

TEACHING WITH ONLINE PRIMARY SOURCES:
DOCUMENTS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

NO KITCHEN CABINET THIS:
FRANCES PERKINS BECOMES SECRETARY OF LABOR

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Franklin D. Roosevelt took the oath of office as the thirty-second President of the United States on Saturday, March 4, 1933. The same day he called the U.S. Senate into a special session to consider his ten nominees for his cabinet. In just 24 minutes, the Senate confirmed all ten. Among them was Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor.¹

At the date of the featured document, the United States was in the depths of the Great Depression. It was the worst and longest economic collapse in the history of the modern industrial world, lasting from the end of 1929 until the early 1940s. The Great Depression was characterized by severe and rapid declines in the production and sale of goods and a sudden and severe rise in unemployment. Businesses and banks closed their doors, people lost their jobs, homes, and savings, and many depended on charity to survive. In 1933, fifteen million Americans—one-quarter of the nation's work force—were unemployed. As a result, the Presidential election of 1932 was a clear and true contest to find a savior for America. In June 1932, Republican delegates convened in Chicago and nominated Herbert Hoover and Charles Curtis. Later that same month, the Democrats also assembled in Chicago and nominated Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John Nance Garner. To demonstrate the urgency of the situation, Roosevelt immediately delivered his acceptance speech in Chicago and pledged a New Deal for the American people. In an overwhelming election mandate, Roosevelt and Garner collected 472 electoral votes to Hoover and Curtis's 59. The popular vote was equally lopsided with Roosevelt garnering 22,821,857 votes to Hoover's 15,761, 845.

In February 1933, President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt was forming his first cabinet and America was abuzz with rumors that he would appoint the first woman to his cabinet and that woman would be Frances Perkins. Reportedly, Perkins expressed her preference for a woman who was a trade unionist. Roosevelt, with encouragement from his wife Eleanor, a long and close friend of Perkins, persisted with the appointment. Perkins finally accepted, making it clear to Roosevelt that her goals were direct federal aid to the states for unemployment relief, public works, work hour limitations, minimum wage laws, child labor laws, unemployment insurance, social

¹ *Journal of the Executive Proceedings of the Senate of the United States*; Vol. LXXIV, Seventy-Third Congress, Special Session from March 4, 1933 to March 6, 1933, 3-7.

security, and revitalized public employment insurance; if he didn't want all of that, he didn't want her. As we know now, Perkins's goals became major features of the New Deal. Later, at a dinner in Perkins's honor, Eleanor Roosevelt pointed out that FDR nominated Perkins not only because of the demands of other women, but, more importantly, because she was the best-qualified man or woman the President knew.

Perkins's nomination, the featured document, went to the U.S. Senate for confirmation. In order to address America's economic emergency, Roosevelt hit the ground running after his election by executing his powers under Article II, Section 3, of the Constitution and under the newly adopted Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution. These provisions allowed Roosevelt to call a special three-day session of the Senate to confirm the nominations for his cabinet. When the cabinet nominations arrived for that special session of the Senate, Edwin A. Halsey, the Secretary of the Senate, made a most interesting annotation on the featured document. At the bottom of the document Halsey noted, "this is the first instance of a woman being appointed to a Cabinet position." A veteran officer of the U.S. Senate since 1913 and the author of several books on the history of the Senate, Halsey insured that the significance of Perkins' nomination and confirmation would not be lost.

Article II, Section 3, and the Twentieth Amendment to the Constitution also authorized Roosevelt to call another session of both Houses of Congress to consider his New Deal legislation. That session, later known as the "Hundred Days," convened from March 9, 1933, until June 15, 1933. In that session, Roosevelt, his advisors, his cabinet, and the Congress concentrated on the first part of the New Deal strategy: immediate relief. A record number of bills, developed and created by FDR's cabinet and Brain Trust (his informal group of advisors), went to Congress and all easily passed. The 1932 election had also given the Democrats huge majorities in both Houses of Congress.

Born in Boston in 1880 and raised in Maine, Perkins, as the featured document shows, was a resident of New York at the time of her nomination. She studied natural sciences and economic history at Mount Holyoke College and was strongly influenced by Jacob Riis's book on the New York City slums, *How the Other Half Lives*. Perkins began attending lectures by labor and social reformers such as Florence Kelley, who was the general secretary of the National Consumer's League. After Perkins graduated in 1902, she volunteered her time at settlement houses, gaining firsthand knowledge of the dangerous conditions of factory work and the desperation of workers who were unable to collect promised wages or secure medical care for workplace injuries. By 1910, she was the Secretary of the New York Consumers' League where she worked closely with Florence Kelley. Perkins successfully lobbied the New York state legislature for a bill limiting the workweek for women and children to 54 hours. She was also active in the women's suffrage movement, marching in parades and giving street-corner speeches.

