

Franklin Roosevelt's Cultural Vision

by Theodore Andromidas

The American Dream ... was the promise not only of economic and social justice but also of cultural enrichment.

—Franklin Roosevelt, 1938

Dec. 27—With the *Compromise of 1877*¹ that withdrew all U.S. troops from the South, and the Supreme Court's decision in the *Civil Rights Case* of 1883,² the United States would begin a retreat from the great moral vision for which so many had fought and died just 20 years earlier. This retreat became a virtual rout with the murder of President McKinley in 1901 at the hands of a British Imperial assassin. The United States would not begin to emerge from an ever-deepening dark age for decades. This moral and intellectual descent, led by “the most evil man of the Twentieth Century,” Bertrand Russell,³ threatened to end the United States as the “last great experiment for promoting human happiness.”⁴

Educating into a Dark Age

A review of the changes in the American education system following the *Compromise of 1877* provides a good look at the cultural decline of the United States into what would have become, as in Europe and elsewhere, a new dark age of fascism and war.

By 1880, we find enrollment rates for public school education for the later years of the Nineteenth Century



Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library

Before the New Deal: A one-room school in Alabama, circa 1935.

and the early years of the Twentieth, in a precipitous decline. The number of young people enrolled in school remained relatively low in the last third of the Nineteenth Century. In fact, the rate of student enrollment in America's schools in 1900 was almost exactly the same rate of enrollment as in 1840. And, although rates fluctuated, in general, only half of all 5- to 18-year-olds were enrolled in school.⁵

Rates for males and females were roughly similar throughout the period, but rates for African Americans were much lower than for whites. Prior to the emancipation of Southern blacks, school enrollment for blacks was largely limited to a small number in Northern states. Following the Civil War, the enrollment for blacks rose rapidly from 10% in 1870 to 34% in 1880.

However, in the ensuing years, leading into the Great Depression, there was essentially no change in the enrollment rate for blacks, while the rate for whites actually fell. This situation would not change until the

1. Reconstruction ended following the Compromise of 1877 between the Northern and Southern political elites. In exchange for deciding the contested presidential election of 1876 in favor of Rutherford B. Hayes, supported by Northern states, over his opponent, Samuel J. Tilden, the compromise called for the withdrawal of Northern troops from the South.

2. The Court held that Congress lacked the constitutional authority under the enforcement provisions of the [Fourteenth Amendment](#) to outlaw racial discrimination by private individuals and organizations, rather than state and local governments.

3. “[The Incompetence of Twentieth Century Science Education](#)” by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr, *Executive Intelligence Review*, April 4, 2014.

4. George Washington, January 9th, 1790.

5. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970.

New Deal. The overall enrollment rates for 5- to 18-year-olds rose from 51% in 1900 to 75% in 1940. The difference in the white and black enrollment rates narrowed from 23 points in 1900 to seven points in 1940, again, in great part, due to the programs of the Franklin Roosevelt Administration.⁶

Education in the Southern tier of the United States suffered terribly during the pre-Roosevelt years. Fewer than 5% of the teachers in this region had college training; more than 60% had no definite professional training of any kind. Although the average annual salary for female teachers during the 1870-1900 period was about \$300, average salaries in the South for the same period actually dropped from \$175 to \$159. Not only were salaries low, but in some cases payment was uncertain. In South Carolina in the 1880s, teachers routinely received vouchers on payday instead of a check. It was considered a progressive step when teachers were paid (much later) the face value of those vouchers rather than a reduced amount.

While illiteracy ranged from 30 to 45% of the total population in the Southern half of the nation (three times that of other areas of the country), only one Southern pupil out of ten who enrolled in school reached the fifth grade, and only one in seventy reached the eighth grade. Poorly equipped teachers worked with almost no supervision, merely “keeping school,” as it was referred to at the time. Each small, isolated school was left to itself as county superintendents’ jobs routinely went to incompetents as reward for political service; no qualifications were legally prescribed for any positions. The State Superintendent in South Carolina in 1900 reported that “Each district has as poor schools as its people will tolerate, and in some districts anything will be tolerated.” Rural schoolhouses in the South during the 1880s and 1890s were valued at less than \$100 each.

