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A New Deal for Welfare: Governor Fred Cone and the Florida State Welfare Board

by David Nelson

In May 1937, Florida suffered from the crippling effects of the Great Depression. The governor's office received letters daily from out-of-work laborers, single mothers, starving children, and elderly dependants pleading for assistance and state action. Yet, Florida's government rested upon a shallow tax base making the state's ten-year old welfare system almost entirely dependent upon federal aid. Only two years earlier, the federal government had demanded that the state re-vamp its State Board of Public Welfare, requiring an increased state financial commitment, stiffer welfare laws, and higher qualifications for welfare employees before millions of federal dollars would pour into the state through various New Deal programs.

Faced with the flood of welfare requests, newly inaugurated governor Fred Cone asked the state legislature in May 1937 to abolish the State Board of Public Welfare and replace it with a new State Welfare Board. Citing overblown salaries, mishandled funds, and "foreign" influence (northern-born appointees), Cone painted a picture of vast corruption and inexcusable government waste. His plan called for a scaled-down, economically-minded board run in a business-like manner. For many, however, Cone's reorganization plan jeopardized millions in federal grants and threatened the entire New Deal program in Florida.

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Yet the plan was business as usual for Cone, who remembered days when the state government offered only limited welfare to the “deserving poor” and shunned overt federal involvement in state affairs. The new federal welfare programs, with their armies of social workers and seemingly limitless funds threatened the political, racial, and social boundaries that Cone had known in Florida. Rather than reject the New Deal, however, Cone realized the potential benefits that accompanied federal monies. Realizing, as did so many state governors of the 1930s, that New Deal programs offered much in the way of patronage, he saw a chance to increase his gubernatorial power by controlling employees who doled out Florida’s federal dollars. Maintaining a *laissez-faire*, conservative government while strengthening Florida’s traditionally weak governor’s office became interdependent goals in Cone’s vision. Once inaugurated, Cone wasted little time acting upon that vision.

When Fred Cone was elected to office in November 1936, Florida governors were little more than public spokesmen for the state. Their staffs consisted of an assistant executive, a few secretaries, a receptionist, and a switchboard operator.¹ Kept weak by the 1885 state constitution—a reaction to the powerful executive office of the Reconstruction-era 1868 constitution—gubernatorial power faced several restrictions.² Principal among them was the seven-member elected cabinet system comprised of the governor, comptroller, attorney general, superintendent of education, treasurer, commissioner of agriculture, and the secretary of state. The executive cabinet decided on a myriad of issues, and in various combinations ruled over countless boards and commissions.³ While many boards answered to individual cabinet members, others answered to the legislature, bypassing the governor altogether. An organizational chart for the state government of the 1930s was a confusing, de-centralized mesh of competing boards, commissions, departments, and committees.

1. James Dunn, “The New Deal and Florida Politics,” (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1971), 91.
2. See David R. Colburn and Richard K. Scher, *Florida Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1980) for a discussion on the 1885 constitution and its effect on governors.
3. In 1937, the executive officers were Comptroller J. M. Lee, Attorney General Cary D. Landis, Superintendent Colin English, Treasurer William Knott, Commissioner Nathan Mayo, and Secretary R. A. Gray.

In addition, Florida's chief executives were limited to one four-year term, while cabinet members could be re-elected without limits.⁴ As a result, cabinet members answered to their constituents, not the governor. When in 1948, southern political analyst V. O. Key referred to Florida's politics as "every man for himself" (a reference to the state's divisive political climate) he very well could have also been describing Florida's executive cabinet system.⁵

Aside from a one-in-seven vote in the cabinet, Florida's gubernatorial power rested on three primary tools: veto, persuasion, and patronage.⁶ By simply refusing to sign off on legislation, a governor could often irreparably disrupt tenuous and fragile political alliances. A governor was the public face of government, a figure to whom the press and the public listened and paid attention. Opportunities to persuade and shape public opinion were valuable assets. A governor used the bully pulpit to pressure the cabinet as well as the legislature (always eager to remain in their constituents' good graces) to follow his lead. A governor appointed hundreds of directors, commissioners, officers, and low-level bureaucrats each year. Nearly two-thirds of his time in office was spent fielding requests for jobs and choosing state officials. Elected officials knew that constituents were kept happy through jobs and political opportunities, and since the governors had the power of appointment, such men became dependent upon the governor's wishes. By the 1930s, a new set of federal programs offered governors a plethora of new appointees and increased opportunities to wield power.

Programs such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and the National Youth Administration (NYA) offered relief to the unemployed, while providing states and local communities with much-needed funds and infrastructure. Created and funded by the federal government, most of these relief programs were staffed and administered on the local level. In Florida, Governor Dave Sholtz (1933-1937) implemented the state version of the New Deal. Originally from New York, Sholtz

4. Only one governor, William Bloxham, served more than one term in 1880 and 1896.

5. V. O. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York, 1948), 82.

6. David Colburn and Lance DeHaven-Smith, *Government in the Sunshine State* (Gainesville, Fla., 1999), 90-91.

built his administration upon the appearances of political and personal friendship with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Although the relief programs proved popular, Sholtz's administration ended in a cloud of controversy, as charges of bribery and corruption by his gaming and racing commissions circulated. Still, Sholtz had gained enough power and political favors through his New Deal appointments to stage a U.S. senatorial campaign, albeit an unsuccessful one.