On a Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, Frances Perkins was visiting friends in Greenwich Village in New York when the sound of fire engines disturbed their

luncheon. Hurrying outside, Perkins and her friends discovered that the top floors of the Ache Building, just off Washington Square, were on fire. Those floors housed the Triangle Shirt Waist Company. Perkins was witness to the worst factory fire in the nation's history. The escape of the workers, mostly young women, was impeded and prevented because many of the factory doors were locked or blocked. Perkins watched as employees on the ledges of the upper-story windows leaped to their deaths. Understandably, the image of the charred human remains lined up on the sidewalks outside of the building was indelibly marked on Perkins' mind. The tragedy shocked all of America and intensified Perkins's dedication to workplace safety.

When the New York legislature appointed a State Factory Investigating Commission to investigate the fire, Frances Perkins became their chief investigator. Her investigations revealed filthy working conditions, fire hazards of all kinds, lack of sanitation, dangerous machinery that maimed workers, and women and children working in the garment industry for twelve and eighteen hours a day. She took many leading politicians with her to tour these factories, including New York Assemblyman Al Smith and New York State Senator Robert Wagner. In 1918, Perkins accepted then Governor Al Smith's appointment as the first woman on the New York State Industrial Commission. By 1929, New York's new governor, Franklin D. Roosevelt, had appointed Perkins to the top position in the state's labor department. Always in the forefront of progressive reform, she expanded factory investigations, reduced the workweek for women to 48 hours, and championed minimum wage and unemployment insurance laws.

As the featured document indicates, Frances Perkins became Secretary of Labor in March 1933. Although Al Smith commented that he thought men likely would take advice from a woman but probably would not take orders from a woman, Perkins was undaunted. Drawing on her experience in New York, she immediately proposed federal aid to the states for direct unemployment relief, an extensive program of public works, the establishment by federal law of minimum wages and maximum hours, unemployment and old-age insurance, abolition of child labor, and the creation of a federal employment service. Her proposals came to fruition in historic reforms such as the Wagner Act (1935), which gave workers the right to organize unions and bargain collectively, and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), which established for the first time a minimum wage and a maximum workweek for men and women. As chair of the Committee on Economic Security, she drafted legislation that eventually became the Social Security Act of 1935. She also played a crucial role in the successful resolution of a number of dramatic labor uprisings during her tenure. However, her accomplishments on behalf of organized labor did not set well with conservatives in the Congress. In 1939, the House Un-American Activities Committee brought an impeachment resolution against her that soon was dropped for lack of evidence.

At a testimonial dinner for Perkins at the Mayflower Hotel in New York City in 1944, William Green, the President of the American Federation of Labor, called her the greatest Secretary of Labor in history. Perkins served as Labor Secretary for the entire

twelve years of the Roosevelt administration, longer than anyone else held that cabinet post. Asked if she had ever doubted whether she should have accepted the appointment, she recalled her grandmother pointing out that if anybody opens a door, one should always go through. In 1945, Perkins resigned from her position as labor secretary to head the U.S. delegation to the International Labor Organization conference in Paris. President Harry Truman later appointed her to the Civil Service Commission, a job she held until 1953. In the last years of her life, Perkins assumed a professorship at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations. After her death in 1965 at the age of 85, Cornell University named a professorship in her honor, and Congress named the Department of Labor Building in Washington, D.C., the Frances Perkins Building. William Wirtz, Secretary of Labor at the time of her death, said, "Every man and woman who works for a living wage, under safe conditions, for reasonable hours, or is protected by unemployment compensation of Social Security, is her debtor."

[For access to the document, visit www.archives.gov/research/arc/. In the search box, type the identifying ARC #595434. This document is from the Textual Records of the U.S. Senate, Center for Legislative Archives, Washington, DC; Record Group 46: Records of the U.S. Senate, 1789–, and may be printed and duplicated in any quantity.]

Teaching Suggestions

1. Focus Activity with Document Analysis

Provide students with a copy of the document and a copy of the document analysis worksheet found at www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/document.html.

Group students in pairs and ask them to analyze the document by completing the worksheet. Then guide a discussion based on the questions from the worksheet. Ask students what the brief document reveals about our government. See Daniel Rulli, "Big and Famous is Not Always Best," *Social Education*, 67:7 (2003), 378.

2. Class Discussion

Tell students that the notation at the bottom of the document (that reads, "This is the first instance of a woman being appointed to a cabinet position.") was written by Edwin A. Halsey, Secretary of the Senate. Ask students to consider what motivated him to write on the document, and to define the word "historic." Lead a class discussion about moments in their lifetime that they would consider "historic."

