save" the 1934 congressional elections, terminating the CWA turned out to be the *least* popular thing he did as President, and as soon as the elections were over, on voter mandate, FDR brought it right back again, rammed it through Congress again as the [Works Progress Administration](#) (WPA).

Only this time it had full funding, and a Congressional and Presidential mandate to try to hire *every single one* of the roughly 3.5 million unemployed, non-disabled, work-aged heads of household in America. And in almost no time at all, they came as close as makes no difference, getting to 3.3 million, on one simple philosophy: you tell us whatever it is you "do," and we'll find you a job doing it. Those jobs paid very nearly jack squat; nearly all WPA workers ended up living with their whole families in roughly 8" x 10" or so rooms in improvised "boarding houses," spare rooms leased out by people who were house-rich but cash poor, trying to save their homes, tenants with no control over the menu of the meal plan it came with and shared use of a single bathroom (or maybe just an outhouse and an outdoor water pump) with 3 to 8 other families. Nobody lived well on the WPA, but nobody starved either. On the other hand, nobody worked terribly hard, either, and I know this one from a very personal source: my paternal grandfather was a WPA veteran.

Grampa Hicks was himself a right-wing anti-tax anti-communist Democrat of the American Liberty League school, and he hated the WPA with a fiery passion for the entire rest of his life. It was from him I first heard the joke: "How many people does it take to do one WPA job? Three. One on his way to the bathroom, one on his way back from the bathroom, and one leaning on the shovel pretending to work." But here's the funny thing. You know what Grampa Hicks was before the Great Depression? *He was a bum*. A mostly-unemployed unskilled laborer on the rare occasions he had a job, a street brawler and small-time crook, a chronic alcoholic and wife-beater who spent most of the 1920s in jail. So when he showed up in one of Harry Hopkins' branch offices and they asked him, "What do you do?" all he could answer was, "Nothing." So they stuck him on one of the WPA's archetypal projects: a National Guard armory. Under the thin pretense of "military preparedness," Harry Hopkins made up this total BS scenario whereby some day, in some foreign invasion of the US, we might end up having to retreat all the way back to any random tiny little town in America, so every tiny little road-crossing town and every suburb and every city neighborhood in America should have a solidly built, concrete-block or raw stone building that the state militia can store their weapons in until that day, and can use as a fort when we get nearly

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conquered. Nobody was fooled. Everybody knew it was a lie: it was building buildings just for the sake of building pointless buildings. Furthermore, the whole "fort" thing was just an excuse to make the job take longer, to build out of improbably heavy materials and as slowly and carefully as possible, so those mostly unskilled laborers didn't run out of something to do before Hopkins and his few staff could come up with something else to do. Grampa Hicks went to his grave still mocking the work he'd done.

But you know what? There's a funny thing about that, something I'm pretty sure Grampa Hicks never thought about. First of all, if it weren't for the WPA, we Hickses would *still be bums*. Grampa Hicks was desperate to get out from behind that wheel barrow and that shovel, but was too drunk to do plumbing. So he took to hanging around when the electricians were running wire, and managed to get himself a totally useless job as a sort of human Vice-Grip. "Here," says the skilled electrician who was himself out of work, yelling over to my grandpa because the WPA wouldn't spring for proper tools, "you there -- hold these two wires together while I tape them together." By following that guy around and watching over that guy's shoulder, Grampa Hicks taught himself basic electrical wiring. And when the WPA was over, he was able to lie with a straight face to employers that he was a skilled electrician, and that got him his first real job, one his son learned from him, and that I learned from my dad that paid my way through college: electrical sign erector, IBEW local 1.

But never mind how much difference those "pointless" National Guard armories made to my family, there's something even bigger that Grampa Hicks didn't know. *We're still using almost every single one of those buildings*. I saw an article a while back (citation lost, sorry) by an architecture student who'd gotten curious about what ever happened to all those National Guard armories, so he got some grant money and went on a national tour. And what he found was that in almost every single rural town in America and even in most suburbs, those "ridiculously over-built" armories were the first truly solid building ever built there. And because they were "ridiculously over-built," they're still in use. A few are grocery stores or other businesses. Some are schools or community centers. Most are police stations or city halls. Almost all of them double as emergency shelters for the town during natural disasters. So the student did some math to figure out, using standard construction techniques and assuming standard maintenance costs, and assuming that we would have built something to do those jobs some time between then and now, what it would have cost some of those counties to have done without those buildings. And compared that to what it cost them and their descendants in federal tax money to support the WPA and to pay off its debts. *The WPA actually made money on its most "useless" projects*.



