THE NEW DEAL’S CARING STATE: A FOUNDATIONAL NARRATIVE FOR CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the “other” reform movement associated with the settlement women that Camilla Stivers’ identified in *Bureau Men/Settlement Women* (2000) does not disappear with the end of the Progressive era. In fact, the settlement women’s emphasis on care, connection, and concrete experience came to inform the national policies, values, and practices of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, most notably in the figure of Frances Perkins. Perkins, along with other New Deal women administrators, have long been omitted from American public administration’s history. This paper not only hopes to make Perkins and other New Deal women visible, but more importantly it seeks to establish a fresh reading of the period based on the care perspective. Such a reading would provide a more complex and gender inclusive view of the period than the familiar “textbook” narrative with its focus on government growth, executive reorganization, and the “principals approach” to management. By privileging the care perspective, this paper builds further on Stivers’ (2000) goal of creating a “usable past” for public administration scholars by extending it to the New Deal. That the care perspective is embedded in both the Progressive and New Deal eras helps make the case for establishing a care-centered public administration in this century.
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“Government is a human institution. It is made up of men and women who work together in groups to protect and to serve other men, women, and children scattered over a great continent.” The President’s Committee on Administrative Management

American public administration scholars know well their field’s “textbook” history, with its special emphasis on the Progressive era as the defining moment in the field’s founding. Perhaps less well known is the recent scholarship that has sought to broaden, deepen, and unsettle the “textbook” understandings of that period (Luton, 2002; Scheer, 2002; Stivers, 2002). An especially significant reexamination of the Progressive era is Camilla Stivers’ (2000) *Bureau Men/Settlement Women*, which offers a rich historical account of the settlement women and men involved in the Progressive-era municipal reform movement. Stivers (2000) argues that the settlement women’s values, practices, and reform goals formed a clear “feminine” alternative to the bureau men, whose “masculine” values, practices, and reform goals still shape public administration as a discipline today.

According to Stivers (2000), “gender played a constitutive role in the field’s construction, that is, the tension between masculinity and femininity revealed in the ideas of public administration’s founders is central to the shape the field assumed” (p. 14). The tension surfaced between the “bureau men” interested in making procedural, administrative reforms in the city, and the “settlement women” who sought substantive policy reforms aimed at making people’s lives better. The bureau men’s philosophy became the prevailing orthodoxy in public administration, while the settlement women’s philosophy became “public administration’s buried heritage” (Stivers, 2000, p. 49). Recovering this “buried heritage” is important because the “work of settlement residents and club women created an alternative public space and an
alternative understanding of the role of administration in governance” (p. 101).

This alternative understanding placed caring for others, not efficiency, at the center of administrative practice (Stivers, 2000, p.125). In practice this meant settlement women worked to improve people’s actual living and working conditions through programmatic, substantive policy change, “collaborating with those closest to the problems to develop and implement solutions” (p. 100). Settlement women viewed their reform work as “municipal housekeeping” directed towards making the city more home-like, while bureau men sought to make the city more business-like. Although the care alternative did not figure in American public administration’s official history, neither did it disappear. McSwite (2004) claim that it “can be found at every turn in the way public agencies are managed currently” (p. 423).

It is this paper’s contention that the care alternative came to inform the national policies, values, and practices of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, most notably in the figure of Frances Perkins. Despite playing a significant policy and administrative role in the New Deal, Perkins has been nearly invisible in public administration, noted in textbook histories only for being the first woman to serve in the president’s cabinet. Other New Deal women administrators, such as Ellen Woodward of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), long have been omitted from public administration history. This paper not only hopes to make Perkins and other women New Dealers visible, but more importantly it seeks to establish a fresh reading of the period based on the care perspective. Such a reading would provide a more complex and gender inclusive view of the period than the familiar “textbook” narrative with its focus on federal government growth, executive reorganization, and “the principals approach” to management.

By privileging the care perspective, this paper builds further on Stivers’ (2000) goal of
creating a “usable past” for public administration scholars by extending it to the New Deal. That the care perspective is embedded in both the Progressive and New Deal eras helps make the case for establishing a care-centered public administration in this century. More specifically, examining the concept’s strengths and weaknesses in New Deal policy and practice can inform studies of care in the present. For example, care must be constructed in more universal terms if it is to guide contemporary policy and administrative practice. The New Deal tendency to define care in feminine and maternal terms is too gender stereotypic and narrow for use today (Mettler, 1998).