3. Labor History through the Fine Arts: Cross-Curricular Activity

Like most social movements in America, the labor movement was accentuated by a rich collection of art, music, film, and literature. Examples range from songs such as Bob Dylan's "Maggie's Farm" to books such as *The Jungle*, films such as *Norma Rae*, or artwork from the Federal Art Project during the New Deal. Ask each student

to select one of the categories (art, music, film, or literature) and research an example from that category that supports the labor movement. Allow class time for students to report their findings and explain how their example relates to and teaches about the labor movement. Encourage them to support their presentation with audio-visual aids.

4. The Confirmation Process: Charting the Role of the U.S. Senate

As the essay above pointed out, the U.S. Senate plays a crucial role in confirmation of Presidential appointments. Explain to students that this role is derived from the U.S. Constitution (Article II, Section 2, Clause 2). Divide the class into small groups to do research on assigned Presidential appointments and Senate confirmations. A number of these in American history have been quite controversial, starting as early as John Adams's "midnight judges" in 1801. Ask each group to create a chart that traces the process from the nomination through confirmation or rejection by the Senate. Give each group time to share its findings.

5. Tradition Outside of the Constitution: Tracing the Development of the Presidential Cabinet

Explain to students that the Constitution only *indirectly* provides authority for a cabinet in Article 2, Section 2, stating the president "... may require the opinion, in writing, of the principal officer in each of the executive departments, upon any subject relating to the duties of their respective offices. ..." The Constitution does not specify which or how many executive departments should exist. George Washington initiated the precedent of creating a cabinet and held the first recorded meeting of a "Cabinet" in 1791. Assign an equal number of Presidents to each of the five small groups of students starting with Washington and ending with George W. Bush. Ask each group of students to research the cabinets for their assigned Presidents. Suggest that students examine who was appointed and why, how many cabinet posts existed, whether controversies associated with any of the cabinet members existed, and whether any were fired or impeached. Allow class time for each group to report their findings.

6. Advising the President: Advisor Role Play

Roosevelt faced a drastically difficult economic situation when he took office in 1933. He relied on his Cabinet, particularly Perkins, and his unofficial advisors, known as the "Brain Trust," literally to brainstorm ideas about how to solve the problems created by the Great Depression. Divide the class into two groups representing two presidential candidates. Assign each student in each group a role as either a specific cabinet officer or an "unofficial" advisor. Allow each group class time (1) to identify the current economic problems in America and (2) to propose solutions to those problems. Ask each group to submit a written report on their findings and solutions and make an oral presentation to the class.

7. The President, Congress, and Special Sessions: Responding to an Emergency in a Democracy.

In 1933, a state of economic emergency existed in the United States. Roosevelt used his powers under the Constitution's Article II, Section 3, and the Twentieth Amendment to respond to this emergency by putting Frances Perkins and other Cabinet members in office and by placing in immediate effect a large bundle of legislation. Help students brainstorm other emergencies that have faced America. Put the list on the board and assign students to research whether the emergency resulted in a special session of Congress. Alternatively, students could research Congressional Special Sessions and discover the reasons behind those sessions.

8. Government and Labor: Research a Changing Relationship

As an individual research paper assignment, ask students to explore the relationship between Federal and state governments and organized labor from 1800 to the present. Frances Perkins, in her role as Secretary of Labor, fundamentally affected this relationship. These research projects might examine such topics as the history of the Department of Labor or the government's role in the labor union movement. Ask students to prepare an abstract of their paper for presentation to the class. (An abstract is a short—typically one-page—description of a paper. The abstract should state the goals and purposes of the paper and any hypotheses made and provide a brief summary of the results or findings of the paper. There are two main types of abstracts: descriptive and informative. Descriptive abstracts provide a summary of the topics discussed in the paper. An informative abstract provides more detailed information about the findings of a single-topic paper.)

9. Frances Perkins and Teen Labor Issues: Surveying your Peers

Frances Perkins had a list of goals before assuming responsibility as Secretary of Labor in 1933. Help students develop a survey of ten questions about labor issues to ask other young adults. Require each student to administer the survey to at least five other students who are not in the class. In a class discussion, compare their findings with the goals Perkins set. Help students find differences and similarities.

10. Profiling Labor in Your Community: Creating a Snapshot

Frances Perkins faced a formidable task dealing with the state of labor in the country in 1933. Ask students to imagine that they are student interns in their local Chamber of Commerce office. Their first task is to create a "snapshot" of the labor situation in their community for a brochure given to newcomers to the community. The "snapshot" might include information on unions, the type of jobs, the characteristics of the local economy, the unemployment rate, and labor resources. Encourage students to use computer software to create the brochure, and allow class time for each student to share their findings.