You can take almost any WPA project from the 1930s that was widely mocked as a pointless waste of money; nearly all of them paid every penny back in long-term savings to the taxpayers, in taxes paid by people who learned their trade on those projects who would have otherwise stayed on the dole, or both. In the 1936 elections, Roosevelt's political enemies handed out campaign buttons mocking the stupidest-sounding idea the WPA ever had. See, in even the smallest towns, the WPA built the first sewage treatment plants those counties ever saw, and laid sewer pipe for them. But lots of Americans still lived in areas too rural for even that. So the WPA paid teams of laborers to ride from farm to farm, shack to shack, shanty to shanty all over America looking for private outhouses that were rickety, or worse were too close to water supplies or food preparation. Those teams were given a standardized design with a water-tight roof, solid construction that would require almost no maintenance for decades, and most importantly: clean concrete floors and toilet hole lids that could close nearly air-tight, plus ventilation stacks that were designed to be insect resistant, in order to reduce both ground-water contamination by and insect-born transmission of fecal bacteria. Many areas turned the WPA down, especially suburbs around cities, and people all over America relentlessly mocked the WPA workers who thought that the US had "nothing better to do" than to waste \$17 per rural house building massively over-engineered fancy outhouses. But you know what? Over the course of the 1930s and 1940s, almost every area that turned the WPA down on the outhouse project and other sanitation projects suffered major cholera outbreaks. Areas where the WPA built sewage treatment and sanitary outhouses escaped, *saving tens of thousands of children's lives*, and probably millions of dollars in hospital costs and lost wages.

Some people were really determined to not even do anything as useful as pretend to dig ditches. So they claimed, when the WPA asked them "what do you do?" to be writers or actors or artists. Some of them were even sincere, and had actually studied those subjects in high school; others just made it up. When asked about it, Harry Hopkins famously shrugged and said, "Why not? Those people have to eat, too." So the government made up make-work programs for them, too, all of which were relentlessly mocked all through the 1930s. You're an actor? Here. You've got no budget for props, sets, costumes, or stage rights for plays. We'll let you use an empty storefront and call it a "theater," especially if you'll bring in some WPA laborers to build a stage and some seats for you. No, wait, you can have some costumes, but not many; we have some households headed by widows who could stand to do some sewing for you at WPA wages. And you can have any public domain script you want. Now, put on plays. We don't care what plays, or how many you do, but you will come in 20 to 30 hours a week and work on them, and put them on when you're done ... including you, Mr. Orson Welles. Whose acting, then directing, careers are still bringing in taxpayer dollars every year; all by himself he's probably paid back the entire cost of the WPA's program for actors.

You say you're a journalist or a historian or a writer? Hmm. Tell you what. During westward expansion, an awful lot of tiny little towns got founded, and the people who founded those towns are getting old; go ask them who founded the town, and why, and what it was like, and write it up as a history of the county. Take all the time you want. Nuts, we're out of tiny little towns, and still have writers left over. Think of something. I know, go interview former slaves; we'll give them some time off from their WPA jobs so you can write down what they say their lives were like. What, we're still overstocked on people who say they're writers? Fine, here, we'll hand 'em to the state tourism boards; we'll send teams of 'em to just walk around every state in the Union, get drunk in the local bars, describe the local sights, and make tourist guides. And, oh, by the way, who knew? That'll turn out to include an entire generation of America's most famous writers, including America's third and fifth ever Nobel prizes for literature. Just the taxes on the movie rights to John Steinbeck's novels have probably paid for that entire program all by itself, and are still paying taxes. Not to mention that we still have all of those books, and most of their notes towards the unfinished books, and guess what? Generations of grad students in history are *extremely* grateful to the WPA; they wish *every* generation of Americans had been as well documented.