When Cone entered office, the New Deal was in full force. While many citizens had specific complaints about the welfare program in Florida, and many were fed up with former Governor Sholtz and the corruption that arose from his administration, most did not lose faith in the New Deal. As one politician described it, they were simply "disgusted with the way Sholtz ran it."⁷

Rather, many Floridians considered the New Deal and its popular leader, President Roosevelt, godsend. In nearly every oral history conducted with Florida residents of the 1930s, their praise for Roosevelt and the New Deal was unwavering. CCC veteran Paul DiGiralomo of Dade County said of FDR: "He was a great man," and his parents "thought he was God."⁸ Another CCC vet, George LeCouris of Tarpon Springs proclaimed the New Deal "the salvation of the country,"⁹ Former citrus sharecropper James Keene remembered his mother "just loved that man [Roosevelt]."¹⁰ Fatherless Hillary Cowart who survived on WPA surplus commodities and later by working for the CCC, said of his mother that she "could not think but one thing, that [Roosevelt] was a wonderful person."¹¹ Interview after interview contain similar sentiments.¹² When Florida citizens voted for Cone, they were voting against Sholtz and corruption, not against the New Deal.

7. William A. Shands Oral History (OH), interview by Dr. Samuel Proctor, 1 March 1971, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program (SPOHP), University of Florida, 68.
8. Interview with Paul DiGiralomo by Dave Nelson, 11 November 2002, original transcript housed at Reichelt Oral History Program (ROHP), Florida State University, 6.
9. Interview with George LeCouris by Dave Nelson, 11 November 2003, ROHP, 3.
10. Interview with James Keene by Dr. Julian Pleasant, 5 May 1998, SPOHP, 5.
11. Interview with Hillary Cowart by Dr. Julian Pleasant, 10 November 1998, SPOHP, 5.
12. Harry Bush OH, 3, Carrol F. Burnette OH, 2, and Fred White OH, 5, all interviewed by Dr. Julian Pleasants, SPOHP.

Yet, Cone was no friend of the New Deal. At sixty-five, he adhered to an earlier, more conservative view of government. (One former chief executive said of Cone that “he was simply too old to be governor.”)¹³ Nevertheless, the new governor realized that times had changed and that the public demanded a more involved and activist state government. Cone saw that not only did the expanded federal welfare offer new political opportunities for state leaders, but that failing to gain access to this avenue of political power would mean surrendering any chance to curb the effects and limit the reach of the New Deal.

Born in 1871 in the North Florida community of Benton, Columbia County, an area which columnist Allen Morris called the “hog and hominy” part of Florida, Cone’s earliest experiences were shaped by memories of Reconstruction.¹⁴ In fact, one of Cone’s earliest public acts occurred when he shot, but did not kill, a Republican. While visiting his uncle, Charles Cone, young Fred heard that a former Union soldier and staunch Republican—C. L. Morrison—was about to be named postmaster of White Springs. Taking matters into his own hands, Cone shot Morrison one night. The resulting wound proved painful but not life threatening. Fred’s uncle paid Morrison’s medical bills and convinced the Unionist to withhold pressing charges. Ironically, soon thereafter, Charles Cone had Morrison arrested on charges of concealing a felony: Fred Cone’s attempt to murder Morrison! At the trial, the young Cone was the primary witness, and Morrison was convicted.¹⁵

With an antebellum state senator as his father, Cone kept his eye towards politics. After attending Jasper Normal College and the Florida Agricultural College, he passed the bar exam in 1892 without obtaining his law degree.¹⁶ A lifelong Democrat, Cone became mayor of his hometown, Lake City, three times.¹⁷ Then, in 1907, he was elected to the Florida Senate,¹⁸ and served as

13. Spessard Holland quoted in Dunn, “The New Deal and Florida Politics,” 262.

14. Allen Morris, 19 December 1940, “Cracker Politics files,” Volume one, Florida Collection, Florida State Library. All the Allen Morris *Cracker Politics* column clippings in this file were copied from the *Miami Herald*.

15. For the full story, see Jerrell Shofner, “The White Springs Post Office Caper,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 56 (January 1978): 341-344.

16. Colburn and Scher, *Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century*, 40.

17. *Lake City Reporter*, 30 July 1948.

