

ESSAY REVIEW

A SELF-POSSESSED WOMAN: A View of FDR's Secretary of Labor, Madame Perkins

by
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That night, I “was terrified at what I had accepted,” Frances Perkins remembered. Late into the evening, she debated calling Roosevelt back and rejecting her appointment as the next secretary of labor and the first female cabinet member. “Every now and then it flits through my mind that I did call him up—I’m not sure.” Revealing perhaps her own interior dialogue, she added, “I knew what he would say: ‘Now, don’t be a baby, Frances.’”

To succeed as a politician meant suppressing other “weaknesses” as well. Helped along by a proper Congregationalist New England upbringing and her earnest commitment to “live for God and do something,” Perkins became the consummate female politician: unflappable, steadfast, and fiercely protective of her private life. Unlike Pat Schroeder, Perkins kept that stiff upper lip. The only woman in her position, operating in a culture which unquestioningly upheld behavioral standards for public life set by men, she adjusted. She learned to acknowledge graciously the begrudging praise of her male colleagues—“Madam Perkins had a man’s brain” or “she’s all right, she kept still until the President asked her what she had to say and then she said it short”—even though she recognized these “compliments” for the ultimate insults they were.

As the film, *You May Call Her Madam Secretary* movingly

portrays,¹ Frances Perkins had large ambitions – not for herself, but for the world in which she lived. And to a remarkable degree, she realized those ambitions. Perkins’s vision and fortitude found concrete expression in such landmark legislation as the Social Security Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act, the Wagner Act, unemployment insurance, and child labor laws. Yet, this remarkable achievement had an underside – one which still haunts women in public life. Perkins succeeded in influencing the political agenda of her day, moving it closer to the values of her female social work and settlement house colleagues (her intellectual mentors had been Anna May Soule, Florence Kelley, and Jane Addams) because she downplayed the problems particular to women. Perkins did this instinctually it seems, just as she knew that telling a Tammany Hall boss that she lived in a settlement house would “throw him off.” Perkins declared in later life that she had hoped to make it easier for women politicians who came after her and that she “considered herself a good feminist,” but while in office, she sidestepped leadership on women’s issues and claimed that her sex was a handicap “only in climbing trees.” The dilemma for Perkins as for many women pioneers was inescapable: by de-emphasizing her womanhood and her ties to the women’s community, she heightened her political impact. On the other hand, her denial of gender as a political category may have helped legitimize the dominant male political culture and institutionalize the personal costs so many women in political life still bear.

These and other contradictions are not directly pinpointed in the film narrative. Nonetheless, a reality replete with paradox and poignancy emerges through the film’s adroit selection of visual imagery and its reliance on Perkins’s own writings (as splendidly dramatized by actress Frances Sternhagen). The movie opens with a stunning sequence of images from Perkins’s long career paired with a voice-over of quotes which communicate a complex welter of opinion about her. We learn she was “the mother of social security;” but “one of the most useless public officials.” She was also “much misunderstood; however, that was entirely

¹ *You May Call Her Madam Secretary*. Produced and written by Robert and Marjory Potts, 1987. 58 mins. (Available for rental or purchase in video (VHS/Beta) and 16mm film from Vineyard Video Productions/Elias Lane/West Tisbury, Massachusetts 02575; 617-693-3584. Discussion Guide also available.)

her own fault,” and “totally without ambition.” A dramatic montage of Depression-era scenes follows, introducing the viewer to the social injustices which so propelled Perkins and other activists of her generation.

The film skillfully interweaves Perkins’s personal biography with the social movements of which she was a part. Growing up in Worcester, Massachusetts within a conservative, Republican family, Perkins gradually shed her inherited ideas about the causes of poverty and the role of government under the tutelage of socially-progressive Mt. Holyoke female faculty. Perkins’s fledgling social analysis was reinforced by her experiences working among the poor at Chicago’s Hull House. By 1909, she had given up teaching biology and embarked on a career as a social worker in New York. There, Perkins witnessed the militant labor upheavals of 1909–10 as well as the horrific 1911 Triangle factory, and learned from friends such as Rose Schneiderman the one-word solution to poverty: organize. Perkins never stopped believing that legislation was the best way to “right industrial wrongs,” but, unlike many women of her class, Perkins came to accept the value of working-class organization. The idea that trade unions “were an evil to be avoided” was firmly discarded. She joined the Socialist Party – though she later voted for Wilson, not Debs in 1912 – and along with a circle of friends which included Mary Heaton Vorse, she marched in suffrage parades, organized street meetings, and gave soapbox speeches.