*I don't think you can come up with a single dollar of WPA spending that actually counts as wasted*, not a single WPA "make-work" project so pointless and stupid that we didn't get our money's worth out of it, especially if you count all the on-the-job job skills training it gave the 8 or 9 million people who went through the program. And that's even if you don't factor in the analysis of very serious historians who question whether or not American "G.I.s" would have fought so hard or so well to save the world from 1941 to

1945 if they had been as resentful, and as starving, as they were in 1930. But no, the blunt fact of history is that if the truth were ever told about the WPA, if the truth hadn't been being smothered in lies by the same political factions that opposed it at the time all the way up to this very day, everybody would know what the WPA proved as inescapable facts. No dollar of government spending is wasted, if it does a job that nobody else was going to do *and* it builds something that *lasts*. Almost nobody is so greedy and lazy that they actually would prefer to be paid to stay home and watch TV or get drunk or stoned all day; there are untold tens of millions of us now that no employer would touch for any of a long list of bad reasons who would rather be working. And no matter how lazy you think they are, boredom is a powerful motivator, and so is a desire not to let down your team, and so is a desire not to look bad in front of others: bring 'em to work, leave 'em alone, and nearly all of them actually will work, will actually build things that are built well, built for the ages, built to last. Paradoxically, the really wasted money is the money that gets spent on government overseers determined to make sure that none of the workers waste any money: point people at jobs, give 'em simple hand tools, and tell them to take their time and build something solid and it's almost impossible for us to not get that money back in long-term savings.

Nor is this even all that "liberal" an idea. Ronald freaking Reagan himself briefly campaigned on it, calling it "Workfare:" if you can't find a job, we'll make you one, whether you like it or not. But he didn't even get sworn in before the same pro-corporate Republicans and right-wing Democrats convinced him to drop it, to instead concentrate on cutting taxes for corporations as his only unemployment-fighting measure. No, there is now, just as there was in Franklin Roosevelt's time, a bipartisan consensus of the elites in this country that the way to put Americans back to work is that taxes must be cut on investors and corporations. We are, apparently, supposed to ignore the last thirty years of history, which teaches us that every tax cut we pass and every subsidy we grant to big corporations will be used to hire robots or to move jobs overseas. No, this time we're supposed to believe it will be different and this time they really will use that money to make more jobs. Trust them on this, they say. And just as in Roosevelt's day, the exact same political coalition of big-corporation Republicans and big-corporation Democrats insist that if that won't do the job fast enough, then what we need are even more public-private partnerships. And ironically, even Barack Obama, who very nearly lost his political career early on because he was caught on the fringes of Tony Rezko's financially corrupt public-private partnership, one that Barack Obama had gotten for him, somehow hasn't learned that it's public-private partnerships and tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy, not government make-work programs or benefits for the unemployed, that are the real welfare cheats. Being a Harvard graduate who grew up under the steady drumbeat of pro-corporate propaganda about how evil the WPA was, he's still talking up the need for more public-private partnerships like Harold Ickes' old Public Works Administration.

So I figure the odds at roughly 4 to 1 that he's going to screw up the unemployment situation in America, at the very least doing nothing to help it, and quite possibly making it worse by funding the elimination of yet more American jobs, because that's exactly what the new President and his cabinet officers are talking about doing, lately. Sadly, these are even better odds than we would have had under either Clinton or McCain, neither of whom would have even considered anything *but* public-private partnerships. Obama will, I think, at least think about it. But I don't think he'll do anything but try to set up another PWA. Which is a damned shame. Because what we really need is another WPA.

**Mood:** ☹ pensive

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 **xodiac** wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 10:49 pm (UTC)

Occasionally you write an article here that makes me wish you wrote for the newspaper editorials. You deserve a wide audience. But this article makes me think you should print it out and send it to a certain occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Or email it. Since he's supposed to be trying to stay in touch with the American people, he might even read it. What can it hurt?

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 **hickory** wrote:


Jan. 29th, 2009 12:04 am (UTC)

I wouldn't presume to speak for the author, but I'd like to cheerfully point to the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 2.5 Generic license link to the right. I believe that, if you feel strongly, mailing a copy yourself to anybody at all is covered. Part of me wonders if it isn't more credible for somebody else to mail it to the White House ... I mean, any random nutjob can mail a letter to the President, but if you do it, then it's not a random nutjob, it's a random nutjob with a readership.