18. *Ibid.*

senate president in the 1911 session. During his six-year stint, Cone's biggest achievement was his sponsorship of a bill to provide pensions to Florida's Confederate veterans. Although he moved into banking following his senatorial service, Cone remained active in state politics, serving as a delegate at three national Democratic conventions.¹⁹ In 1928, the *Ocala Banner* editorialized that Cone "made himself famous (or infamous) by refusing to serve on the committee to ratify [Catholic presidential candidate Al] Smith of his nomination."²⁰

Although out of the public eye for over twenty years, Cone was asked to run for governor in 1936 by opponents of gubernatorial candidate and fellow Democrat Raleigh Petteway.²¹ In a field of fourteen candidates, Cone's low key image, his untainted service in the senate, and his rural roots contrasted with Sholtz's urban manners and New York upbringing.²² As former state senator William Shands explained, "you go from one extreme to another as a rule politically."²³ This truism proved especially crucial to Petteway's chances: popularly, he was perceived to be privately backed by Sholtz.

In the solid Democratic South, the primary in effect chose state officers. With his slogan "lower the budget to balance taxes instead of raising taxes to balance the budget," Cone won a run-off primary in a close race.²⁴ The majority of his support came from politically powerful North Florida.²⁵ In the November election, Cone received over 80% of the vote, becoming Florida's oldest and crassest chief executive. Senator William A. Shands called him an "ultra-conservative."²⁶ The *Ocala Banner* described him as "cracker from head to toe."²⁷ Armed with a booming voice and an

19. Jon Evans, "Florida Politics in the Shadow of War: The 1940 Governor's Race," (M.A. thesis, Florida State University, 2000), 16; William T. Cash, *A History of the Democratic Party in Florida* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1936), 194.

20. *Ocala Banner*, 29 June 1928.

21. Hank Drane, *Hank Drane's Historic Governors: Their Impact on the Sunshine State* (Ocala, Fla., 1994), 111.

22. Key, *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, 88; Colburn and Scher, *Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century*, 71.

23. William A. Shands OH, 68, SPOHP.

24. Colburn and Scher, *Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century*, 72.

25. In the November election, Cone received over 80% of the vote. The Republican candidate was E. E. Calloway. Colburn and Scher, *Gubernatorial Politics in the Twentieth Century*, 136.

26. William A. Shands OH, 66, SPOHP.

27. *Ocala Banner*, 11 February 1937; clipping found in Box 1, Fred Cone Miscellaneous files, 1936-1948, Florida State Archives (FSA), Tallahassee, Florida.

imposing figure, Cone walked the Capitol barefoot and kept an oft-used spittoon next to his desk.²⁸ His manners were as coarse as his language was blunt. Once during a heated exchange at a weekly executive cabinet meeting in the Capitol, Cone shoved a cabinet member back into his chair.²⁹

Some accused Cone of having no overall plan or agenda during his term. Former Florida governor and U.S. senator Spessard Holland once described Cone as “leaderless. . . [and a man] who didn’t know what he was doing.”³⁰ Yet, Cone ran on a plank of small government, no new taxes, and “Florida labor at living wages for all public works”—a none too subtle reference to the New Deal with its high number of non-Florida born administrators.³¹ And, as his actions in office proved, Cone indeed had an agenda.

For attentive New Deal supporters, Cone’s inauguration speech of January 5, 1937, proved ominous. Although he avoided the demagogic rhetoric common among other southern critics of the New Deal, Cone called for a return to business-minded, smaller government. Although he named only the State Road Department directly, he spoke of smaller budgets and abolishing unneeded agencies and noted the prevalence of out-of-state workers in public works programs—all of which should have clued observers to the future attack on the state’s welfare system.³²

Florida’s first welfare law, passed in 1828, allowed judges to help “pauper” children through the use of apprenticeships. At the age of twenty-one, orphans received a blanket, \$100, and a horse.³³ That law was altered in 1866 to require orphans to be taught a trade during their apprenticeships. Ten years later, Florida started the Florida Asylum for Indigent Lunatics, and nine years after that, the state-run School for the Deaf and Blind opened in St. Augustine.³⁴ That same year, 1885, Florida re-wrote its

28. Walter Howard, “Vigilante Justice: Extra Legal Executions in Florida, 1930-1940” (Ph.D. diss., Florida State University, 1987), 234.

29. *Ibid.*, 234, fn. 6.

30. Quoted in Dunn, “The New Deal and Florida Politics,” 262.

31. *Cracker Politics*, 19 December 1940.

32. For a full transcription of Governor Cone’s inauguration address, see fill “Addresses, 1937,” Box 2, Governor Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

33. Winson Doyle, et al. *The Government and Administration of Florida* (New York, 1954), 231.

34. *Ibid.*



Fred Cone's Inauguration, with Secretary of State R. A. Gray, January 1937. *Florida State Archives*

constitution. Its only welfare provision was its requirement that counties provide "inhabitants who by reason of age, infirmity or misfortune may have claims upon the aid and sympathy of society."³⁵ This was the start of Florida's poor farms. Beyond this, however, the Florida Constitution forbade any direct relief by the state.