Alabama’s educational system in 1930 was much like the entire Southern tier of the nation. In the early 1900s, education in Alabama still suffered from short school terms, low funding, and racism. In one county, for instance, the average length of the school year was 72 days for white students and only 34 days for African-American students. The value of the typical schoolhouse for whites was \$40,000, in contrast to the average black schoolhouse valued at only \$1,000. The average

annual salary for white male teachers was \$863 and for white female teachers \$422, whereas African-American male teachers earned \$480, and black women teachers just \$140.⁷

‘New Deal for the American People’

Such was the state of so much of the nation when, on March 4, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt assumed the Presidency. He found a country, not just in the depths of decades-long economic decline and then financial collapse, but a country descending, with the rest of the world, into a new dark age. Roosevelt, who was elected overwhelmingly, had promised a “New Deal for the American people,” and worked quickly on an unprecedented number of reforms addressing the catastrophic effects of the Great Depression. Together with his “brain trust,” a group of university scholars and progressive activists, Roosevelt sought the best course of action for the struggling nation. A desperate Congress gave him *carte blanche* and rubber-stamped his proposals in order to expedite the reforms. During the first 100 days of his Presidency, a seemingly never-ending stream of bills was passed, and the Congress worked quickly to relieve poverty, reduce unemployment, and speed economic recovery.

Many of these programs are still familiar to us today, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), which put three million young men to work within months. We also know that programs like the CCC helped begin the process of taking these young people out of illiteracy and the degradation which had defined the lives of so many since the death of McKinley, a degradation from which they would eventually emerge to rebuild the nation and, perhaps without knowing it, be prepared for the war against fascism.

Through his New Deal, administered by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), Roosevelt would initiate the greatest period of infrastructure building of any nation in the history of humanity.

It was the WPA, directed by his close friend and trusted associate Harry Hopkins, that administered the rebuilding of the United States through infrastructure projects for roads, bridges, schools, courthouses, hospitals, waterworks, and post offices. It also initiated the construction of many other projects, including museums, parks, community centers, zoos, botanical gardens, audi-

6. Truman Pierce. *White and Negro Schools in the South: An Analysis of Biracial Education* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1955), pp.17-42.

7. “Public Education in the Early 20th Century,” Gordon Harvey, Jacksonville State University, in *Encyclopedia of Alabama*.

toriums, waterfronts, city halls, and university unions, many of which are still in use today. The infrastructure projects initiated and overseen by the WPA included 40,000 new and 85,000 improved buildings.

We must emphasize here that one of its most far-reaching projects was the creation and expansion of educational and cultural infrastructure: 5,900 new school buildings were built; a total of more than 2,170 additions were made to existing school buildings; an additional 31,000 school buildings were renovated or modernized. Library facilities were improved and expanded, and 1,000 new library buildings were built. Primary and secondary school enrollment rates increased dramatically, and by 1940 illiteracy had been substantially reduced.

The Federal Project Number One

Roosevelt understood that if he were to succeed in returning the American people to the mission for which the nation had been created, more than just “economic relief” and job training was required. For this purpose, **The Federal Project Number One**, known as “Federal One,” for short, was created in 1935 to extend the economic relief, and protection, of the New Deal to artists, actors, writers, and musicians. Many of these men and women had refused to sign on to New Deal relief programs for fear of irrevocably damaging their artistic performance capabilities. The relief programs used manual labor almost exclusively. Imagine if the great Amadeus Quartet or some other group of performers or artists had been forced to dig ditches. Any accident to their hands or feet or eyes could well have ended their careers forever.

Roosevelt also knew, as the future was to demonstrate, that this program could and would provide a great double benefit to the American people. Not only would these legions of unemployed artists be put back to work, but their creations would enrich the minds of a population that had been morally and intellectually devastated by the previous 40 years of cultural and economic decay, which would end in what became known as the Great Depression.



Library of Congress
One of thousands of posters circulated by the WPA for music education across the United States.

“Federal One” was to become a powerful instrument with which to infuse great Classical art and culture into the daily lives of millions of broken and demoralized Americans. Three years after the establishment of “Federal Project Number One,” President Franklin Roosevelt wrote to his friend, the journalist Hendrik Willem Van Loon, on January 4, 1938, “I too, have a dream—to show people in the out of the way places, some of whom are not only in small villages but in corners of New York City—something they cannot get from between the covers of books, *some real paintings and prints and etchings and some real music.*”⁸

Below we will give a brief overview of only one program of Federal One, the Federal Music Project. Although short-lived, along with most of Federal One, it was a bold and successful attempt at halting the decades-long decline of culture and literacy in the United States through the direct support of music and the arts by the government. This is not an attempt to critique the quality or beauty of all the music performed and produced by the Music Project, or most of the art created by Federal One. Rather, it should be clear to the reader that the Roosevelts, Harry Hopkins, and others, as they were attempting to raise the nation out of decades of despair, not just with jobs, but with art, were also attempting to establish the foundations for an American Renaissance.⁹

The Federal Music Project

“If President Roosevelt had done nothing else but establish the Federal Music Project, that alone would be sufficient to account him great.” So declared a southern

8. Hendrik Willem van Loon (1882-1944) was a historian and children’s writer. Born in the Netherlands, he moved to the United States in 1902.