In fact, perhaps everybody reading (and agreeing) should send it in, then it's a random nutjob with a readership starting a movement. I'm going to have to go listen to "Alice's Restaurant" now to figure out what to do next.

ps: as I self-identify as a nutjob, I use the term with the utmost respect.

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[jim\\_kaye](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:02 pm (UTC)

wow. I feel like I just had sex. Really, really good sex.

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[pseydtonne](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 06:21 am (UTC)

Dude! Frances Farmer before the brain soufflé! Great icon.

I know, off-topic... but still...

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[dmlaenker](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:05 pm (UTC)

Your bugaboo is the WPA, and I agree. But I also think we need another space race. Just like the last one created pretty much the entire modern computer industry, the demands of sustaining astronauts on a long-term mission in the most fouled environments possible will push sustainable development and engineering forward by leaps and bounds, feeding the hungry and creating millions of technology jobs.

But essentially I agree with you. I read this, and all I could keep thinking of was Tim Kreider's "[Lost Secrets of the Ancient Americans](#)".

We used to be the Americans. Why can't we be the Americans again?

*Edited at 2009-01-28 11:05 pm (UTC)*

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[hickory](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:46 pm (UTC)

Sign me up for a trip to Mars.

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[pope\\_guilty](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:19 pm (UTC)

*Even if one accepts the incredible claim that every US President who has ever been assassinated was killed by a deranged lone gunman, acting out of personal motives, with no political motive, and with no encouragement or assistance by anyone else*

But nobody believes that. It's a matter of historical record that Abraham Lincoln was murdered as part of a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the American government by Confederate loyalists. This isn't a fringe theory, it's part of the public and accepted history of the country.

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[hickory](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:44 pm (UTC)

I assume the history is how you say -- I'll believe any conspiracy theory until proven guilty ;-) -- but that certainly isn't how I was taught it in grade school, high school, or college, which does make me wonder how you define "public" and "accepted."

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[sure](#) - [sheilagh](#) - Jan. 29th, 2009 05:53 am (UTC) - [Expand](#)

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[hickory](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:41 pm (UTC)

I've been in one of those WPA outhouses in an empty corner of some empty forest. It still had instructions posted over an empty holder to add a measure of DDT to the pit every other month to prevent flies. I imagine now we could create a similar number of jobs by declaring every one of them a Superfund site and send in a crew to dig up all that DDT.

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[roninspoon](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:48 pm (UTC)

While reading this I was reminded of an article I read yesterday, *All You Need Is Love...* about the efforts to "turn off" Black September. It's a story I've heard before, and I'm not sure how apocryphal it is, but it strikes me as something that would work, and work very well.

Essentially, when the PLO wanted Black September to go away, they put out the call for pretty single

Palestinian ladies and fixed up all the terrorists with wives, providing some cash, a house and a job to all that married and additional cash when they had children. Then, over the years, they'd give these cats legitimate passports and ask to send them on legitimate nonviolent diplomat errands overseas. To a man, they refused, because now they had something to live for.

It sounds like mushy poppy cock to some, but it something that would genuinely work. Perhaps not to the degree that was reported, but certainly very well.

It's unlikely that we'll ever use that strategy though, and certainly not for the terrorists we currently detain. We won't do it for the same reasons I don't think we'll reignite work programs like the WPA. Americans don't like to reward failure or wrong doing, and while terrorism and unemployment aren't nearly the same thing, providing benefits to the people who are unemployed strikes a lot of people as rewarding failure. Regardless of how little the cost is, or what value eventually comes out of it.

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[pope guilty](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:52 pm (UTC)

Never underestimate the desire of the average human being to see the weak and the powerless get a boot in their faces.

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[inquisitiveravn](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:50 pm (UTC)



Y'know, this country has a whole lotta infrastructure that needs rebuilding, including some levees and pumps in N'Awlins and a lot of unsafe bridges. Surely we can start with that. After all, even if the government hires the people who do the actual construction, that should create a bunch of private sector jobs for supplying the materials and providing transportation.

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[bradhicks](#) wrote:

Jan. 28th, 2009 11:56 pm (UTC)

Not to mention the jobs feeding and housing them. Not for nothing is the boarding house one of the iconic images of the Great Depression; untold thousands of homeowners who were out of work, and probably even more widows, saved their mortgages by renting out rooms and serving modest meals to WPA workers.