In 1927, in response to the economically devastating 1926 hurricane that struck South Florida and ended the 1920s Florida land boom, destroyed much of that year's citrus crop and left thousands homeless, the state legislature created the State Board of Public Welfare to oversee city, county, and private relief agencies.³⁶ The new board offered no relief on its own. Instead, it inspected all public/private relief agencies, oversaw state parolees, licensed maternity houses and child-boarding homes, requested reports

35. Ibid, R.A. Gray, *The Government of Florida* (Philadelphia, Penn., 1941), 125.

36. The 1926 hurricane would be followed two years later by another equally destructive hurricane. For more on these two hurricanes, see Jay Barnes, *Florida's Hurricane History* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Eliot Kleinberg, *Killer 'cane: The Great Florida Hurricane of 1928* (New York, 2003); John Williams, *Florida Hurricanes and Tropical Storms, 1871-2001* (Gainesville, Fla., 2002).

from such agencies, and encouraged county-led welfare.³⁷ As Florida historian Charlton Teabeau noted, under-funded and under-staffed even in economically flush times, the board was wholly inadequate for handling the needs created by the Great Depression.³⁸

Changes came with the dual inaugurations of Governor Dave Sholtz and President Franklin Roosevelt in 1933 and the beginning of the New Deal in Florida. In his first message to the state legislature, Sholtz proclaimed, "President Roosevelt has boldly shown the way to the nation."³⁹ Soon, programs such as the CCC, Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), Civil Works Administration (CWA), and PWA operated in Florida. Then, in 1935, the federal government accused Florida of offering an inadequate financial commitment to its relief program. Harry Hopkins, Roosevelt's chief social worker, always skeptical of Sholtz, ordered all welfare offices to relocate from Tallahassee to Jacksonville, safely out of the governor's sphere of influence. Under the threat of losing millions in federal funds, the state legislature revamped the State Board of Public Welfare, renaming it the State Board of Social Welfare, and giving it more power in handling state relief efforts. While many balked at this increase in power, the Florida Health and Welfare Council—a state-wide organization comprised of state and private social workers—pointed out that "the power . . . given to the Florida Board is found in most of the progressive states of the North. It is impossible to have a State Board that can prove at all effective along welfare lines without granting it a good bit of authority."⁴⁰ Twelve districts were created, each with its own welfare board. The state board operated with an annual budget of \$100,000 and a mandate to handle both state-sponsored relief and administer the federal work relief programs through a parallel organization called the Florida Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Serving as the head of these operations was the man that Harry Hopkins personally approved, Commissioner of Welfare Conrad Van Hyning.

37. "State Board of Public Welfare First Annual Report, 1927-1929," State Welfare Board files, p.1, FSA.

38. Tebeau, *The History of Florida* (Miami, Fla., 1971).

39. Merlin Cox, "Dave Sholtz: New Deal Governor of Florida," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 43 (October 1964): 148.

40. File "State Board of Social Welfare, 1935-1937," Box 1, Florida Health and Welfare Council Records, 1921-1973, FSA.

Born in Akron, Ohio, in 1900, Van Hyning was schooled in social work at the University of Akron. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1922, he moved to New York as a caseworker for the Charity Organization Society. After marrying a fellow social worker, Van Hyning became Assistant Director of the New York State Emergency Relief Administration under then Governor Franklin Roosevelt.⁴¹ Through his New York contacts, Sholtz soon learned of Van Hyning's work and asked him to lead Florida's Emergency Relief Administration and serve as Florida's Welfare Commissioner. Soon after his arrival, however, Van Hyning found himself in charge of a system with no professionally trained social workers. In the meantime, he had to hire out-of-state workers to meet immediate needs.⁴²

As one might expect, most of those workers were from Ohio and New York. While qualified and professionally-trained, their presence caused quite a stir throughout Florida's political circles. As Jack Horne—Florida's CCC selection agent, who would lead a one-man letter-writing campaign against Cone's changes to the state's welfare system, explained to federal authorities in June 1937: "Even though Florida spends millions of dollars annually to advertise its attributes and encourage out-of-state people to come here and spend their money, Floridians resent outsiders on public payrolls."⁴³ Van Hyning and his fellow social workers were "foreigners" in the eyes of many in Florida's government.

In October 1936, Van Hyning and other members of the State Board of Social Welfare created the Merit System.⁴⁴ Demanded the previous year by the federal authorities as a precondition to receiving federal funds, the program served as a formalized process of hiring social workers aimed at preventing patronage.

41. Van Hyning's wife, Florella Van Hyning, died 13 January 1937. *The Florida Social Welfare Review* 2 (February 1937): 2.

42. Biographical background on Van Hyning came from Cash, *A History of the Democratic Party in Florida*, 243-4; Personal communication with Conrad's relative Amy Van Hyning, 20 January 2003. Copy of email in author's possession.

43. Jack Horne to Dean Snyder, Administrative Assistant, Office of the Secretary of Labor, file: "Florida, 1937," 17 June 1937, Entry 29, Correspondence with State Selection Officers, RG 35, NARA.

44. 9 October 1936, State Merit Council minutes, Box 1, State Merit Council, FSA.