9. We can get a striking glimpse into some of the intellectual depth of the Federal One programs: The Federal Writers Project provided access to some of the first English translations of Nicholas of Cusa published in the United States. They were published by the California State Library, under the Historic Records Survey of Project of Federal One. One was “*De staticis*,” by the Famous and Learned C. Cusanus.”

California musician during the height of the Great Depression. The newspaper which quoted him at the time, concluded by adding: "...this opinion will be confirmed by thousands of musicians and music lovers."¹⁰

Holger Cahill, director of the Newark Museum of Art, was appointed in 1935 to direct Federal One. Federal One had five subdivisions: The Federal Music Project, the Federal Art Project, the Federal Theatre Project, the Federal Writers Project, and the Historical Records Survey. Just one year after the five national directors first met in Washington, some 40,000 WPA artists and other cultural workers were employed in projects throughout the United States.

Hopkins personally chose Nikolai Sokoloff to head the Federal Music Project. Sokoloff was a Russian-born, Yale-educated violinist who had made his mark in the Boston Symphony. Just prior to being appointed, Sokoloff had organized and conducted a symphony orchestra in New York. He would direct the project through most of its existence.

During its four year history, from October 1935 to August 1939, the Federal Music Project would sponsor an impressive 275,000 live "performances, programs, and recitals" performed before 147,000,000 people in 43 states and Washington, D.C. The Federal Music Project funded various musical initiatives but primarily focused on music composition, performance, and education. University professors, music educators, and professional musicians were *all* eligible for relief, as long as they were United States citizens.

How far the music of the WPA project eased the distress and bewilderment of the depression must, of course, escape exact evaluation, but the contribution to the morale of multitudes certainly was significant.

—Earl Moore, Federal Music Project
Final Report, 1939

For Sokoloff, and the early leadership of the Federal Music Project, America's music would be a continuation of European classics. His disdain for popular music was unrestrained. The ordinarily reserved Sokoloff did not hesitate to denounce it in rather colorful terms. To one reporter he argued that jazz and swing did not represent popular music at all: "*Popular music* is music that endures through the years, as Handel's *Messiah* and the



stokowski.org

Nikolai Sokoloff, first head of the Federal Music Project, conducting the Cleveland Orchestra in the 1920s.

Fifth Symphony of Beethoven—that's popular music. I'd bet more people today in the world know the Fifth Symphony—and it was written one hundred years ago."

And the national director felt just as strongly about embellishments to performances of symphonic or chamber music: "The clever dance arrangements of Classical airs," he told one meeting of music directors, "are as ludicrous as your lovely grandmother made up to look like a chorus girl."

Yet Sokoloff was committed to the development of a uniquely American Classical music. He agreed with the composer Antonín Dvořák, who 40 years earlier, had attempted to initiate a Renaissance in American music. Sokoloff encouraged American composers to create their own symphonic scores.

He told a southern California newspaper: "I believe very firmly that we should give the good American conductors a chance when there are vacancies in these orchestras, and *I believe we should give plenty of opportunity to American composers of merit.*" Yet, as he warned in the Federal Music Project preliminary report, this "administration has had no intention of fostering incompetence."

The Offerings of the Federal Music Project

Millions of Americans saw orchestras, concert bands, and symphonies on tour throughout their states, some led and performed by local talent. Oklahomans could attend performances of the Oklahoma Federal Symphony in Tulsa; Floridians the Florida Federal Symphony in Tallahassee. An estimated 55,000 saw a federal orchestra perform in Milwaukee. In its final

10. Richard Saunder, *Hollywood Citizens Journal*, June 19, 1931.

report, the Federal Music Project stated: “Great music under the Federal Music Project was no longer the privilege of the more fortunate of the dwellers in cities”¹¹

Before 1933 the nation boasted 19 symphony orchestras; the Project directly created 34 new orchestras and helped in the creation of at least 100 more orchestras across the nation. Classical music had now become the “people’s music,” available to urban and rural areas alike, to the wealthy and the poor.¹²

In its second report to the Congress, the Federal Music Project gave a detailed report of its activities, stating in part:

In this nation-wide movement, inaugurated when communities recognized an irreparable injury threatened the whole structure of American music, there are enrolled instrumentalists, vocalists, composers, teachers, copyists, arrangers and librarians, tuners and instrument repairers. These are the musicians who faced deterioration of skill, the relaxation of vital energies and waning morale with the loss of employment.”¹³

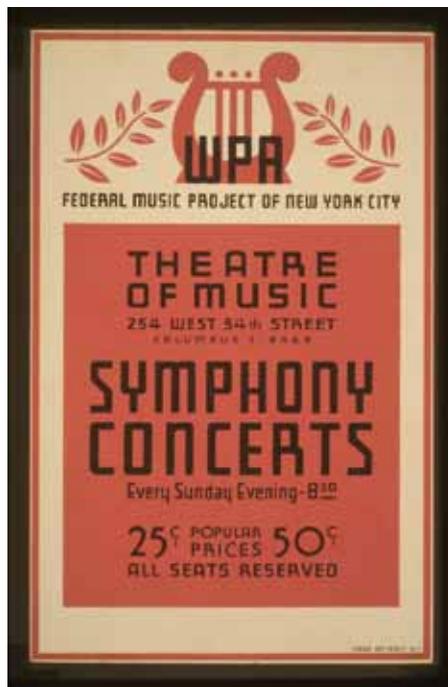
By June 30, 1935, 15,000 musicians were enrolled in the following units:

- 141 symphony and concert orchestras, engaging 5,669
- 77 symphonic, military, and concert bands with 2,793
- 15 chamber music ensembles
- 81 dance, theater, and novelty orchestras . . .
- 38 choruses, quartets, and vocal ensembles

11. Cited in Robert D. Leighninger, “Cultural Infrastructure: The Legacy of New Deal Public Space,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 49, no. 4 (1996), pp. 226-236.

12. Eric Hobsbawm. *Nations and Nationalism since 1790: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 131-62.

13. Nikolai Sokoloff. *The Federal Music Project: Second Preliminary Report Covering Its Scope and Activities During Its First Nine Months* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office).



Library of Congress

At the heart of the Federal Music Project were thousands of performances either free or at cheap “popular prices.” Classical Music was becoming “the people’s music.”

- 141 teaching projects
- 24 projects for copyists, arrangers, librarians, and binders . . .
- two vocal and instrumental soloists’ projects
- two tuners’ and Instrument repairers’ projects
- 11 miscellaneous (coordinating, administrative, and clerical) projects.

In developing the program, the first consideration of the WPA was whether there were needy, unemployed musicians of skill in a community where the music program was to be established. Then there were conferences with local sponsors before the project units were created. Once the project was up and running, a primary objective was to involve the American people and its public and private institutions at all levels. City councils, county and township boards;

school districts and boards of education, recreation groups, chambers of commerce, service clubs, fraternal orders, and veteran organizations all enlisted as cooperating sponsors. The National Federation of Music Clubs, with more than 5,000 member bodies in 48 states, was among the first to assume responsibilities of cooperating sponsorship.¹⁴

As the report also emphasized, the Federal Music Project engaged the leading musicians among America’s Classical artists. Again, from the project’s report to Congress:

Many among America’s most distinguished musicians promptly proffered their services in the new Federal Music Project. They saw in this emergency project not only a wise step to conserve the skills of musicians but the potential building, as well, of a new body of musical appreciation in the nation.

In addition to performing thousands of concerts, offering music classes, organizing the Composers Forum

14. Ibid.

Laboratory, and hosting music festivals, Sokoloff and his collaborators asserted that music was socially necessary, and that the project's purpose was to "build music into community life through group participation in enjoyable self-expression, and lay a foundation of cultural interest through music appreciation."

Sokoloff believed that Americans were at the beginning of a great cultural change, one that would replace their "frontier spirit" with a great desire for musical creativity. Until the New Deal, the cultural backwardness and ignorance of many Americans was justified under the myth of the "American pioneer spirit." Roosevelt and Hopkins gave Sokoloff and his collaborators the opportunity to change that.

