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The Depression and After

John N. Schacht

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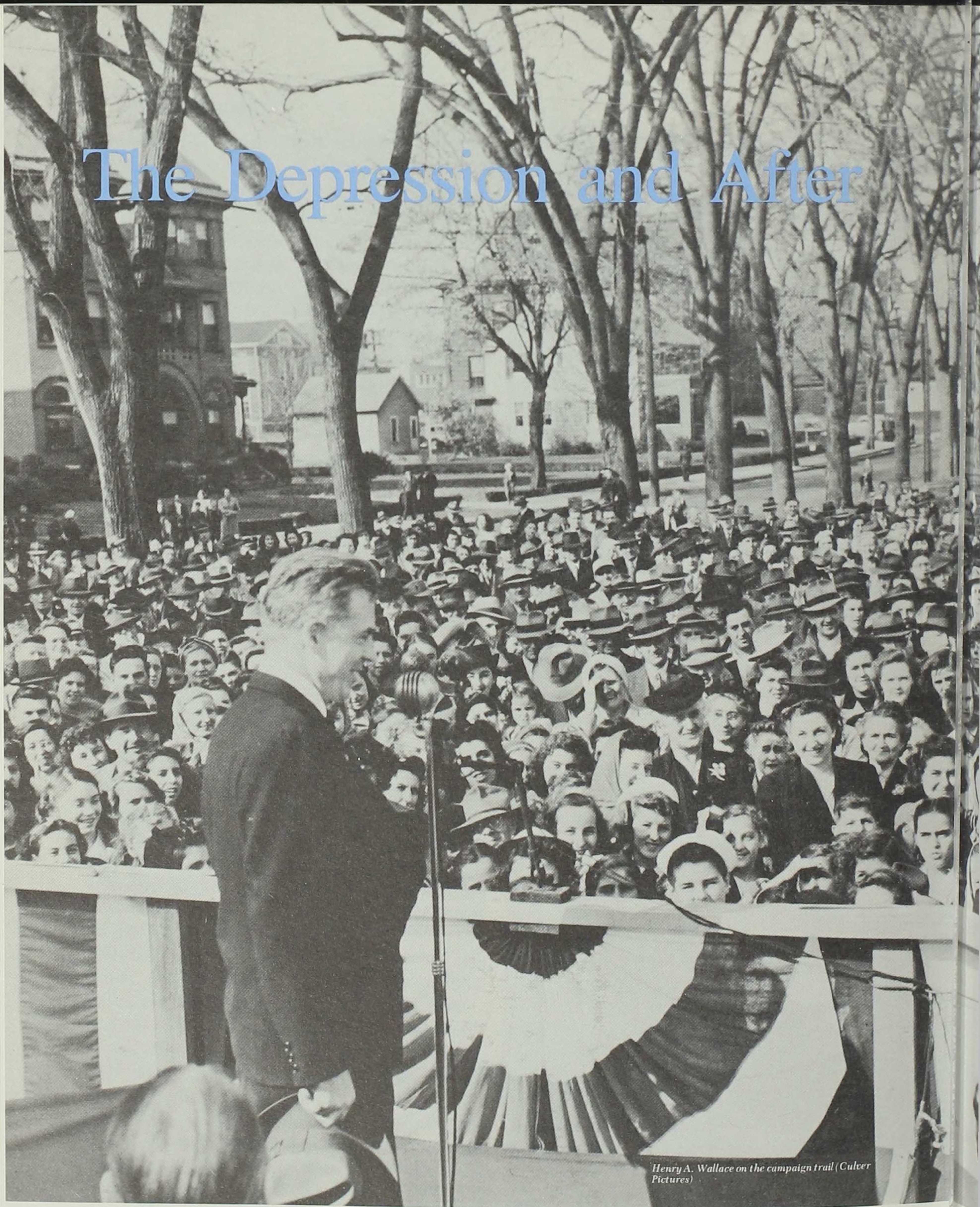
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The Depression and After



Henry A. Wallace on the campaign trail (Culver Pictures)

These, then, were the situations of our four men at the start of a decade when an Iowa background could serve as a preparatory course for success. Why was it of value?