Over the next two months, the council met and designed a hiring procedure based upon skill and qualifications. Political connections and personal contacts were not taken into account. Each candidate faced a three-part process: a personal interview, a written exam, and an evaluation of relief experience and social welfare training.⁴⁵ Points were assigned to each of the three sections, and candidates with the highest points were hired.⁴⁶ The council explained that it was meant to be “a scientific, measuring device for determining ability [for] specialized work such as the administration of welfare.”⁴⁷ Not surprisingly, as Jack Horne explained, “patronage hungry politicians object[ed] to this system.”⁴⁸

Cone made replacing the current welfare board with his own handpicked board a top priority. Realizing that if he controlled the State Board of Social Welfare he would also control the State Merit System, and therefore control who was hired and fired, Cone used all three tools at his disposal—veto, public persuasion, and patronage—to take control. When Cone took office, however, most in the social welfare field were unsure how he felt towards relief. Horne wrote that most social workers knew Cone “favored the enactment of old age pension legislation,”⁴⁹ a state version of social security required by a constitutional amendment that Floridians passed in November 1936.

In January and February 1937, Van Hyning and the State Board of Social Welfare made numerous unsuccessful attempts to meet with the governor to discuss the state’s welfare efforts.⁵⁰ For social workers, his delay may have seemed like innocuous carelessness or simply a sign that the governor’s preoccupations lay elsewhere. Not until April 1937 did Cone make his intentions clear when he backed a legislative investigation of the State Board of Social Welfare to root out financial corruption. Using the

45. 9 November 1936, State Merit Council minutes, Box 1, State Merit Council, FSA.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Jack Horne to Dean Snyder, Administrative Assistant, Office of the Secretary of Labor, file: “Florida, 1937,” 17 June 1937, Entry 29, Correspondence with State Selection Officers, RG 35, NARA.

49. Ibid.

50. Van Hyning to Cone, 5 January 1937; 26 January 1937; 1 February 1937; 11 February 1937; James Donn, Chairman of State Board of Social Welfare to Cone 24 February 1937; 4 March 1937, File “Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937,” Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

amendment requiring old age pensions as his opening wedge, Cone claimed there were insufficient funds to meet pension needs and justified abolishing the board by blaming the high cost of state welfare.

Cone had planned his move for months. First, he appointed his friend William Wainwright to the State Audit Board in January 1937. The governor instructed State Auditor Bryan Willis to "see that he [Wainwright] represents me. . . I want you to let him have as many of the state auditors that Mr. Wainwright desires to assist him."⁵¹ One of Wainwright's first jobs was to begin investigating the State Board of Social Welfare. Within a month, Wainwright had replaced Willis as Florida's state auditor.⁵²

Cone then ordered background checks on all welfare employees. In his archived papers is a list of State Board of Social Welfare employees, including information about their places of origin, monthly salaries, where their families lived, what state tags they had on their cars, where they previously worked, and notations on which employees were Jewish.⁵³ Welfare Commissioner Van Hyning, for example, received the following notation: "he refuses to consider for positions applicants with endorsements from Florida politicians."⁵⁴

With his homework complete, Cone prepared to go public. In late April 1937, the governor sent a message to the state legislature. "The crying need of our state today," he began, "as I see it, is economy and business-like management of our finances."⁵⁵ While

51. Cone to State Auditor Bryan Willis, 9 January 1937, File: "Auditor, State 1937," Box 5, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

52. Cone to Midyett-Moor Insurance Agency, 22 August 1939. In this letter, Cone was re-appointing Wainwright. He mentions that Wainwright was made state auditor on 26 February 1937. See also Representative Charley Johns to Cone, 27 February 1937; Mack H. Padgett to Cone, 12 March 1937 File: "Auditor, State 1939," Box 5, Fred Cone Papers, FSA. Unfortunately no copies of this audit exist. In the files of the State Auditor at the Florida State Archives, there are only five audits from the 1930s: University of Florida, FAMU, St. Augustine School for the Deaf and Blind, Florida State College for Women, and Stae Secretary R.A. Gray in 1938. Box 1, State Auditor files, FSA.

53. See untitled document in file: "Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937," Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA. Several employees were paid between \$250 and \$300 per month. Van Hyning was paid \$502.19. This figure was comparable to other state agency heads.

54. Ibid.

55. *Message of Fred P. Cone, Governor of Florida, to the Florida Legislature, Session of 1937* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1937), 3. A copy of the message can be found in Fred Cone's papers, file: "Addresses, 1937," Box 2, S 368, FSA.

maintaining that “all selfish, personal, and political considerations must be cast aside,” Cone urged that “all boards and commissions that have been created in the past should be closely analyzed and considered, and those that are not necessary. . . should be abolished.”⁵⁶ His rationale, of course, was the recently passed old-age pension amendment.⁵⁷ However, Cone avoided mentioning the popular State Board of Social Welfare directly; it was too soon. To drive home his point of pending financial crisis, Cone asked the legislature to approve a budget at 1935 levels.⁵⁸ As one historian described it, Cone was “cutting the budget to the bone, then scraping the bone.”⁵⁹ Even so, the governor’s message created a political climate more conducive to his plans.