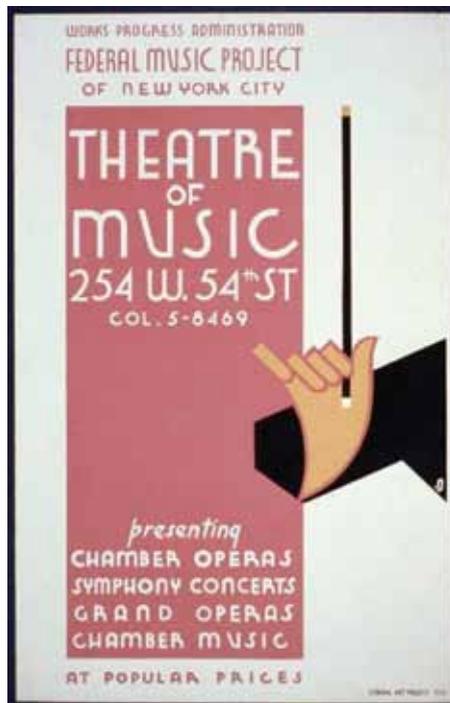
The project included a broad and ambitious music education program. It provided classes in rural areas and urban neighborhoods, providing music education in all public schools which did not have it. In 1939, an estimated 132,000 children and adults in 27 states received free instruction every week. A Composers Forum Laboratory afforded composers in several major cities the opportunity to hear their work performed with complete instrumentation.

The Index of American Composers paralleled the Design Index, cataloguing 5,500 works by 1,500 composers; WPA ensembles performed every one of these catalogued works. Finally, Music Project workers also served as copyists, arrangers, and librarians, expanding the availability of musical work.

Thirteen thousand professional musicians are giving free concerts for the education and pleasure of millions who never before have known such living music. Suddenly America is becoming musically articulate.

—Works Project Administration pamphlet, 1936

Space does not permit examination of the full scope of the performances provided *free* or at nominal cost, to



Library of Congress

A poster featuring the offerings of the Federal Music Project.

the American people. Here is just a small section of the Federal Music Project's *Second Preliminary Report Covering Its Scope and Activities During Its First Nine Months* to the Congress as authorized by Sokoloff, which is a partial listing from the preliminary report of the number of concerts and audiences from each state:

From the regional directors' reports spanning January 1 to June 3, audience figures for New Jersey alone stood at 2,036,406, exclusive of radio listeners. In New York City between October 10 and June 7, 1,094,642 individuals heard WPA music in concert, opera or other public performances. Attendance figures for California from January 16 to June 29, in 3,952 programs or performances, were

2,291,976, and in Illinois, exclusive of the thousands who heard the orchestras supplied for Federal Theater vaudeville or recreational services, 1,415,619 persons heard 1,947 concerts.

In Grand Rapids, Michigan, attendance for the first six months of the year is listed at 60,575, but this does not embrace the music appreciation and educational programs throughout the public and parochial school systems. By including these, listener figures aggregated 162,000 up to April.

Minnesota audiences between January 1 and June 29 heard 813 programs with attendance of 328,030. WPA concerts in Denver, Colorado Springs and Pueblo registered audience figures of 109,609. Connecticut, with its symphony orchestras in Hartford and Bridgeport, reported listeners numbering 159,347. While Missouri had only two concert project units which played to 3,201 persons in Kansas City, St. Louis and two CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) camps during January, attendance figures had risen until they numbered 44,636 in the six weeks period between May 1 and June 15. The WPA concert orchestra in Joplin began public performances in April, supplying about 11,000 listen-

ers of a grand total of 118,461 in the State for the first six months of the year.

Pennsylvania attendance figures, between February 1 and June 19, including 537,086 in Philadelphia alone, totaled 1,536,197, and this compilation was made before the Philadelphia 100-piece orchestra and its concert band of ninety men had participated in events in late June before estimated crowds of 50,000.

Concert units in six cities in Ohio were heard by 702,371; in Oregon listeners' figures stand at 80,180 which does not include outdoor concerts in parks; programs in Nebraska between March 1 and June 20, principally in Omaha and Lincoln, were heard by 103,905 persons. . . ."¹⁵

Music education, as with public performances, was also at the foundation of the Federal Music Project. Again, sections of the project report to Congress demonstrate this:

The program created by the Federal Music Project for the rehabilitation and retraining of the approximately 1,600 teachers of music now on its rolls has disclosed a vast and unexpected hunger for music among large groups of our people. The classes, over which these WPA teachers preside, enroll today literally hundreds of thousands of persons, divided about equally between adults and children.

These teachers are leading and directing classes for group instruction, both vocal and instrumental; they are presiding at community gatherings for talks and demonstrations on music appreciation, history and theory, and they are serving as conductors, instructors and coaches of choruses, bands and orchestras.

