Book restores woman's role in New Deal

by: REVIEWS BY GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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After the election of 1932, Franklin Roosevelt received hundreds of letters recommending the appointment of Frances Perkins as Secretary of Labor. A social worker, consumer advocate, industrial commissioner, director of the Council on Immigrant Education, and head of the Labor Department of New York State, Perkins, one endorser gushed, "is the best equipped MAN for the job that I know of."

Downey, a former staff writer for The Washington Post, seeks to restore the first female Cabinet Secretary in the government of the United States to her proper place in history. Throughout her tenure, Downey points out, Perkins had to contend with condescension and contempt from colleagues as well as critics because she was a woman. Exasperated that she talked too much at Cabinet meetings, Harold Ickes, the secretary of the Interior, noted that when she had the floor Jim Farley's eyes closed and Henry Wallace stared at the ceiling. Perkins reminded him, Ickes opined, that "there is something to the adage, 'A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they'll be.'"

Nonetheless, Perkins retained Roosevelt's confidence and helped draft legislation establishing unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, minimum wages, standards for workplace safety, and payment for overtime. The "truth," Downey declares, is that the New Deal was "Frances Perkins' creation."

Well, not quite. Perkins did, indeed, make significant contributions to the New Deal. In staking out her claim that the Labor secretary was the "moving force behind the Roosevelt Administration," Downey relies far too heavily on Perkins' reminiscences, recorded in the 1950s in an oral history project at Columbia University. Whatever she might have thought, Perkins didn't get public works projects and unemployment insurance legislation back on track by "ripping over to the White House." Nor was she really "the one most responsible" for the Social Security Act.

Portraying Roosevelt as "a man who could be manipulated" by the last voice he heard on a particular issue, Downey doesn't always capture the president's byzantine brilliance. He was notoriously difficult to pin down, even when it came to apparently settled ideas.

Perkins may have stayed in office too long, Downey points out, poignantly. Her portfolio shrank as "Dr. New Deal" gave way to "Dr. Win the War" and she became a target of anti-communist zealots, who thought her insufficiently scrupulous in deporting suspected subversives.

Moreover, even though she was "the most important political benefactor labor ever had," union leaders never liked her.

And so without fanfare she left Washington, taking a job in the 1950s as a visiting lecturer (with a small salary) at Cornell University's new Industrial and Labor Relations School. And watching, with ambivalence, as Eleanor Roosevelt "got the adulation and luxurious life that Frances must have felt she deserved."

The Woman behind The new Deal

THE LIFE OF FRANCES PERKINS, FDR’S SECRETARY OF LABOR AND HIS MORAL CONSCIENCE

By Kirstin Downey
Nan A. Talese, $35

Glenn C. Altschuler is the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.
U.S. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins (center) wears a steel helmet during an inspection tour of the San Francisco tower of the Golden Gate Bridge on March 25, 1935. Associated Press