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[jonathankorman](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 12:11 am (UTC)

Just so.

I wish I could find the reference on a story I read some time ago about a mathematician who got a WPA grant to spend a few years working on methods for mapping complex relationships on a 2D surface without any crossed lines. It seems that there was quite a bit of press at the time about what a waste of government money it was ... for this guy to develop the methods we would use decades later to design integrated circuits.

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[janetmiles](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 12:26 am (UTC)

This is an impressive essay, and I see that we have some friends in common. May I add you to my reading list?

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[bradhicks](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 12:36 am (UTC)

You may. I do, after all, write this stuff in hopes it will be read. But I should warn you, I've slowed way down from a couple of years ago; some times I may go weeks between essays.

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[hickory](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 12:26 am (UTC)

I've been hunting for a link, but failed. About a year ago I watched a presentation from a representative of the National Science Foundation covering the grant process which included two things: evidence that every dollar the government spent on materials science research (some physics, chemistry, chem engineering, biochem, etc) paid for itself in taxes from new companies in 20 years (ie those NSF grants are, in aggregate, investments with a recent historical average rate of return of  $72/20=3.6\%$ ), and an appeal to contact our Congress Critters sharing that factoid while asking for more money. Perhaps it's working; the material science budget is up 20%

this year. Call it the WPA for the over educated ;-)

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[bradhicks](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 04:43 am (UTC)

Let a hundred thousand new graduate fellowships bloom, say I. It's also almost impossible for the federal government to lose money, long term, on university scientific research. And, to paraphrase Harry Hopkins (and with apologies to Jorge Cham), "Grad students need ramen, too."

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[apocalypticbob](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 12:54 am (UTC)

Here via [arkhamrefugee](#)...interesting read. I live in a small town in Oklahoma that still has not only a very solid natural stone WPA armory still being used as an armory, but a WPA built rock lined drainage canal that winds through the town and comes in very handy every time we get a heavy rain. Now if we could just get these potholes and bridges fixed. I had heard that part of the stimulus plan was supposed to be used to do exactly that...hire people to fix the roads, but then that idea apparently got tabled here in Oklahoma, as there

were too many to fix. Now what kind of sense does that make?

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[alobar](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 01:12 am (UTC)

Amazingly good post! I had already come to the same concussions myself, but you back up your perspective with details and studies. And you are far more eloquent than I am.

I do, however, disagree with you one one major point. I feel tat with sufficient publicity and connections with grass roots organizations, I feel Obama can be *induced* to listen and to act.

I may be a tad bit optimistic here, but I would suggest you begin working on what you want to say to Obama when he invites you to meet with him in private.



**bradhicks wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 01:33 am (UTC)

First of all, it won't be me he calls. Or at least I hope not; I'm too easily discredited. No, if we're very, very lucky the person he'll call to explain this to him is Sara Robinson over at the Center for American Progress, who's also something of an expert on the subject, much more so than I am. And one heck of a writer.

The reason I still hold out some hope that he'll do the right thing, despite a "stimulus bill" working its way through Congress right now that's 80% tax breaks for wealthy corporations and public-private partnerships and 20% cash hand-outs to people without asking them to work, is that the Center for American Progress has gotten successful enough to count as one of the most important think tanks in America. And they're funding a metric butt-load of studies and articles and books aimed at rehabilitating the reputation of the New Deal.

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**masque12 wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 02:36 am (UTC)

I sent a link to this article to the current administration through <http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/>. Maybe others can do the same, so someone will notice and listen?

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**amberite wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 04:16 am (UTC)

I did.

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**phillipalden wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 02:52 am (UTC)

You should send a copy of this to Obama. Actually, you should be on his staff. Then I might have a little more faith in my government's ability to deal with this catastrophe.

I wish I could be more hopeful, but I can only honestly bring a moderate amount of hope to the table. There are just so many differences between the 1930s/1940s and now. Those same *lazy bums* are going to be asked to install high-tech equipment. Hopefully we'll have enough engineers to stand over them and make sure they

don't fuck it up.