It should be noted that this paper is not attempting to construct a grand gender/care narrative for public administration. Rather, this paper is following Larry Luton’s (1999) suggestion that public administration scholars take “a postmodern, postprogressive view of history” that “would be broad in its coverage and personal in its application” (p. 214). Such a history eschews “eternal verities” in favor of looking only for “similarities” in stories across time, with the aim of “interpret[ing] those similarities as providing lessons regarding how we might act to accomplish what we wish to accomplish and/or to become what we want to be” (Luton, 1999, p. 214). This paper contends, then, that the New Deal and the Progressive eras share a similar care orientation that heretofore has been unexamined by public administration scholars. Furthermore, it proposes that if we want to think about how to act now and what we might accomplish today with respect to citizens’ economic, health, and social insecurities, then we should revisit the 1930s when the national government attempted to create, however flawed, a “caring society” (Bernstein, 1985).

THE BUREAU ETHOS IN THE 1930s
Just as the Farm Security’s black and white photographs of the Great Depression have come to stand as iconic elements of the New Deal historical narrative, so have *The President’s Committee on Administrative Management* (1937) (CAP) and the *Papers on the Science of Administration* (1937) come to stand as summary documents of public administration in the 1930s. Drawing on the “canons of efficiency,” committee members Louis Brownlow, Charles Merriam, and Luther Gulick recommended a strong executive-centered government capable of “efficient management in a democracy” (CAP, 1937, p. 3). The committee felt the “machinery of everyday government” needed to be strengthened so that future presidents would be able to implement and manage their legislative programs. Towards that end, they suggested a complete reorganization of the executive branch that included everything from the elimination of independent regulatory commissions, moving the Bureau of the Budget, improving executive planning, and recommending two new cabinet-level departments.

The *Papers*, written in conjunction with the report, argued for a “science of administration” capable of increasing efficiency and economy in hierarchical organizations through the application of administrative “principles” such as planning, budgeting, and staffing among others (Gulick & Urwick, 1937). The *Papers* reinforced the then prevailing view that politics and administration were separate activities, meaning that the study of government technique could and should be separated from the study of its ends.

The 1930s emphasis on efficiency, economy, and administrative reform is similar to the Progressive era’s bureau ethos. All three committee members were active in the era’s reform movements (O’Toole, 1984). Brownlow, for example, was a leader in the city manager movement, and he sought to professionalize public service by creating governmental associations
through which expert knowledge could be disseminated (Karl, 1979). In 1911, Merriam ran for
the mayor of Chicago as a progressive reform candidate, and he was an early advocate of using
social science research to solve public problems. Gulick, the director of the New York Bureau of
Municipal Research, was an actual “bureau man.”

Sympathetic to Roosevelt’s New Deal, they were members of the president’s
administrative management committee and served as confidants and advisors. In his
autobiography, Brownlow (1955) described supplying various names for different New Deal
positions, soliciting interest in funded research studies of public problems, and helping Harry
Hopkins set up the Federal Emergency Relief Administration’s (FERA) Civil Works
Administration. Merriam served on the National Resource Planning Board (NRPB), and Gulick
later entered war-time administration.

Given his bureau background, it is not surprising that Gulick (1933) looked to business
for an analogy when making scholarly sense of the New Deal. The federal government, he
observed, had become a “super-holding company” that now had “broad supervisory powers”
over industry (p. 63). He claimed that the “success” of New Deal politics and policy “rests upon
administration,” which in turn depends on the government’s ability to execute the “fundamental
new function” of central planning (Gulick, 1933, p. 65). Such planning “would give central
consistency to all the objectives, all the programs, all the organizations, all the procedures of
government” (Gulick, 1933, p. 65).

Planning was just one of the “tools of rationality” that public administration scholars
believed they could offer to practitioners working in the federal government’s “new and
expanded agencies” (Sayre, 1958, 103). That scholars generally agreed on what constituted the
“tools of rationality” led Wallace Sayre to characterize the decade as the “high noon of orthodoxy” (p. 104). Both the Report and the Papers, according to Sayre (1951), “gave to the students and practitioners of administration . . . a closely knit set of values, confidently and incisively presented” (p. 1).

Looking back from the 1980s, Frederick Mosher (1992) recalled a less orthodox 1930s discipline of public administration, noting that “almost all the early leaders—until about 1950—were devoted to government that is representative, responsive, compassionate,” and that “[s]tructure, like personnel, budgeting, and planning, was purely instrumental to a more humane and just society” (pp. 200-201). Recalling his experience as a student during the 1930s, he noted that “economy and efficiency were not glorified as our objectives. We were apostles for the welfare of mankind” (Mosher, 1992, p. 201). He concluded that “there has never been more humanitarian, social equity concern than during the New Deal; its influence on the study, teaching, and practice of public administration was enormous” (Mosher, 1992, p. 201).

