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By Heather Cox Richardson

Today, President Joe Biden designated a new national monument in honor of Frances Perkins, secretary of labor under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The first female Cabinet secretary, Perkins served for twelve years. She took the job only after getting FDR to sign on to her goals: unemployment insurance, health insurance, old-age insurance, a 40-hour work week, a minimum wage, and abolition of child labor. She later recalled: “I remember he looked so startled, and he said, ‘Well, do you think it can be done?’”

She promised to find out.

Once in office, Perkins was a driving force behind the administration’s massive investment in public works projects to get people back to work. She urged the government to spend \$3.3 billion on schools, roads, housing, and post offices. Those projects employed more than a million people in 1934.

In 1935, FDR signed into law the Social Security Act that she designed and negotiated, providing ordinary Americans with unemployment insurance; aid to homeless, dependent, and neglected children; funds to promote maternal and child welfare; and public health services.

In 1938, Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act, which established a minimum wage and maximum hours. It banned child labor.

The one area where Perkins fell short of her goals was in establishing public healthcare. It was not until 2010 that President Barack Obama signed into law the Affordable Care Act.

Perkins’s work to build FDR’s New Deal sparked the modern American state.

Before Perkins, the primary function of the federal government was to manage the economic relationships between labor, capital, and resources. Property rights, after all, had been the basis on which North American colonists had found the justification to

rebel against the British crown, and that focus on the relationships inherent in property ownership had continued to dominate the government American lawmakers built.

But Perkins recognized that the central purpose of government was not to protect property; it was to protect the communities of people who lived in the nation. She recognized that children, the elderly, women, and disabled Americans, all of whom contributed to society whether or not that contribution was recognized with a paycheck, were as valuable to the survival of a community as male workers and the wealthy men who employed them.

“The people are what matter to government,” she said, “and a government should aim to give all the people under its jurisdiction the best possible life.”

A majority of Americans of both parties liked the new system, but the reworking of the government shocked those who had previously dominated the country. As soon as the Social Security Act passed, opponents set out to destroy it along with the rest of the new system. A coalition of Republican businessmen who hated both business regulation and the taxes that paid for social programs, racists who opposed the idea of equal rights for racial and ethnic minorities, and religious traditionalists—especially Southern Baptists—who opposed the recognition of women’s equal rights, joined together to fight against the New Deal.

Their undermining of Perkins’s vision got little traction when they were attacking business regulation and taxes to support social services. Voters liked those things. But it began to attract supporters after 1954, when the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, decision requiring the desegregation of public schools. That decision enabled those opposed to the New Deal to harness racism to their cause, warning American voters that a government that protected everyone would mean a government that used tax dollars paid by white Americans to benefit Black Americans.

Religious traditionalists’ role in undermining the New Deal grew in the 1970s. The new system dramatically expanded women’s rights, and when President Richard Nixon’s people worried he would lose reelection in 1972, they quite deliberately used the issue

of abortion to claim that “women’s liberation” was destroying the family structure that religious traditionalists believed mirrored God’s relationship to his human flock.

By 1979, religious traditionalists had rejected the modern move toward women’s rights and made common cause with Republicans eager to derail the New Deal. In 1980 the support of those traditionalists put Republican president Ronald Reagan into the White House. Their influence grew in the 1990s as white evangelicals became the base of the Republican Party. By 2016 they had brought into the Republican Party a determination to reinstate a male-dominated, patriarchal world that resurrected the government Frances Perkins’s vision had replaced.

That impulse has grown until now, in 2024, attacks on women have become central to the destruction of the kind of government Frances Perkins helped to establish during the New Deal. Religious extremists in the Republican Party have in some states reduced or prevented women’s access to healthcare and are talking about taking away women’s right to vote, and the party itself has downgraded the role of women in society. When House Republicans released a list of their committee leaders for the next Congress last Thursday, there were no women on it. For the first time in 20 years, no House committees will be chaired by women.

“Very fitting in the MAGA Era—No Women Need Apply,” former Republican representative from Virginia Barbara Comstock posted on X.

In his term in office, President Biden has worked to reclaim Frances Perkins’s vision of a government that works for all Americans. When he took office, he promised to have a Cabinet that “looks like America,” and he created the most diverse Cabinet in American history. And he has emphasized women’s equality. In March 2024 he signed an executive order noting that, since women’s roles in American history have often been overlooked, it is imperative that we recognize the women and girls who have shaped the nation.

The creation today of the Frances Perkins National Monument tied together Perkins’s expansion of the government and the centrality of women to the American story. The event took place in the Frances Perkins Building, the headquarters of the U.S.

Department of Labor in Washington, D.C., where acting secretary of labor Julie Su noted that Biden has been “the most pro-worker, pro-union president in history,” protecting pensions, defending unions, creating good jobs, and unapologetically wielding the power of the presidency on behalf of working people.

Su inducted the president into the Labor Department’s Hall of Honor, and Biden responded with the observation that “the American people are beginning to figure out all we’re doing is what’s basically decent and fair—just basically decent and fair.”

Then Biden spoke about Perkins and her work. He described how his administration has defended, protected, and expanded her vision. He reiterated that women have always been vital to the United States and insisted that they must be acknowledged both in our current society and in the way we remember our history.

As part of the day’s events, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland announced the establishment of five new National Historic Landmarks recognizing women’s history: the Charleston Cigar Factory in Charleston, South Carolina, where in 1945–1946, Black women led a strike that prompted the organization of southern workers; the Furies Collective, the Washington, D.C., home of a lesbian, feminist publishing group in the early 1970s; the Washington, D.C., Slowe-Burrill House, home of Black lesbian educators Lucy Diggs Slowe and Mary Burrill in the early twentieth century; Azurest South in Petersburg, Virginia, the home and studio of early twentieth century Black architect Amaza Lee Meredith; and the Peter Hurd and Henriette Wyeth House and Studios in San Patricio, New Mexico, where the two painted in the twentieth century.

In establishing the 57-acre family farm of Frances Perkins on the Damariscotta River in Newcastle, Maine, as a National Monument today, Biden acknowledged both the importance of Perkins’s New Deal vision of a government that benefits everyone and the centrality of women’s equality to that vision.

—Notes:

<https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/republican-women-chosen-lead-house-committees-time-decades/story?id=116764680>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/21/us/biden-cabinet-diversity-gender-race.html>

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2024/12/16/remarks-by-president-biden-honoring-our-nations-labor-history-and-the-biden-harris-administrations-work-to-strengthen-americas-workforce/>

[https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/upload/Charleston Cigar NPS AB 2024-02 compressed.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/upload/Charleston_Cigar_NPS_AB_2024-02_compressed.pdf)

<https://www.nps.gov/places/furies-collective.htm>

<https://www.nps.gov/places/slows-burrill-house.htm>

<https://www.dhr.virginia.gov/historic-registers/020-5583/>

<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2024/03/27/executive-order-on-recognizing-and-honoring-womens-history/>

[https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/upload/Hurd-Wyeth-House-and-Studios NHL exec-summary 2024-8 508-2.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalhistoriclandmarks/upload/Hurd-Wyeth-House-and-Studios_NHL_exec-summary_2024-8_508-2.pdf)

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

<https://francesperkinscenter.org/learn/her-life/>

<https://www.dol.gov/newsroom/releases/osec/osec20241216-0>

<https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/lectures/>

<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1933-02-19/ed-1/seq-23/>

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