Right now the populace is calling for a nation-wide freeze on home foreclosures, and the chorus keeps getting louder. I cannot say I'm opposed to this idea for many reasons, (like avoiding mold in Florida when they turn the A/C off in a foreclosed home, making it useless for future use) - I can see some downsides.

I think we have more complex problems this time, and I'm not sure of all the ramifications of that.

Great essay!

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**bradhicks wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 03:03 am (UTC)

Well, you know, we have a ton of unemployed engineers, too, that can't find work since the dot-com bubble burst. And not a few others like myself who have proven that we can do high-quality, high productivity work but that no employer wants because the Americans with Disabilities Act isn't worth the paper it's printed on. Probably half of the people we have on Social Security Disability Insurance right now, myself included, could contribute a heck of a lot to this country, if it weren't for employers' not entirely irrational fear that we drag down the productivity of neurotypical workers around us. Seriously. *We need to put Americans back to work.* That's my snake oil, my hot button, my single solution to almost all of America's problems, war or peace, good times or bad: stab Paul Volcker's and Alan Greenspan's consensus estimate of "natural unemployment" *in the face* and put more Americans back to work.

We have almost no problems in this country that we couldn't solve with a federally funded low-expectations minimum-wage full-time employer of last resort. But only "almost." We still need single-payer health care for as much of the most important stuff as we can afford, leaving private insurance to just cover the rest. And one or two other things. But it would sure nail down a lot of other things, from Social Security financing to the deficit, from the housing mess to the banking mess, from the auto industry to infrastructure maintenance.

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[SSDI... argh](#) - [mr pandakun](#) - Jan. 29th, 2009 04:47 am (UTC) - [Expand](#)

**(Anonymous) wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 02:56 am (UTC)

Well, you said to go over this with a fine-toothed comb. I don't know enough history to do it, but I'll point out the obvious objection:



You're not counting the private jobs which would have been created without the WPA. The WPA drove up the cost of the bottom of the labor pool. Also, it was funded through taxes and debt, which removed capital that could have been used for investment. Without these obstacles, private corporations could have hired the unemployed and used them more efficiently.

Personally, I doubt it for two reasons: I don't think corporations are rational enough to take that opportunity and it would be hard for a corporation to capture the benefits of many of these projects. But it seems like the argument any conservative has to make, and I'm kind of surprised no one has raised it yet.

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**bradhicks wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 03:08 am (UTC)

That is a very popular argument. Now answer me this: where was that private investment going to come from to create those private sector jobs, when the banks had all melted down all over the world? And what employers were looking to expand their operations in a 1930s America that was visibly hanging by its collective fingernails over an abyss of anarchism, communist revolution, and totalitarian dictatorship? And how long were we going to stave off that violent revolution if unemployment stayed at 20% and up, or kept getting worse as it was looking to do? Did we have long enough for a private sector solution to work, even if you're right that that was possible?

"All government is by the consent of the governed." An uncomfortably high percentage of the 15% of Americans who've been thrown away as undesirable unemployables are combat-hardened military veterans, you know. Starve them long enough, without any hope of it getting better, and they don't have to give a fig about your supposed property rights or your hypothetical libertarian fantasy land or your pseudo-economic cargo cult worship of the Invisible Hand.

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[\(no subject\)](#) - [del\\_c](#) - Feb. 8th, 2009 05:15 pm (UTC) - [Expand](#)

**gilmoure wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 03:29 am (UTC)

My grandfather, a younger son of cattle rustlers in Texas, came west for a CCC project in the Sandia Mountains. The trails, picnic areas and crest house he and the others made are all still in use. The fact that Grandpa met Grandma at the CCC dances is pretty cool to me, too.

As much as I appreciate your writing, I really, really hope you're wrong about Obama in this one.

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**silveradept wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 03:39 am (UTC)

These may be piddling questions, but I still have them, and you wanted us to ask:

Can this v.2 WPA scale up to the amount of people that it's going to need to? Some part of your post is about the need to scramble to find more work for the people who came to the WPA because nowhere else had a job - with population increases like the Baby Boom, and a large part of people over the retirement age still needing to work to survive, can that kind of government entity absorb all the people that will press on it, at their various ages and health levels, and still find them work? Furthermore, can it cope with the variance of professions, degrees, and levels of competence that the populace would have when coming?