Mosher’s recollections suggest that the settlement ethos figured more prominently into 1930s public administration than is commonly acknowledged. Perhaps at the level of teaching and practice a commitment to a compassionate, humane, socially just government was communicated, but at the level of study it is difficult to detect. Even within The Frontiers of Public Administration (1936), a book often cited for its dissenting views on orthodox public administration, the authors maintain that the problems posed by the “depression and efforts to deal with it require for their solution both improvements in administrative technique and equally more accurate ideas concerning the nature of administration” (Gaus, White, & Dimock, 1936, p. vii).
During the 1930s and 40s, articles dealing with the New Deal’s commitments to social justice and welfare did not appear in the *American Political Science Review (APSR)*, then a leading outlet for public administration research. Articles were published that reflected bureau ethos concerns such as government form, executive reorganization, agency coordination, and national planning, but there were no substantive policy analyses of any of the New Deal’s major social policies or programs. The one exception was a 1936 article on the legal and administrative aspects of the Social Security Act (Harris, 1936).

John Gaus and Leonard White (1934; 1935) published surveys in the *APSR* of new government functions and administrative developments for the years 1933 and 1934. Neither survey discussed these functions and developments in terms of their social, economic, or political values, nor were they placed in the context of the New Deal’s stated goals, values, and objectives. Policy and program substance also went unexamined. The survey for 1933 does note that “politics has become an important and significant part of life for many people—perhaps for the first time in their lives,” but the reasons for this change were discussed in abstract, rather than concrete, terms (Gaus & White, 1934, p. 455). In another survey, Roger Shumate (1935) examined the “The Development of National Administration” between 1932-35, but he too simply reviewed the New Deal’s embrace of new bureaucratic forms and growth in personnel, agencies, and field offices. On a human note, he did observe that he “visited nearly a 100 government offices during the summer of 1935, and, almost without exception, met with unfailingly courtesy and helpfulness” (Shumate, 1935, p. 847).

*Public Administration Review (PAR)*, also tended to ignore the social justice and welfare issues attached to the New Deal. Between 1940-1960 there were no substantive policy articles
on New Deal domestic initiatives such as Social Security or relief policy, nor did articles on social agencies such as the WPA appear. For public administration scholars the signature New Deal initiative was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which was the subject of at least seven articles and numerous book reviews over the years.

In 1953, *PAR* published a content analysis of its articles and book reviews between 1940-1952. The journal reported that “twice as many articles and reviews dealt with organizational and procedural matters as with policy issues” (*PAR*, 1953, p. 259). Further, it reported that there were “great gaps in coverage” with respect to public works (p. 260). Defense/protection was the policy function that received the most articles and book reviews, with social welfare ranking second. Social welfare’s high ranking, however, occurred because the category included articles and reviews on employment, veteran’s services, housing, relief and social services, and unemployment compensation.

This synoptic review of the discipline’s journal literature documents that public administration scholarship during and after the New Deal tended to be centered around topics rooted in the bureau men’s ethos, and ignored those tied to the settlement women’s ethos. Government form, the organization of functions, executive reorganization, the TVA, and later war-time administration were dominant topics, while substantive policy issues relating to relief, public works, unemployment, and security seldom appeared. Overall, the care, or human, dimension of the New Deal–its policies, programs, and values–seemed to spark little scholarly interest. In 1946, W. Hardy Wickwar observed that “social services” rivaled “defense services” for national government attention, because “social security” was now thought to complement “national security” (1946, p. 563). He then posed the question as to whether this “phenomenal . .
change” had yet affected political scientists and public administration scholars, only to conclude that “all in all, it is surprising how little we have been changed by these developments” (Wickwar, 1946, p. 563).

The failure to examine social policy, social services, or the human side of the New Deal has meant that New Deal women administrators have been absent from both public administration scholarship of the period and later its histories of the 1930s. Frances Perkins, despite years of top-level state and federal service as a “first woman,” generated no scholarly interest as a leader, administrator, or policy maker, until Meredith Newman’s (2004) recent biographical profile. Perkins’ memoir was reviewed in the APSR, but not in the PAR (Zeller, 1947). Gaus (1950) did not include Perkins in his discussion of “participant in administration” books, although TVA administrator David Lilienthal’s books were included. Perkins does make a brief appearance in Brownlow’s (1955) autobiography, where she did not “think that the budgetary, personnel, or planning procedures should be organized on any government-wide basis,” a viewpoint shared “generally with other Cabinet members” (Brownlow, 1955, pp. 373-374). She also appears briefly in Marshall Dimock’s memoir (1980), as the “persuasive woman” who convinces him to stay in Washington as an Assistant Secretary of Labor (pp. 51-52).