The 1930s were a mixed bag of experiences; the decade left memories of extremely diverse people, institutions, and events. There were Will Rogers and Father Coughlin; Joe DiMaggio and Joe Louis; Huey Long and Norman Thomas; John Dillinger and William Randolph Hearst; Albert Einstein's flight from Germany and Jesse Owens' triumphs there; the Maginot Line, the Munich Pact, and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade; Wrong Way Corrigan and Sally Rand; the Lindbergh kidnapping and the Scottsboro case; Prohibition's repeal, flagpole sitters, and dance marathons. But mainly it was the decade of the NRA and WPA; the Townsend Plan and the Supreme Court fight; the Bonus March and apples for sale on street-corners; "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" and *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Depression—that was the story.

And that meant Iowans had some advantages. To start with, they had advantages because of what they were not: Iowans were not likely to be prominent in fields where success was improbable in the Thirties. For example, big-business types were rare in Iowa. Historian William Miller and others have shown that such men tended to emerge from big, industrialized cities; small chance of that in Iowa! But big business was not in good repute in the Thirties, with formerly prestigious figures like Henry Ford and Samuel Insull now associated with labor goons and stolen money. (Obviously Hoover had ties to big business; let us ascribe that to the California influence.) All in all, the unlikelihood of an Iowan's dominance in the business world did not much diminish his chances for fame in the 1930s.

For another example, military and naval leaders rarely hailed from Iowa. Of the sixty-four Americans listed in Roger Parkinson's *En-*



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THE PALIMPSEST 13

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Henry A. Wallace on the campaign trail (Culver Pictures)

cyclopedia of Modern War, only one—Admiral William D. Leahy, who had been born in Hampton—was an Iowan, and Leahy was a naval diplomat rather than a “fighting admiral.” (None of the sixty-four, incidently, was born in the other upper midwestern states: Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, or Nebraska.) But, again, military and naval figures were not much admired in the 1930s. Many Americans had become so disenchanted with the results of World War I that they now recoiled at the thought of any past or future military intervention overseas. In consequence, the prestige of military men sank to perhaps its lowest point in American history during the 1930s, and they exerted no influence on basic national policy until very late in the decade.

What the Thirties called for, rather, were men who could cope with hard times. And in hard times, food becomes a vital concern in a way that it is not during prosperity. Iowans, having grown up with what historian Frank Freidel aptly called “the ample demonstration of abundance and the promise of even greater abundance from the Iowa soil,” were shocked—not just startled, but morally offended—by what the Depression meant: a scarcity of the elemental necessities of life. Being expert in the production and distribution of food, Iowans felt qualified to do something about this monstrous condition. In the disastrous Thirties, Hoover, Lewis, Wallace, and Hopkins all assumed the role of providers.

Of course, the four men brought differing expertise and differing points of view to that role. With their complementary skills, one could imagine them forming a well-integrated corporate team: Wallace providing research; Hoover, management; Lewis, labor; and Hopkins, distribution. True, one cannot readily imagine their agreeing on methods. The four would have agreed that all men and women were entitled to some equitable share of life's needs. But the relatively conservative Hoover and Lewis emphasized the part that individual

toil played in achieving rewards. Hoover expected enlightened and rational people to cooperate voluntarily for mutual benefit. Lewis might not have disputed this, though he clearly expected workers to exercise their collective muscle if a fair share was denied them. Wallace and Hopkins, on the other hand, had spent much of their professional lives during the 1920s watching the diligent efforts of men and women come to naught on farms and in slums, and they felt government was obliged to help people who were in real need. Still, the four had more in common than their obvious political differences suggest: their Iowa upbringing, rural or small town; their marriages, three out of four to Iowa women; their exposure to serious religious guidance, whether expressed in a work ethic, charitable duty, or both; their interest in education, and exclusively Iowa schooling for three out of four; and their political acumen and ambitions—for all four, at one time or another, aspired to the presidency. And of course there were personal connections, with the two older men and the two younger sometimes operating in close or loose alliance.

