

Frances Perkins and the Limits of New Deal Racial Liberalism

Steven White
Syracuse University

On September 16, 2019, Elizabeth Warren gave a major speech in New York City near the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Warren brought up Frances Perkins, Labor Secretary in the Franklin Roosevelt administration, who had witnessed the fire firsthand and been immensely affected by it. She described Perkins as someone who “worked the political system relentlessly from the inside, while a sustained movement applied pressure from the outside” in pursuit of “[b]ig structural change.”

As I saw Perkins' name in the news, I was reminded of a section in my dissertation (White 2014) that didn't make it into the eventual book. Towards the end of her life, Perkins sat down for an extensive oral history interview at Columbia University with the historian Dean Albertson. Among a range of other topics, she briefly discussed civil rights advocacy during the Roosevelt administration and offered a strikingly negative opinion of the recently decided *Brown v. Board* case that has been widely overlooked by historians and biographers.

Albertson was asking Perkins about James Byrnes, who had served in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. By the time of the interview, though, Byrnes was Governor of South Carolina and Albertson mentioned his opposition to integration. “Well, I wouldn't like to tell you what I think of the Supreme Court decision on the matter,” Perkins said, unprompted. When asked if she disagreed, Perkins said it was “terrible,” a “purely political decision” that “should never have been made” (Reminiscences of Frances Perkins 1955: 335). When Albertson said that he felt it was “so darned long overdue,” Perkins replied:

Oh my dear fellow, now look here. No - it's not overdue. It's just begun to loom up as due - as nearly due. No, wait! Nobody ever heard that segregation was wrong until about five years ago. I never heard such a thing. I never heard of such a thing. Certainly we should be nice to



the Negroes. Certainly we should treat them right. (Ibid.: 335-36)

Albertson brought the subject back to the World War II era, which they had been discussing. Segregation “began to come up then,” Perkins admitted, stating that after NAACP leader Walter White “began to agitate, it began to be raised. See, he was a smart agitator.” “Gosh, he's been agitating for twenty years,” Albertson said. “No, not for twenty years,” Perkins replied. “He didn't have a chance to. He didn't do any agitating until well into the Roosevelt administration. It was well into the Roosevelt administration before the word 'segregation' was mentioned. Yes, it was” (Ibid.: 336).

When Albertson noted that “during the war it was a boiling point,” Perkins acknowledged that “it was being raised.” She again said that Walter White had been “agitating” and “was putting his finger on the places where it mattered,” like military recruiting. Albertson clearly became frustrated at this point. “So help me,” he interjected. “I had never heard of Walter White. All I saw was two drinking fountains side by side, and I got the word.” Perkins acknowledged that she “always used to feel queerly” in segregated facilities like waiting rooms for trains. When Albertson brought up the issue of

“get[ting] in the back of the bus,” Perkins said, “Yes, but they got on the bus after all. The bus hauled them where they wanted to go” (Ibid.: 337-38).

A bit later, Albertson asked Perkins bluntly whether she meant “to tell me in all your life you've never considered the proposition that there was something perhaps a little awry about this system of separate schools, sitting in the back of the bus, separate drinking fountains--?” Perkins said that it was “a way of life in the South.” When asked if she accepted it, she said she did not but that she “didn't live in the South.” Albertson pushed her on this point, noting that she traveled the region during the 1948 campaign and “saw these things” (Ibid.: 342). Perkins replied:

Yes, and they didn't vote, and we knew they didn't vote. I went there. When Eugene Talmadge told me that in the state of Georgia, we had a hundred percent Anglo-saxon population, I did say, “Well, what were those strange black things I saw walking around the streets? If they weren't population, what were they?”

I mean, that startled me a little bit. But, the way I regarded it, the laws of the South are quite separate in their way of thinking, and it's the way we've gotten along, and I always regarded it as not my function to tell the South what to do. It was my function to do what I thought was right, where I lived, and not try to solve the problems that they had. (Ibid.)

Perkins' forthright opposition to *Brown* and her more general comments on the Jim Crow South are striking coming from someone generally considered one of the more liberal members of Roosevelt's cabinet. Indeed, some historical scholarship has painted Perkins as a friend of civil rights (Guzda 1980). Perhaps this is less surprising, though, when placed in the context of the limits of New Deal white racial liberalism. Political actors could simultaneously be supportive of civil rights activists on some issues while opposing them in other areas. Roosevelt's economic policies helped pull black voters away from the Republican Party, but he was famously reticent to speak out against lynching because he feared upsetting his awkward but successful electoral coalition of northern liberals and southern segregationists (Katznelson 2013). And while Truman went further than Roosevelt with concrete policy actions like integration of the armed forces, he was not always sympathetic to civil rights activists after his presidency. Commenting on the sit-in movement, Truman told reporters that if “anyone came into my store and tried to stop business I'd throw him out,” adding that “[t]he Negro should behave himself and show he's a good citizen” (Turner and Johnson 1960). Many white New Deal liberals like Perkins were comfortable with certain parts of the mainstream civil rights agenda in the 1930s and 1940s. The more extensive civil rights demands in the next two decades, though, were often much more difficult for them to accept.

References

- Guzda, Henry P. 1980. “Frances Perkins' Interest in a New Deal for Blacks.” *Monthly Labor Review* 103(4): 31-35.
- Katznelson, Ira. 2013. *Fear itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time*. New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Reminiscences of Frances Perkins (Part 8, Session 1). 1955. In the Oral History Research Office Collection of the Columbia University Libraries.
- Turner, Edward and Arthur Johnson. March 22, 1960. Telegram to Harry Truman. Folder: Civil Rights, Box 14, Post-Presidential Papers, Truman Papers. Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.
- White, Steven. 2014. “For Democracy and a Caste System? World War II, Race, and Democratic Inclusion in the United States,” Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University.