Not intended to be a definitive account of 1930s public administration, this overview sought to show the different ways the bureau ethos served as the dominant frame through which public administration viewed the New Deal, as well as its own scholarship and practice. In contrast, the settlement ethos, which was equally if not more influential in the New Deal itself, seemed to have little impact on public administration’s scholarship or practice. Indeed, it would be easy to conclude that since Perkins was ignored so thoroughly by public administration she
was little more than a token woman administrator known only for her tricorn hat. Fortunately, this was not the case, as this paper will make clear. Before turning to Perkins, though, this paper will examine how the settlement ethos informed New Deal policies and practices.

THE SETTLEMENT ETHOS IN THE NEW DEAL

When Franklin Roosevelt took office in 1933, the depression was already several years old with no end in sight. Local government efforts to provide relief were exhausted, as were the efforts of private charities and voluntary associations. Approximately “18 million Americans required relief of some kind,” and “one fourth and perhaps as much as one third of the population could not support themselves because of unemployment, inadequate wages, or physical infirmity” (Biles, 1991, pp. 97-98). The economic and social dimensions of the crisis were so overwhelming that Roosevelt, in his first inaugural address, famously reassured Americans that “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” and that he was prepared to “recommend the measures that a stricken nation in the midst of a stricken world may require” (Hunt, 1995, p. 30, 34). In his “first one hundred days,” fifteen major pieces of legislation became law, many of which were aimed at the recovery and reform of whole industries such as banking, securities, housing, agriculture, and manufacturing. It was clear as well to Roosevelt, Perkins, and others that federal action also must be directed towards citizens’ immediate (e.g., relief and public employment) and long-term (e.g., unemployment insurance and old-age insurance) security needs if full economic recovery were to occur.

In his 1934 Message to Congress, Roosevelt stated that “among our objectives I place the security of the men, women and children of the Nation first” (The Committee on Economic Security, 1985, p. 136). Integral to this sense of security was “security of the home, security of
livelihood, and the security of social insurance” (p. 139). The Social Security Act was, of course, the step that would help accomplish the latter. The Act contained unemployment insurance, old-age insurance, Aid to Dependent Children, old-age assistance, grants for maternal and children’s health, and assistance for the blind and disabled. Federal mortgage guarantees for houses and farms helped secure the home. The Fair Labor Standards Act helped preserve people’s livelihood by establishing a minimum wage, limiting the number of hours individuals could work without receiving overtime, and prohibiting the use of child labor. The Wagner Act secured for workers the right to join unions and bargain collectively. The WPA provided jobs at a “decent wage” for those unable to find private employment, while the Civilian Conservation Corps and the National Youth Administration offered young people work and service opportunities.

The above policies, along with a host of others, constituted the “New Deal,” which Roosevelt promised citizens in his 1932 nomination acceptance speech.² “As Roosevelt described it, the ‘new deal’ meant that the forgotten man, the little man, the man nobody knew much about, was going to be dealt better cards to play with” (Perkins, 1946, p. 166). Although the New Deal was never a “central unified plan,” its many programs and policies were unified around the belief that “the people mattered” and that “all the political and practical forces of the community should and could be directed to making life better for ordinary people” (Perkins, 1946, p. 173, 167). In both speeches and concrete actions, Roosevelt affirmed to citizens that “suffering was not to be denied or ignored; that human action could be effective in meeting human needs; that government at a national level had to assume a major responsibility for the welfare of its citizens; and that in a modern society individuals had only partial control over their
fate” (Cooney, 1995, p. 50).

Roosevelt’s concern for the security of “ordinary people” was rooted in the depression itself and the many anxieties it had bred among citizens. Perkins (1946) believed that Roosevelt’s compassion and empathy for others went back even earlier to the years he spent recovering from polio. In light of this paper, it is interesting to note that Eleanor Roosevelt felt Roosevelt’s concern for those left behind came from an encounter at Rivington Street Settlement House where she volunteered and he had come to meet her. There, he encountered a sick child whom he carried up several flights of stairs to a very poor tenement. Shocked by what he saw, he told Eleanor that “if I ever get a chance to hit that thing, I’ll hit it hard” (Sunstein, 2004, p. 65). Eleanor’s own social conscience had been awakened by her volunteer work at Rivington, as well as the volunteer work she did for the National Consumers’ League (NCL) documenting women’s working conditions in department stores and the garment industry (Burke, 1984).