Within days, Cone’s ally Senator William H. Mapoles of Crestview asked for and received funding to investigate the State Board of Social Welfare.⁶⁰ Aiding him were two recently fired FERA employees, T. J. Fenn and Virgil Riley, and two state auditors.⁶¹ Charged with exploring “rumors” of “excessive expenditures and misadministration of its affairs,” the investigation focused on the Board’s high salaries and operating expenses, sparking a major public relations battle that played out across the front pages of the state’s major newspapers.⁶² Mapoles called the Board “one of the dirtiest, nastiest things you’ve ever seen,”⁶³ and claimed that Van Hynning was paid \$8000 a year. The actual figure was \$6000. A fellow Panhandle senator, Pensacola’s Phillip Beall, invoked Reconstruction-era Yankee interventionist imagery as he remarked that the government should “prevent social workers from coming into our homes and telling the mothers they don’t know how to raise their own children.”⁶⁴ Upon hearing news of the probe’s preliminary findings, Cone declared the Board “a waste of money and an awful expense. I haven’t a clue where the money is going.”⁶⁵

56. *Message of Fred Cone*, 3-4, 5.

57. *Ibid.*, 5.

58. *Ibid.*; *Tallahassee Democrat*, 5 May 1937; *Tampa Tribune*, 16 May 1937.

59. Drane, *Hank Drane’s Historic Governors*, 111.

60. *Tallahassee Democrat*, 7 May 1937; *Tampa Tribune*, 12 May 1937.

61. *Ibid.*, 14 and 18 May 1937.

62. *Ibid.*, 7 May 1937.

63. *Ibid.*, 20 May 1937.

64. *Ibid.*, 16 May 1937.

65. *Ibid.*, 20 May 1937.

The accusations flabbergasted social workers. The district welfare board in Tampa asserted that its affairs were performed in an "honest, non-political, and efficient" manner.⁶⁶ Sue Mahorn, director of the historical section of the state WPA and one of Cone's few Welfare Board-employed friends, begged the governor to keep Van Hyning.⁶⁷ State Board of Social Welfare director James Donn wrote daily letters to the governor and newspapers explaining the Board's case. Van Hyning publicly called the probe "prejudiced and inaccurate."⁶⁸

One of the most politically damaging accusations was that large amounts of funds were spent administering the old-age pension plan. According to the panel, expenditures ran as high as \$3.20 for every \$11 in pensions.⁶⁹ From January to April alone, the board spent well over \$100,000. In response, Van Hyning explained that the findings ignored the Board's other services—certifying WPA participants, enrolling CCC and NYA recruits, and providing surplus commodities—by lumping all expenses under "old-age pensions." The actual cost, he argued was \$1.08 for every \$11 distributed.⁷⁰

Timed to coincide with the senate probe, Representative Bob Sikes of Crestview proposed a bill to abolish the current State Board of Social Welfare and replace it with a new State Welfare Board.⁷¹ All involved recognized the bill as a product of Cone's administration. The bill called for a state board, twelve district boards, and a commissioner, all to be appointed by the governor. Under the State Board of Social Welfare, only the state board was appointed by the governor for staggered five-year terms, and that board, in turn, chose commissioners and members for the twelve district boards. The proposed bill would replace all present members (including Commissioner Van Hyning), implement a five-year residency requirement for all State Welfare Board employees, and place a salary cap on board members at \$250 per month and \$6000 per year for the commissioner.⁷² The bill also provided no money

66. *Tampa Tribune*, 25 May 1937.

67. Mahorn to Cone, 1 April 1937, File: "Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937," Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

68. *Tallahassee Democrat*, 21 May 1937.

69. *Ibid.*

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Florida Times Union*, 1 May 1937.

72. *Tallahassee Democrat*, 16 May 1937.



Governor Fred Cone in his Capitol office in 1937. *Florida State Archives*

for aid to dependent children or the blind. Perhaps, because of his earlier political success with Civil War pensions while a state senator, Cone banked his gubernatorial success on old-age pensions.

In his first months as governor, Cone had cultivated a reputation for rewarding his supporters and punishing his opponents. He appointed his Lake City law partner, Roy Chapman to the State Supreme Court. His brother Branch, a small-scale lawyer from Macclenny, was his executive secretary.⁷³ Known as a “joker” who was often found fishing in the Gulf, Branch handled much of Cone’s political networking.⁷⁴ Indeed, Senator William Shands of Gainesville referred to him as Cone’s “patronage man.”⁷⁵ The Cone brothers regularly checked to see who supported them before making appointments, and the governor once remarked about a candidate for the State Audit Board, “It is my information that Mr. Coleman did not support me, and I want proof that he did before I do anything about it.”⁷⁶

There is reason to believe that Representative Sikes of Okaloosa County proposed the State Welfare Board bill in order to obtain help on Santa Rosa Island. A barrier island off the panhandle coast, Santa Rosa Island had been promised by Escambia County officials to the Florida Park Service in 1935. By 1937, however, the National Park Service was considering buying the sandy isle for use as a national park. Business and real estate leaders knew that a national park was much more profitable than any mere state park, and they fought the state for control of the island. That summer Cone, in a rare pro-federal move, supported the National Park Service efforts.⁷⁷ Considering that Sikes was privately critical of the new welfare board within weeks of its inception, it seems likely he proposed the bill to gain the governor’s favor.⁷⁸ The bottom line was that Cone reciprocated political favors, and there would be plenty of rewards if his bill passed.