The Depression decade began with one of our Iowans, Herbert Hoover, in the White House. The year 1930 dawned dark and grew darker, but Hoover still moved confidently. Calling Congress into special session in April 1929, he had pushed through the Agricultural Marketing Act, designed to aid farmers in a period which still looked generally prosperous. Now in 1930 he persuaded dozens of trade associations to pledge to maintain wage levels and engage in new investment. He signed the Hawley-Smoot Tariff into law, increasing agricultural and other duties; and the Federal Farm Board swung into action, forming government corporations to purchase surplus wheat and cotton. Before the stock market crash, he had inveighed against the prevailing easy credit that had fueled specu-

lation, and he had instituted a tight-money policy to dampen it. Now he took measures to get credit flowing again. But none of this kept unemployment from sticking at between three and four million. Businessmen were clearly becoming convinced, despite Hoover's public optimism, that new investment outlays were unwise. And as drought intensified the stress on farmers and the banks that served them, a huge wave of bank failures began to roll, closing more than six hundred banks by the end of the year.

By the autumn of 1930, Americans were sufficiently shaken to vote Republican con-

gressmen out of office by the score, and Hoover's problems were not lightened by the generally unfriendly Congress that convened in December. But in response to disastrous bank failures abroad, Hoover was at least able in July 1931 to declare a moratorium on the payment of debts foreign governments owed the United States. That December, he succeeded in establishing a system of home-loan banks to provide easy financing for home building. Meanwhile, he had worked out the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Approved in January 1932, the RFC was intended to stimulate economic activity and put some of the



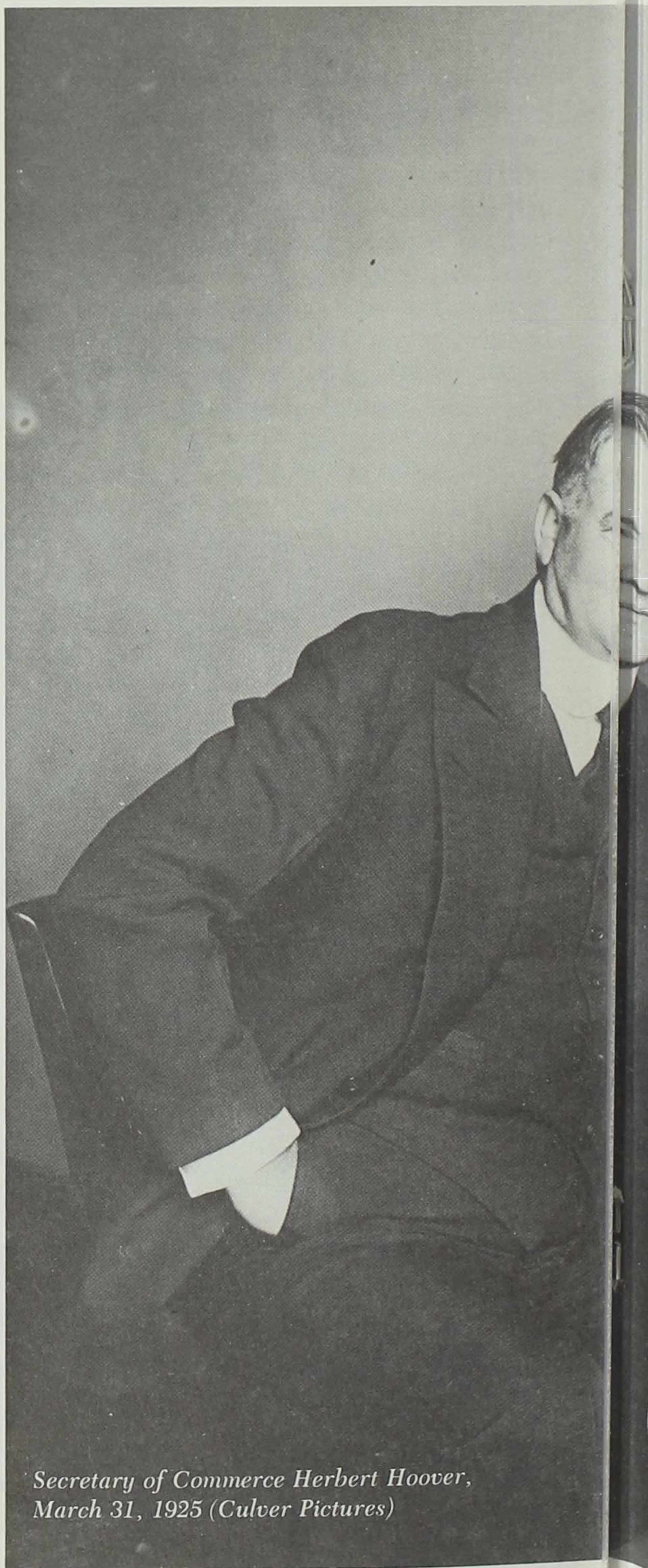
Herbert Hoover—with Kitty Dalton of the Knights of Columbus—inspects relief supplies bound for Europe's starving children, January 24, 1921 (Underwood and Underwood photo; courtesy Herbert Hoover Presidential Library)