The years of volunteer reform work and her many friendships within the social reform community meant that she too was prepared to “hit it hard” when she became First Lady. She helped to obtain appointments for women reformers in the Administration and became a public advocate for its relief policies. Eleanor held White House conferences on emergency relief for women and camps for unemployed women, played a role in the establishment of the National Youth Administration, and supported resettlement housing for the poor (Burke, 1984; Wandersee, 1984). She “consistently conveyed to her husband a variety of ideas on possible relief programs that he might have overlooked” (Burke, 1984, p. 364). These were spawned during countless visits to WPA women’s projects and to Appalachia and other hard pressed areas of the country serving as Roosevelt’s “eyes, ears, and feet.” Later in the New Deal she turned
her attention to civil rights.

In addition to her interest in substantive policy change, Eleanor brought the settlement perspective’s emphasis on the individual to the New Deal as well. According to Fran Burke (1984), “the humanness and individualistic concern of the president’s New Deal has been strongly attributed to Eleanor’s dedication to the individual” (p. 368). She believed that “politics was human [italics in the original] and individual” and that the country “must develop the human side of government” (p. 368). To that end she started her newspaper column My Day, which humanized herself, the president, and his policies and programs. In her travels around the country she talked regularly to ordinary citizens about their experiences with the depression and New Deal programs, which she then reported back to the president and other administrators. Eleanor also made a point to respond personally to the thousands of letters she received from citizens, many of them women and minorities desperate for relief from the depression. She channeled letters to the appropriate administrators and many times intervened personally. For example, she helped over 4,000 women gain fourth-class post office positions (Burke, 1984, p. 368).

Eleanor was not alone in her concern for people’s lived experiences with the Depression and New Deal programs. This concern came to permeate the whole New Deal and was behind, for example, the government’s efforts to assemble folk stories, study ethnicity in different regions, record Appalachian folk and Delta blues music, and tape regional dialects among other projects. Participating in this vast undertaking were government employed artists, writers, scholars, and photographers. Using methods such as oral history, life history, and documentary photography, they interviewed former slaves and countless ordinary men and women about their
life experiences in particular places (e.g., the western frontier), with the Depression, and in specific trades and industries (e.g., stone cutters, meat packing) (Banks, 1991).

This approach of telling the stories of real people influenced how New Deal administrators came to understand people’s concrete needs and ultimately informed their development of social and agricultural policies. Most familiarly, the FSA used photographers to document the effects of the country’s agricultural crisis on farm families and communities, and to help make the case for New Deal agricultural policies. At Labor, Perkins made a point of meeting and talking to working people, preferably in their own union halls, whenever she traveled. She observed that “on their own ground they would express themselves and ask questions” (Perkins, 1946, p. 136). She observed further that Roosevelt “took great interest in my reports,” because they were from the “men who worked at the benches and in the mills. He felt that from them he had a real picture of American life” (Perkins, 1946, p. 136). He also was interested in her reports on what women said about the New Deal in the many women’s meetings and club meetings she attended around the country.

In 1934, FERA director Hopkins hired 15 reporters, journalists, and novelists to travel the country and talk to the people and clients involved in federal relief so as to better assess the program’s effectiveness. Early on, his agency had been collecting statistical data on poverty and relief, but Hopkins wanted knowledge on the human dimension of the Depression and relief administration (Baumann & Coode, 1988). He told Lorena Hickock, one of the reporters, that she should “go around the country and look this thing [relief] over. I don’t want statistics from you. I don’t want the social-worker angle. I just want your reactions, as an ordinary citizen” (Cooney, 1995, p. 166). In her conversations with people she found: “One by one, sometimes
bold, sometimes hesitant, sometimes demanding, sometimes faltering, they emerged—individuals. People with voices, faces, eyes . People with stories” (Cooney, 1995, p. 166).

The New Deal’s concern for ordinary citizens’ stories is not much remembered today in either public administration textbooks or popular memory. This more intimate, human, settlement side of the New Deal with its emphasis on care has been lost largely to the bureau view that government became impersonal, bureaucratic, and technical with an emphasis on efficiency. Government did become that, but it was never to be exclusively so. In the presidential message attached to the Brownlow Report, Roosevelt stated that “the great stake in efficient democracy is the stake of the common man” (CAM, 1937, p. iii). The report itself claimed that “the whole basis of reorganization must not be superficial appearance but the integrity of the social services [italics mine] underneath, which are the end of government” (CAM, 1937, p.38). Perkins (1946) noted that the fact that the CCC’s administrative set-up was inefficient did not trouble Roosevelt because he was convinced that “government in a representative democracy has to be adapted to human feelings” (p. 181). The next section of the paper turns to some of the women administrators, most especially Perkins, who helped initiate and implement, in Mary Dewson’s words, “the human aspects of the New Deal” (Ware, 1987, p. 211).