Second, relative to the current stimulus package, which looks to fizzle, die, or be gutted and otherwise rendered impotent on doing actual work, how much will it cost?

Last, what's the standard of "Mission Accomplished" on a project like this? Unemployment back down to a certain amount? Banks and corporations standing up after having flattened each other and themselves and going back to business as usual? Something else entirely?

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**bradhicks wrote:**

Jan. 29th, 2009 03:58 am (UTC)

Now we're into the really good questions, thanks.

I don't think the population argument is much to worry about. We have proportionally more taxpayers, too. Even moreso, since we're (apparently, or at least I hope) not waiting until it gets as bad as The Great Depression to get started on it, so we still have more people with jobs paying in, even percentage wise, than Roosevelt had. And if anything, the mix of education levels may actually be better now than it was in 1930; remember, economic development during the 1870s to 19-teens was even less evenly spread than it is now, and the land-grant college system was still in its infancy, and the GI Bill hadn't created an expectation for middle-class kids to go to college.

Cost is a very serious issue. The biggest thing breathing down our necks is that we're doing this *after* having run up the Cold War deficit, plus the even more implausibly high deficits we ran during the Bush administration; the ability of the US government to borrow more without devaluing the currency is not unlimited. And we don't have a good measurement for how much farther it goes, although the last months' T-bill auctions have been nervously low-demand affairs. So we may get stuck with a currency devaluation. But here's the thing: we're stuck with that if we don't try this, either. All of the other so-called "stimulus plans" cost as much or more. And if the economy collapses while we dither, that's going to cost us even more. We don't really have the choice to not spend that money. The question is, what are we going to get for it?

Honestly, I'd like to see a federal taxpayer funded employer of last resort be the default substitute for an awful lot of our existing government benefit programs, including most of the remaining people on AFDC and at least half of the people on SSDI. The sight of American combat veterans dying of frostbite and gangrene under our highway overpasses has been commonplace after every war we've fought for longer than there have been highway overpasses, and that needs to stop, too. You will almost never hear me say the first part of the next sentence, but here it is: I agree with Ronald Reagan that we would benefit a lot from replacing almost all welfare with workfare.

Or we could do what Roosevelt did, and quietly phase it out as soon as unemployment dropped to zero, as it did when we were building the Arsenal of Democracy for World War II, and then do like his successors did, and fail to bring it back the

next time we need it because we'll have succumbed to pro-corporate propaganda again. But either way, we would have at least saved the US from anarchy and fascism or anarchy and communism *for now*. "Life may be scary / But it's temporary ... / Except for death and paying taxes, everything in life is Only for Now."

Edited at 2009-01-29 04:27 am (UTC)

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[rick day](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 04:39 am (UTC)

I like the way you talk. If it is OK I'll monitor your tasty posts for a while.

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[eindrachen](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 05:05 am (UTC)

**Good read**

Very articulate article. I think a government work-based welfare program would be far better than the carte blanche method used now. Even housewives with several children and no appreciable trade or craft skills can still function in other ways (such as running a daycare for children while other mothers with such skills perform various jobs under "WPA v2.0").

It doesn't particularly matter, though. While I agree with your assessment that too many politicians won't consider it, I think most people nowadays do in fact like the idea they can milk the system for all it is worth without having to do much actual constructive work. We've spent at least one or two generations telling people how they are entitled to certain standards of living, without explaining that such things require a cost of some kind (be it in using natural talent or skill to do something, or hard work doing menial tasks, or whatever). After such a long period of time, I think most people under the age of 30 truly would prefer living on the expense of others while doing nothing particularly industrious.

But the day is fast approaching that the government will run out of help to give us. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing; we endured the Great Depression and the mother of all wars afterwards, and I think this, too, will pass.

Besides, a little hardship is good for humanity. It tends to make us realize what is truly important, and what is just trivial.

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[pope guilty](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 05:21 am (UTC)

**Re: Good read**

*It doesn't particularly matter, though. While I agree with your assessment that too many politicians won't consider it, I think most people nowadays do in fact like the idea they can milk the system for all it is worth without having to do much actual constructive work. We've spent at least one or two generations telling people how they are entitled to certain standards of living, without explaining that such things require a cost of some kind (be it in using natural talent or skill to do something, or hard work doing menial tasks, or whatever). After such a long period of time, I think most people under the age of 30 truly would prefer living on the expense of others while doing nothing particularly industrious.*

Do you honestly believe that this is a paragraph that hasn't been written by every generation since the dawn of time? Every generation swears up and down that the one following them is lazy and indolent and ungrateful. Examples exist in every generation from every culture that we have a record of.