Before the Federal Music Project came into existence, it had been estimated that two-thirds of the 4,000,000 children in the 143,000 rural schools in America were without music instruction in any form. Educators had recognized for a long time that the old methods of teaching music in rural schools had not changed to keep pace with other educational trends. Through the teaching of music on an unprecedented scale, this changed under the WPA:

15. Ibid.

The activities of the WPA music teachers penetrated into the remotest rural communities. The teachers also were leading large classes in the congested areas of the great cities. In Minnesota, Massachusetts and Oklahoma, teaching programs were set up on state-wide bases.

Beyond the immediate benefits in community organization, social music activities entered into many phases of individual life. Their influence was found in the home, cementing family ties and deepening social interests. A more spacious form of self-expression was gained, and the cooperative spirit expanded in ensemble work. For the musician a new field of opportunity appeared. Scores of letters and statements in the press attested these facts.¹⁶

Musicians, teachers, and musical scholars across the nation were inspired and remoralized by the Federal Music Project. Dr. James A. Mursell, Associate Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University, wrote:

I regard the work which is being carried on in New York City by the Music Education Division of the WPA Music Project as a most significant enterprise in both its social and musical implications. A great new constituency has been discovered, eager for serious music study, but untouched . . . It is being established that opportunities for music study and musical activities are an important element in the well-being of large numbers of persons. This work is making a remarkable contribution about how music should be taught, and its place in the scheme of human values.¹⁷

In 1939, the Federal Music Project's budget was cut. This wasn't the only reduction in funding of New Deal programs; many other New Deal projects saw their funding reduced. Congressional support eroded in the late 1930s, and the budget bill that was passed in June 1939 reflected it.

Sokoloff had resigned the previous month amid debate over his and the project's preference for Classical music. The opposition came, in part, from within the

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.



National Archives

A class in violin instruction under the WPA Federal Music Project in New York City.

project itself, and was led by Charles Seeger, “folklorist” and father of “folk singer” Pete Seeger. (Charles Seeger’s actual role in the Federal Music Project remains unclear to this day.) In 1939, the Federal Music Project was renamed the WPA Music Program. It didn’t last long. Many state music projects came to an end with the ending of the WPA on June 30, 1943.

The opposition to the Federal Arts Project—and most New Deal programs—was led by Martin Dies (D-Tex.). Dies was one of the two founding Congressional members of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1938. The committee began to focus its attention on the Federal Theatre Project, which had become one of the New Deal’s most vulnerable creations.

The Federal Theatre Project had created a section called *The Living Newspaper* plays, which became the focal point of most of the controversy. Each play identified a social problem and called for specific solutions. According to Brooks Atkinson, a *New York Times* drama critic, writers were “to shake the living daylights out of a thousand books, reports, newspaper and magazine articles” to create documentaries based on current news stories. *Living Newspapers* were collective efforts in many ways. These plays became the obvious points of attack for the demagogues of Dies’ committee.

Despite its short life, Federal One and its projects had an enduring effect on the United States. Despite the

victories of demagogues like Martin Dies, the effects of the programs would last for decades to come. With the election of John F. Kennedy in 1960, the nation looked forward to another American Renaissance. Perhaps no President in American history, other than Franklin Roosevelt, celebrated the arts more visibly than John F. Kennedy. Kennedy invited Robert Frost to be the first poet in history to recite at a presidential inauguration—a harbinger of things to come.

A few short months later, Frost would be followed by a performance at the White House of one of the greatest musicians of the century, Pablo Casals. During the presidential campaign of 1960, Casals had become aware of the young candidate John Kennedy,

and in 1961 he accepted an invitation to perform at the White House as a symbol of his agreement with President Kennedy’s view that “we must regard artistic achievement and action as an integral part of our free society.”

This new Renaissance was horribly cut short. The next internationally renowned artist invited to perform at the White House was Elvis Presley, and thus began the descent of the nation, again, into a dark age. It is Lyndon LaRouche’s announcement of the Manhattan Project in October 2014, and its intervention into American life with events such as the recent performances of Handel’s *Messiah* in New York City, which will trigger another rebirth of American Classical culture.

Author’s Postscript

In 1935, the year that the Federal One was established, this author’s father had just turned twenty. Like so many children of immigrant parents, he was functionally illiterate, having been forced to drop out of school at age 11 to haul coal in his Manhattan neighborhood, “Hell’s Kitchen,” to help sustain his family. It was directly, in part, the activities and infrastructure created by Franklin Roosevelt’s Federal One which gave him the opportunity to become an artist, an architect, and a lover of great Classical art—not to mention a lover of the music of Verdi and the Italian school. —TA