FRANCES PERKINS AND THE NEW DEAL WOMEN’S NETWORK

That there was a women administrators’ network owes to the efforts of Dewson, who, as head of the Democratic Party’s Women Division, worked closely with Eleanor to capture as many federal administrative appointments for women as possible upon Roosevelt’s election. Perkins, the first woman appointed to a president’s cabinet, was her most visible success, but
overall there were approximately 30 women administrators serving the federal government during the New Deal (Ware, 1981). Network members tended to be concentrated in Labor (which at that time housed the Children’s Bureau and Women’s Bureau), State, Treasury; the Civil Service Commission, the Government Printing Office, as well as in New Deal agencies such as FERA, the WPA, and later the Social Security Board. Network members were concerned about one another personally and professionally, and supported women’s causes generally. To the extent that federal relief efforts included women at all owed to network members’ pressure on male New Dealers to recognize that women too were suffering from unemployment.

Most network members were born in the 1880s and shared a set of experiences that included college, the women’s suffrage campaign, and World War I voluntary efforts. Important to this paper is the fact that they also had in common a commitment to social justice that was informed by years of settlement and social reform work. Grace Abbott and Perkins, for example, both lived at Hull House. Network members worked for social reforms aimed at the elimination of sweat shop labor, government inspection of factories, a minimum wage for women, reduced hours for women, the prohibition of children’s labor, and trade unions (Ware, 1981). By the 1920s, Abbott headed the Children’s Bureau and Mary Anderson headed the newly formed Women’s Bureau, and from these two key positions they worked pass and implement the first grants-in-aid program for women and children. Clara Beyer also joined the Children’s Bureau. Perkins served New York governors Al Smith and Roosevelt in the state labor department, eventually coming to head it.

Two social reform groups, The Women’s Trade Union League (WTUC) and the NCL,
also played key roles in shaping network members’ views on how to accomplish social and political change (Perkins, 1954; Ware, 1981). The NCL was headed by Florence Kelley, a pioneering social reformer and an expert on children’s labor whose roots traced to Hull House. The NCL was dedicated to improving working conditions for wage laborers, especially women and children. Her approach to social problems, which she taught to network members, was “investigate, agitate, and legislate” (Ware, 1981, p.35). When Roosevelt asked Perkins to join his cabinet she immediately sought out Kelley who exclaimed: “Glory be to God! You don’t mean it. I never thought I would see the day when someone we had trained, who knew about industrial conditions, cared about women, cared to have things right, would have the chance to be an administrative officer” (Martin, 1976, p. 144).

Perkins’ appointment to Labor (1933-1945) was supported and praised in the social reform community, but she was dismissed by organized labor for being a “social worker.” She was aware that she was not a “bona fide labor person,” and made that very point to Roosevelt who told her “that it was time to consider all working people, organized and unorganized” (Perkins, 1946, p. 151). She then outlined to Roosevelt the policy agenda she would like to pursue as Secretary of Labor to which he pledged his support. The agenda included direct federal aid to states for unemployment relief, a public works programs, a minimum wage, a maximum work hours limit, prohibition of children’s labor, unemployment insurance, old-age insurance, and the creation of a federal employment service. By 1940 her agenda had become law, and for this reason former secretary of labor Willard Wirtz noted that “every man and woman who works at a living wage, under safe conditions, for reasonable hours, or who is protected by unemployment insurance or social security, is her debtor” (Newman, 2004, p.83).
After taking office, Perkins began building support for unemployment and old-age insurance by bringing it up in cabinet meetings and giving many speeches on the subject. She also asked people in the Labor Department to begin drafting legislation. In 1934, Roosevelt created the cabinet-level Committee on Economic Security and asked her to chair it. Announced in June, the Committee was expected to deliver draft legislation to Congress by January of 1935. According to Irving Bernstein (1985), “Miss Perkins, because of her chairmanship, her commitment, and Roosevelt’s urging, was the key member. She gave this program top priority over her many other duties, assumed the basic responsibility, was faithful about attending meetings, and in the later stages, knocked heads together to reach consensus” (p. 51-52).