Caught up in this swirl of political activity and finding she liked life “in a single harness,” marriage came as almost an afterthought to Perkins. She finally wed at the age of 33 to a handsome, but emotionally unstable economist who shared her intellectual proclivities. “I might as well marry and get it off my mind,” was her only explanation. Her social activism continued after marriage, even after the birth of her daughter. Indeed, by 1919, prompted both by personal inclination and the increasing inability of her husband to provide financially, Perkins decided to take on full-time paid work.

Her public career blossomed. Perkins had already earned the respect of a wide array of political factions through her astute lobbying on behalf of the New York state 54-hour bill and her factory inspection activities. She could rely on political alliances

with feminist activists as well as Tammany Hall bosses.² Remarkably, throughout her life, Perkins drew personal sustenance from these same diverse sources. In the suffrage era, Perkins recounts, a closeness reigned between the women in the movement: “like people in the underground, we had to trust each other.” Later, in her New Deal days, female colleagues such as Molly Dewson and Clara Beyer sustained her. She also developed emotionally-satisfying relationships with male political figures Al Smith, Tim Sullivan, and Roosevelt himself.

In detailing Perkins’s political accomplishments from her appointment as New York state’s industrial commissioner to her twelve-year reign as secretary of labor, the film establishes the continuity between Progressivism and the New Deal. The programs she instituted at the state level – maximum hours, minimum wages, child labor prohibitions, improved worker’s compensation – became the model for Federal programs in the 1930s. Although Progressives from Wisconsin and other states were influential in formulating New Deal policies as historians have noted.³ Perkins certainly deserves more credit than has been given her. She was not only the chief officer at the Department of Labor but also the chair of the committee which developed the social security program.

While the film resuscitates Perkins’s critical role in realizing the social welfare dreams of the Progressives, her divergence from their dominant paternalism in her treatment of organized labor is not stressed sufficiently. The film touches on Perkins’s relation to labor – offering up memorable footage of the indomitable Perkins (denied a suitable hall by the Mayor and steel company owners) striding toward the U.S. post office in Homestead as hundreds of steelworkers trail behind, the 1937 auto sit-downs, her impeachment hearings before Congress because of her refusal to deport San Francisco longshore agitator Harry Bridges – but the impact of her consistent refusal to side with employers is not explored. Perkins didn’t budge, for example, when state and local

²Consult Charles H. Trout’s account of Perkins’s life in Barbara Sicherman and Carol Hurd Green eds., *Notable American Women* (Cambridge, MA 1980), 535–539 and Susan Ware, *Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal* (Cambridge, MA 1981) for more information on Perkins’s circle of friends.

³See, for example, Irving Bernstein, *A Caring Society: The New Deal, The Worker, and the Great Depression* (Boston, 1985).

officials pleaded for Federal troops to quell the 1934 San Francisco general strike, and she maintained neutrality in numerous other labor-management encounters—conflicts which laid the foundation for the rebirth of American labor.⁴

But one documentary on Frances Perkins can not possibly cover every aspect of a life as rich and variegated as hers. This film serves as a compelling introduction not only to Perkins but to the social movements which transformed 20th century America. Technically-polished and well-researched, it raises issues which should engage students in a wide variety of fields, from labor and women's studies to social work, history, and political science. The filmmakers have produced an entertaining and informative slice of social history which restores Perkins to her proper place on center stage. Perkins emerges as a powerful, self-possessed woman who through a combination of personal fortitude and favorable circumstance made a substantial mark on U.S. social policy in the twentieth century.

⁴Irving Bernstein provides one of the few accounts of the labor battles of the 1930s which acknowledges the impact of Perkins. Consult *The Turbulent Years A History of the American Worker* (Boston, 1971).