*Besides, a little hardship is good for humanity.*

If hardship's so great, move to Somalia or shut the fuck up. Well-fed people saying that hardship's a fine thing are the worst kind of filth.

[Re: Good read](#) - [alienne](#) - Jan. 29th, 2009 08:53 pm (UTC) - [Expand](#)

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[reconditarmonia](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 05:21 am (UTC)

This is such a great essay. (Even besides the fact that it made me squee because it mentions the Federal Theatre Project. It wasn't just public-domain scripts either - they wrote some interesting conceptual stuff and did really neat things with staging and multimedia.) I'm adding you, hope you don't mind.

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[sheilagh](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 05:37 am (UTC)

**Boise architect Donna Hartmans in 2003 ?**

"I saw an article a while back (citation lost, sorry) by an architecture student who'd gotten curious about what ever happened to all those National Guard armories"

Maybe it was Donna Hartmans, mentioned in this [\(cached\) article](#)?

The armories built during that time period had a different mission than previous armories, according to a 155-page report and inventory of Idaho National Guard armories done by Boise architect Donna Hartmans in 2003.

"The WPA, created by executive order in 1935 mandated that armories be used 75 percent as community centers and 25 percent by the military," Hartmans wrote in her report.

Many did become community centers, where dances and other local gatherings were held - though that changed in 2001.

There's more to that article, hopefully the cache stays active.

"They became very locked down," Hartmans said of new cameras, fences and other security measures.

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[bradhicks](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 02:26 pm (UTC)

**Re: Boise architect Donna Hartmans in 2003 ?**

Mm, no, the article I saw was a broader and more in-depth study than that. But judging by the reporter's remarks, I think they saw it, too.

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[pseydtonne](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 06:35 am (UTC)

Great article! You've sold me on this idea.

Let's get going on a Geeks' Progress Corps. I'm unemployed at the moment but I'd love to use my skills to build a national Wifi network. We could modernize road repair while we're at it -- those Eisenhower-era expressways are showing their age.

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[vespatrix](#) wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 02:42 pm (UTC)

Frwd to whitehouse.gov & everyone I know!

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 **drooling ferret** wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 03:10 pm (UTC)

This kind of stuff is why I started reading your work in the first place.

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 **ponsdorf** wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 03:17 pm (UTC)

A well thought out and an important essay. I agree corporate bailouts are, at least, questionable tactics. Even if not for quite the same reasons. And I **do** admire the workfare concept.

Coupla questions though.

Isn't the transnational nature of our economy far more complex now than in 1933? If so, how good a 'fit' would U.S public works ideas from the 30's be in that context?

I've read your essay twice and haven't been able to see just how your suggested process would be funded? To some degree funding issues would be mitigated under workfare, but not all.

Anyway, thanks for a thought provoking effort.

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 **bradhicks** wrote:

Jan. 29th, 2009 05:54 pm (UTC)


The funny thing about 1929 is that nobody was paying attention to just who was invested in the various pyramid scheme stock frauds that were going around. Here in America, it gets mentioned (a lot) that banks went under, taking out people's savings and forcing companies to lock their doors. What I didn't realize until I started studying a bit of European history of the 1930s, very recently, is just how many banks around the world were also invested in American stock frauds in the 1920s. Or how many countries in Eastern Europe had re-tooled their economy around exporting manufactured goods and importing American agricultural products, and who were flatly unprepared for the Dust Bowl followed by the collapse of the New York stock exchange. The global economy was almost as global as it is now, just slower. Hopefully we can use that speed to our advantage, not get swamped by it.

Fund it? You know the answer to that. And remember, this is coming from someone who's just as big a deficit hawk as you are, maybe bigger: we will borrow it. And if we run out of money we can borrow, we will devalue the currency and print more, and then gods help us all because the outcome of that is almost impossible to predict, but it can't end well. But the alternative is worse.


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