The Social Security Act was signed into law in August 1935, providing what Roosevelt liked to call from “cradle to grave” minimum security coverage for citizens (Perkins, 1946; Bernstein, 1985). Among its titles were old-age assistance, Aid to Dependent Children (now Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), unemployment insurance, old-age insurance, maternal-child health grants, child welfare services, public health grants, vocational rehabilitation services, and grants for the blind and disabled. Network member and Children’s Bureau head Katherine Lenroot and Martha Eliot (also of the Children’s Bureau) proposed and wrote the Aid to Dependent Children portion of the program (Witte, 1963). The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 completed her agenda with its provisions of a minimum wage and maximum hours, and its prohibition of children’s labor. Network member Abbott was instrumental in adding the child labor prohibition to the legislation.

As Secretary of Labor, Perkins worked to insure that the Department was dedicated “to human needs” and insisted that the Department view workers not as abstractions, but as “men
and women of flesh and bone” (Perkins, 1934, p. 283). More specifically, the “winter’s coat, the plumbing, the interest on the mortgage, a good diet, the baby’s milk, marriage, and cultural needs, even soda waters and rides on the pony in the park must always precede generalized abstract theory in our thinking” (Perkins, 1934, p. 283). Beyond the major social policies she helped design and implement, she upgraded and professionalized the Bureau of Labor Statistics so that for the first time the government was able to collect high quality labor economics statistics. She also created the Division (later Bureau) of Labor Standards, which was organized by network member Beyer. This division was the first attempt to focus systematically on workplace safety and standards, and it worked closely with state labor departments. The division joined with the states to improve factory conditions by making state laws more uniform and establishing safety codes (Martin, 1976). Alice Hamilton, a pioneer public health reformer, was asked to direct these efforts.

Perkins’ commitment to the “human” was integral to her approach to administration. Writing in People at Work, she stated that “management is something more than a scientific achievement” (Perkins, 1934, p. 203). Good managers are “artists” and “scientists,” and they bring to problem solving “not only a technique, but also the moral conception which an artist always gives to his product” (p. 204). On the “scientific” side, she reorganized the Department to be more efficient, sought competitive salaries for employees, ended political patronage appointments, and brought in qualified individuals with expertise or work experience for key positions. She herself was dedicated to “the facts” and so directed the agency to become a repository for “technical and economic information” for wage-earners, employers, and the public (Perkins, 1934, p. 270).
On the “artistic” side, she brought energy to the Department and infused it with her strong moral commitment to improving working men and women’s lives (Martin, 1976). Thomas Eliot (1992), the number two person in Labor’s Office of the Solicitor who drafted the social security bill, recalled that after the roll call ended in the House on the Social Security Act she telegraphed him immediately with the good news, which “was a typical act of thoughtfulness” by her (p. 113). He also noted that she was loyal, energetic, knowledgeable, and willing to be an “understanding, thoughtful friend” to the people she worked with (Eliot, 1992, p. 153). Perkins made a point not to use her private office elevator so that she could mingle and talk with the Department’s employees in the main office elevator (Mohr, 1979). She also went to the office as soon as she heard the news of Pearl Harbor, knowing that people in the Department would want the connect with each other at that moment. Finally, she desegregated the new Labor Department cafeteria after discovering there were roped sections for whites and African-Americans (Mohr, 1979).

For these reasons, as well as her numerous policy successes, Peter Drucker (1980) counted her among the “outstanding administrators of New Deal programs” (p. 104). Clearly she and other network members were pivotal in advancing Roosevelt’s social reform agenda and bringing the settlement ethos to federal policy and practice. In contrast to today’s rhetoric about privatization and market-like government, Perkins (1934) believed that “government in a democracy is a service agency [italics mine] for these essential activities of human cooperation” (p. 286). It has been years since elected or administrative officials have spoken approvingly of (social) service agencies or taken the view that social services are the end of democratic government as Perkins and the CAM Report did.
CARE AS A FOUNDATIONAL NARRATIVE
FOR CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The purpose of the foregoing discussion was to show that the settlement perspective, with
its emphasis on care, connection, and concrete experience, did not end with the Progressive Era
but instead was carried forward to inform New Deal policies and administrative practices. At a
minimum the standard textbook account of public administration, which is shaped almost
entirely by the bureau perspective, should be expanded to include the settlement perspective as
embodied by the New Deal women’s administrative network. The period, as most textbooks
portray it, was not bereft of women administrators, nor was Perkins the token woman serving on
the Administration’s periphery. Perkins may not have been a member of Roosevelt’s “brain
trust,” but she was personally and professionally close to him, chaired the Committee on
Economic Security, could always reach him by telephone, and was one of three cabinet members
to serve through all four Roosevelt administrations. The fact that the settlement perspective was
central to the New Deal helps establish the case that the concept of care should be viewed as
foundational to public administration, for it was integral to the development of the administrative
state in two of its most significant periods.

