

Portraits of Character

from the National Portrait Gallery

Frances Perkins

New Deal Stateswoman and Labor Reformer

“I came to Washington to work for God, FDR, and the millions of forgotten, plain common workingmen.” These were the words of the reserved Frances Perkins, speaking in the quiet, genteel accent of the proper New Englander that she was. When Franklin D. Roosevelt named her secretary of labor in 1933, Perkins was not a newcomer to labor relations. As New York State’s industrial commissioner under two governors and a seasoned lobbyist on labor-reform issues, she was well versed in the field. FDR’s support of the first woman cabinet member lasted through the four terms of his presidency. Perkins helped draft and implement important New Deal legislation, including the Social Security Act, to establish publicly financed old-age pensions, and the Civilian Conservation Corps, a program to employ the jobless in public works projects. Her pragmatic, rather than ideological, approach to worker disputes won the respect of both labor and management during some of the nation’s worst strikes and related violence. The development of the Department of Labor into an effective and vital arm of the government was her most important contribution. One of her personally satisfying triumphs was the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938, which mandated a number of reforms for which she had long fought, includ-



Frances Perkins (1882–1965) by William Sharp (1900–1961). India ink over pencil with opaque white on paper, circa 1935. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution

ing a ban on child labor and the establishment of a minimum wage.

Taking a Closer Look

Artist William Sharp has employed a stylized form of caricature—the distortion of the face or figure for satiric purposes—to create the public persona of Frances Perkins in this circa 1935 pen-and-ink portrait. She has been described by historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. as “brisk and articulate, with vivid dark eyes, a broad forehead and a pointed chin... and intent on beating sense into the heads of those foolish people who resisted progress. She had... an instinct for practicality... and a compulsion to instruct.” How does this caricature convey the sense that she is quite capable of handling her

demanding job as secretary of labor?

Learn more about Frances Perkins during her twelve years as secretary of labor at the following Web sites:

<http://educate.si.edu/spotlight/labor.html>
Spotlight Biography: Labor Reformers

<http://www.ssa.gov/history/fperkins.html>
Social Security Pioneers: Frances Perkins



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