jobless back to work by making money available through loans to insurance companies, banks, farm organizations, state and local governments, and other institutions. In the winter of 1931-1932, Hoover drew millions of bushels of wheat and tens of thousands of bales of cotton from Farm Board surpluses to be converted into flour and cloth and distributed by the Red Cross to those in need. Billions of dollars were spent on public works and billions more advanced on credit. By then, unemployment had risen to more than eleven million.

Hoover's relief and assistance program was based on voluntary cooperation; when government intervened directly, emphasis was on the temporary nature of this emergency assistance. Hoover was opposed in principle to the dole. He was convinced that voluntarism would work, that Americans would voluntarily provide what other Americans, for the time being, were without. After all, why should he abandon an approach that he believed was right and that he knew worked? As an orphaned child, he and his parents' families had exemplified it, and in Belgium and elsewhere after World War I he had made it work. So this man, "enormously capable and efficient" in the words of a not especially sympathetic historian, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., jawboned worried bankers, suspicious business leaders, angry labor groups, and a recalcitrant Congress and got them to agree to many measures that he thought would get the country back on an even keel.

Did he achieve success? A few historians and journalists have thought so. Walter Lippman was one: "Hoover [and his aides] had hold of the essence of the matter in the Spring of 1932 when they forced a reflation policy on the federal reserve system. Believe it or not, they arrested the depression."

Believe it or not. The American electorate in November 1932 did not believe it, and they voted out the Hoover administration resoundingly. The President carried only six states, not