As legislative debate over the proposed bill began, two central issues emerged. One, voiced by Senator Spessard Holland of

73. Drane, *Drane’s Historic Governors*, 108; *Cracker Politics*, 28 July 1940. On Branch, Allen Morris wrote that he did not possess much in the way of politicking. “If he has such a grasp, Branch has yet to demonstrate it.”

74. *Cracker Politics*, 28 July 1940.

75. William A. Shands Oral History, 69.

76. Cone to J. E. Batts, 19 March 1937, File: “Auditor, State 1937,” Box 5, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

77. For an account of the struggles over Santa Rosa Island, see Dave Nelson, “Relief Recreation: The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Florida Park Service, 1933-1942” (MA thesis, Florida State University, 2002), 123-125.

78. Sikes to Cone, 27 July 1937, File: “Welfare, Social—Misc., 1937,” Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

Bartow, centered on the limited amount of aid budgeted in the proposal. He disapproved of any new board, fearing that it would endanger the flow of federal aid into Florida.⁷⁹ Holland argued that under the federal demands of 1935, if Florida decreased its financial commitments to relief, the U.S. government might cease its programs in the state. Cone had even threatened to remove the Board's ability to administer federal monies at one point.⁸⁰ Holland proposed amendments ridding the bill of residency requirements and ensuring child and blind aid.⁸¹

The other issue was the removal of Commissioner Van Hyning. It was clear that above all, Cone wanted Van Hyning removed, replaced by a commissioner of his choosing. Many thought that if this was accomplished, Cone would back away from his other threats. Holland and others struck a deal with Cone that if Van Hyning and two board members voluntarily resigned, then the hiring conditions would be removed, other employees would stay, and the full state relief would be restored. The deal was announced on 27 May 1937.⁸²

Yet by the end of May, the month-long welfare board probe had already made its impact on public opinion. Cone received many letters from people angry at the apparent waste of relief funds.⁸³ Van Hyning and the board were branded in the public's eye as both power-and-money-hungry. Since the legislative session was coming to an end, and time was short, Cone decided to use his most potent weapon, threatening to veto the welfare bill unless all board members resigned, and salary caps and residency requirements remained.⁸⁴ Holland and others accused the governor of reneging on his widely reported deal, but on 31 May the legislature caved in and gave Cone the power to choose his own board.⁸⁵ The State Board of Social Welfare would be abolished on 30 June, and

79. *Florida Times Union*, 25 and 28 May 1937; *Tallahassee Democrat*, 25 May 1937.

80. *Tallahassee Democrat*, 24 May 1937.

81. *Ibid.*, 16 and 28 May 1937.

82. *Ibid.*, 27 and 28 May 1937; *Florida Times Union*, 27 May 1937; *Tampa Tribune*, 29 May 1937.

83. These letters included Mrs. M.V. Day to Cone, 21 May 1937; W.S. McIntyre to Cone, 24 May 1937; "Friend" to Cone, 31 May 1937, File: "Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937," Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

84. *Tallahassee Democrat*, 28 May 1937.

85. *Florida Times Union*, 1 June 1937; *Tampa Tribune*, 1 June 1937; Senator Charley Johns of Starke called the bill "measley." See also *Laws of Florida* (Tallahassee, Fla., 1937), 1437-1452.

the new State Welfare Board would take over on 1 July 1937. One House member remarked upon the bill's passing: "The governor has dictated the bill we have just passed. I warn you we have set up the biggest political football the State of Florida has ever known."⁸⁶

In the end, the new board had essentially the same function and structure as the previous one.⁸⁷ There were still twelve districts, each with their own local boards. The state board handled dependent children, blind, and old-age assistance, as well as administering the federal aid programs. The only difference, aside from its name, was that Cone controlled its membership. The board served at his pleasure, and he could replace the members at any time.⁸⁸

Cone wasted little time in choosing his new board. On 15 June, he sent telegrams to seven potential members for the new State Welfare Board officially asking for their service.⁸⁹ He then chose a new welfare commissioner—Clayton C. Codrington, editor of the *Lake City Reporter* and Cone's gubernatorial campaign manager.⁹⁰ Although he met the five-year residency requirement, Codrington was originally from Cleveland, Ohio, and was educated in New York City; he received \$500 a month, only two dollars and 18 cents less than Van Hyning.⁹¹

Even before Codrington took office, he and Cone corresponded about who needed to be "taken care of."⁹² For instance, Cone asked that Rose Printing of Tallahassee, a company that had "contributed to my campaign both in printing and in money," receive "a goodly portion" of the Board's printing jobs.⁹³ The two

86. *Florida Times Union*, 3 June 1937.

