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TAH Paper

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In this paper I will review the book *The Woman Behind the New Deal: The Life of Frances Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor and His Moral Conscience* by Kirstin Downey.

The story of Frances Perkins is the story of a woman in a high profile political and policy making role during what some historians would define as the worst economic crisis to occur in the United States. Ms. Perkins was one of President Roosevelt's closest friends and was the first female secretary of labor. She was responsible for enacting many of the most important Depression-era programs that are even today considered essential parts of the country's social safety network.

Frances Perkins is not a familiar name today, and many people in this country cannot

recall her role as one of the most influential women in American government of the twentieth century.

From reading Kirstin Downey's book, I have gained knowledge of just how influential Frances Perkins was on key Depression -era legislation. Kirstin Downey has included in her book an extensive amount of archival materials and documents that complete a picture of a devoted public servant a working mother and dutiful wife.

Frances Perkins was named the Secretary of Labor by Franklin Roosevelt in 1933. As the first female cabinet secretary, she took up the fight to improve the lives of

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America's working people. She took this role on while juggling her own complex family responsibilities. In the book, Kirstin Downey does an excellent job of exposing Frances Perkins as a real woman with real struggles and tribulations.

Upon arriving in Washington at the height of the Great Depression, Perkins pushed for massive public works projects that created millions of jobs for unemployed workers. She breathed life back into the nation's labor movement, boosting living standards across the country. As head of the Immigration Service, Frances Perkins fought to bring European refugees to safety in the United States. A partial list of Frances Perkin's accomplishments include the 40 hour work week, child labor laws, unemployment insurance, minimum wage and the Social Security Act.

From Kirstin Downey's book, we gained a knowledge of where Frances Perkins has come from and how her past influenced her dealings with the labor unions and workers of her time. Perkins, like many of other settlement house leaders, lived within the community she served. Downey points out that even as Frances was living with the struggling, lower wage workers, she developed strong ties to some of the most influential "captain of industry" who were part of creating the very economic conditions the workers found themselves in.

From the reading, it is clear that Downey has made a strong connection between

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the ideas that Frances Perkins had to reform the workforce. These ideas were deeply rooted in her experiences working with the settlement house movement and her social worker background. Frances used her past experiences to frame many of her most influential ideas and programs. Ms. Perkins learned early how to use powerful allies and encouraged bipartisan problem solving.

As a woman, Frances Perkins had to endure significant indignities in her career. From the readings, we learned that Ms. Perkins had to alter her appearance to become more acceptable and less threatening to the men with whom she was working. Even after changing her physical appearance, uncertainty was still working against her. When it came to seating arrangements at formal dinners, many cabinet members still wondered if Ms. Perkins should be seated with her colleagues or with the cabinet member's wives. Downey points out over and over again the many indignities that Frances had to endure to make a success of her role and effect the social changes to which she was so committed.

Kirstin Downey pointed out that Ms. Perkins learned to work within the confines of these social norms. She quietly listened, asked few questions and effectively influenced both FDR and the members of Congress. Frances Perkins was not without her critics. The author points out that Perkins engendered strong negative feelings from both the labor leaders as well as from legislators. The

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author initially presents Frances as quietly suffering through these indignities, Downey seems to point towards the New England background of Francis as a reason for her tough exterior and steel commitment to her government. Downey also allowed a glimpse at a side of Perkins that seems to be frustrated by the lack of recognition of her accomplishments and even her guilt over harboring these thoughts.

The book also shows a glimpse into the family life of Ms. Perkins. Both her husband and daughter suffered from mental illness. Frances Perkins took on the financial and emotional strain of caring for both of these family members. Downey explored the feelings that Francis was troubled by the idea that her own successful career could be the cause of their mental illness. It is ironic that Ms. Perkins fought to improve the lives of many Americans only to be haunted by the knowledge that she could not help the two most important people in her life.

Kirstin Downey's book is successful in exposing this complex portrait of Frances Perkins. Downey gives Perkins a biography that exposes the story of a fierce advocate who put people first, a *public servant* who was actually worthy of the name, and a bracing reminder of what an inspired government can do. Ms. Perkins was a shining example of someone who ignored traditional female roles and changed America in doing so.

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Kirstin Downey's excellent biography of Frances Perkins reminds all of us the truly

amazing accomplishments that the first woman cabinet member achieved. Perkins took a major role in spearheading decisive work with FDR to solve urgent problems and to succeed in the face of what seemed insurmountable odds. Kirstin Downey

suggests that one of the most influential personalities in shaping the New Deal turns out to be someone that few people recognize and that person turns out to be a woman.

In conclusion, I think that Kirstin Downey has proved that Frances Perkins truly was *The Woman Behind the New Deal*.