The suggestion that care be considered foundational within contemporary public
administration may surprise some readers, given that many scholars hold that we are living in a
postmodern (Fox & Miller, 1995) and post-foundational (White, 1999) moment. Foundational
approaches to knowledge, history, and practice have been criticized for being exclusive,
essentializing, and totalizing, as well as for ignoring or overlooking the people, ideas, and
experiences that did not fit within a particular “foundation.” Operating from this critical
perspective, many post-foundational scholars have worked to identify these absences and
omissions, deconstruct totalizing narratives, offer counter-narratives, and make complex what was once thought to be “known” or “true.”

Within this project’s boundaries, for example, it was interesting to discover that Brownlow, so often represented as the apotheosis of efficiency in government, cared as much about the human side of the New Deal as he did government reorganization, and that the latter should actually be linked to and justified by the former (CAM, 1937; Brownlow, 1955). Writing to Roosevelt in 1943, Brownlow referred to Roosevelt’s domestic agenda as “our domestic agenda,” and he urged him to state after the war that “the way back to peace and prosperity is to realize the four freedoms through the five fundamentals of the right to work, the duty of production, fairness of distribution, equal access to education, and the enjoyment of personal security” (Sunstein, 2004, p.87-88). Furthermore, it was time to “rekindle the flame of hope in the common man” (Sunstein, 2004, p. 88). From these remarks it would seem that Brownlow indeed “cared” about the human side of government just as Perkins did.7

Care is not proposed here as a foundational concept in public administration in the traditional sense of that term. This paper’s argument rather is that care should be viewed as a foundational narrative (i.e., one story among others) that offers a historical, theoretical, ethical, and practical alternative to the standard accounts of public administration’s foundations. Stivers’ (2000) launched a rich and still unfolding literature on the implications of care for public administration. Since then care’s theoretical and ethical implications within public administration have been developed in particular by DeLysa Burnier (2003), O.C. McSwite (2004), Patricia Shields (2005), and Stivers (2005). Recently, Deniz Leuenberger (2005) probed the practical issues of recognition and compensation for the performance of “caring labor” in the
public sector.

The conception of the caring state of the 1930s, forged from the commitments of the Roosevelts, Perkins, and other administrators imbued with the settlement ethos, originated in the Great Depression. Although we are not facing such a crisis today, it is interesting to note that in the 2006 elections personal economic insecurities played a role in why many middle-class citizens voted Democratic (Hacker & Teixeira, 2006). These insecurities, according to Jacob Hacker and Ruy Teixeira (2006), are rooted in the larger, ongoing trend to make individuals less dependent on government by assuming more “risk and responsibility” for things such as retirement, health care, and education. Citizens, however, have begun to express their concern about this trend by telling pollsters they prefer “a role for government that promotes security in the context of expanded opportunity, as opposed to a government role that keeps taxes low to promote self-reliance” (Hacker & Teixeira, 2006, p. 25). If the public administration scholarly community were to embrace care as a foundational narrative as this paper recommends, then its task would be to begin thinking differently about the programs and practices that might help make citizens once again feel that government cared for them.
ENDNOTES

1. The author reviewed the tables of contents for the APSR between 1933 and 1950. The PAR’s table of contents were reviewed between 1942 and 1960.

2. Some historians argue that there were in fact one, two, and maybe three New Deals. The first one was dedicated to recovery, while the second one, beginning around 1935, was more reform oriented. The third New Deal begins around 1937. See John Jeffries “A ‘Third New Deal?’ Liberal Policy and the American State, 1937-1945” for a good overview of this issue.

3. Brownlow (1955) states in his autobiography that Gulick actually wrote the message for Roosevelt, and that he only changed one word.

4. The social service emphasis is noted in John Rohr’s (1986) To Run a Constitution. He claims (with humor) that perhaps it was a “typo.”

5. The author owes a large intellectual debt to Ware’s development of the women’s network. The networks members, their work histories, and biographies are fully developed in Ware’s (1981) Beyond Suffrage.

6. Space did not permit going into detail on Ellen Woodward, but she deserves mention. She was the number two person at the WPA where she was in charge of the projects aimed at both unskilled and professional unemployed women. She ran the WPA arts (painting, writing, music, and theater) projects as well. See Martha Swain’s (1995) biography Ellen S. Woodward: New Deal Advocate for Women for a full discussion of her administrative life. She also served on the first Social Security Board.

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