87. Cone to L.P. Williams, 17 June 1937, File: "Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937," Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

88. *Florida Times Union*, 3 June 1937.

89. Cone to Clyde Taylor, George Shannon, T.T. Boozer, Ivy Futch, J.V. Roberts, W.H. Milton, and W. L. Cathorn, 15 June 1937, File: "Welfare, Social—Misc. 1937," Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

90. Cone to James Farley, 22 June 1937; n.d. clipping from *The Okaloosa* found in File: "Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937," Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

91. Pleasant Daniel Gold, *History of Volusia County* (Deland, Fla., 1927), 394; Homer Moyer, ed., *Who's Who and What to See in Florida* (St. Petersburg, Fla., 1935), 71; 1 July 1937, File: "Minutes, 1937," Box 1, State Welfare Board Minutes.

92. Use of the term "taken care of" can be found in Codrington to Cone, 25 June 1937, File: "Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937," Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, S 368, FSA.

93. Cone to Codrington, 29 June 1937 File: "Welfare, Social—Misc. 1937," Box 101, Fred Cone Papers.

men used a secret code to disguise much of their plans from unwanted readers.⁹⁴

While Codrington immediately lowered qualifications guiding the State Merit System, the State Welfare Board still faced a labor pool lacking even the basic skills to perform the job.⁹⁵ As Codrington explained, they were “locked up” in regards to department heads.⁹⁶ “We are ‘hog-tied’ as to the State Welfare personnel,” he wrote on his first day on the job, “as to the national requirements, for they call for trained workers.”⁹⁷ The new chairman of the State Welfare Board, Clyde Taylor, wrote Branch Cone in July that “there are some from this old crowd that I personally would like to see kept on indefinitely because they are very efficient. . . Codrington agrees with me 100%.”⁹⁸

As the dust settled, many Floridians realized they had witnessed a political coup and a raw bid for power. Cone’s initial shock over the lack of native Floridians among the social workers seemingly dissipated once the new welfare board was created, as his appointment of Ohioan Codrington demonstrated. It was not so much the nativity of employees that concerned Cone as their allegiance to his view of laissez-faire state government and minimal federal involvement. Yet, in his expansion of the control over New Deal monies, Cone overestimated the public’s desire to keep the program in Floridians’ hand. Indeed, when CCC camps and WPA payments were temporarily stalled in July and August, many of Cone’s supporters bolted. Sensing this potential turn in public opinion, departing members of the State Board of Social Welfare added a scathing criticism of Cone and his cronies at their last meeting in June 1937: “Man by nature is cruel—this is the only answer I can find to the debased and unwarranted charges made by Senator Mapoles and others who sought by a series of political trickeries to embarrass the Board and the continuance of

94. Although this code was mentioned in one letter, how it worked was never disclosed in any writing that now survives.

95. For the changes to the State Merit System, see minutes for 21 July 1937, File: “Minutes, 1937,” Box 1, State Merit Council, FSA.

96. Codrington to Cone, 29 June 1937, File: “Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937,” Box 101, Fred Cone Papers, FSA.

97. Codrington to Cone, 1 July 1937, File: “Welfare, Social-Misc. 1937,” Box 101, Fred Cone Papers.

98. Chairman Clyde Taylor to Cone, 27 July 1937, File: “Welfare, Social—Misc. 1937,” Box 101, Fred Cone Papers.

a non-political program. . . political immorality can never be successfully substituted for a sound business administration."⁹⁹

Cone accomplished his immediate goals: he gained control over the welfare board, its commissioner, and the state's merit system. Yet, it is difficult for historians to gauge Cone's rewards in reorganizing the board because so many political deals were handled in code, by telephone, or over a handshake. By the time the minutes were recorded and official letters sent, the deals had long been struck.

Over the years, many historians have gauged governors' successes by their post-gubernatorial careers. In the twentieth century, only three governors—Park Trammel, Spessard Holland, and Bob Graham—were elected to the U.S. Senate, a path most Florida governors attempted to follow. Fred Cone was unsuccessful in this regard. While he may have won the immediate battle over the State Welfare Board, he lost the larger political war. Florida was rapidly transforming into a New South state, fueled in large part by the New Deal. As war preparations began, local tourism revived, and the numbers of new residents rose, the aging Cone represented a simpler, more traditional Florida that was fast becoming obsolete. In 1940, Fred Cone—champion of conservative, business-run government—ran for the U.S. Senate. In a field of six candidates, he came in fourth.

99. 28 June 1937, File: "Minutes, 1937," Box 1, State Welfare Board Minutes. They also praised Van Hyning's performance, adding that "probably no other man could have in so short a time and under such handicaps have carried the program to the point that it reached under his administration."