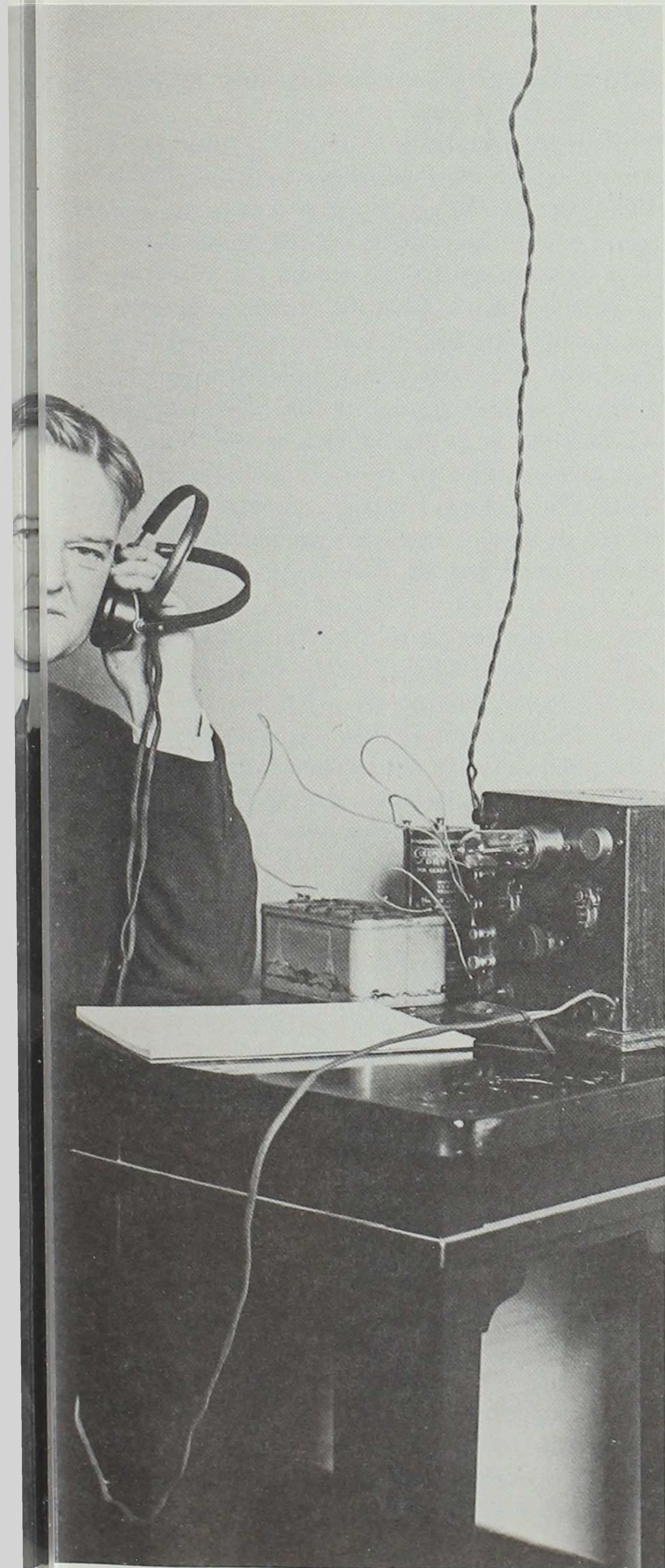
*Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover,
March 31, 1925 (Culver Pictures)*

including Iowa. If there had been any hope in the spring of 1932 that the outlook would be better, it had been dashed by March of 1933. When Hoover left the White House, unemployment had reached the staggering figure of 15,071,000—one-third of the nation's work force.

Where had Hoover failed as a provider? Lippman's comment is revealing, for it implies what Hoover seems to have believed: that the Depression was merely a technical monetary problem. Hoover was loath to put the full force of the federal government into a fight, relying instead on voluntarism. In short, many say, he failed to recognize the scope of the disaster confronting him. On the other hand, Rexford Tugwell, a leading member of the Roosevelt brain trust, has said that "practically the whole New Deal was extrapolated from programs Hoover started." This is an exaggeration, yet it is true that Hoover was often blamed for ideas and measures similar to those for which Roosevelt was praised. For example, critics jeered when Hoover contended that a good deal of the trouble was psychological, but when FDR declared that "We have nothing to fear but fear itself!" the same critics praised both his perceptiveness and his eloquence.

Hoover, exhausted and bitter, stayed out of public life for a year or so after his defeat, but by 1935 New Deal measures had sufficiently outraged him that he returned to the political wars. In 1936 he was interested in the GOP nomination, which may have seemed a prize worth having, since anti-Roosevelt outcries in the news media suggested that the New Deal was vulnerable. But Alfred Landon was nominated and then beaten even more decisively than Hoover had been four years earlier.

During FDR's second term, Hoover stayed active politically. He blasted the attempt to "pack" the Supreme Court, of course, and fought against various New Deal moves that struck him as not only immoral and wrong-headed but unsuccessful—and, indeed,



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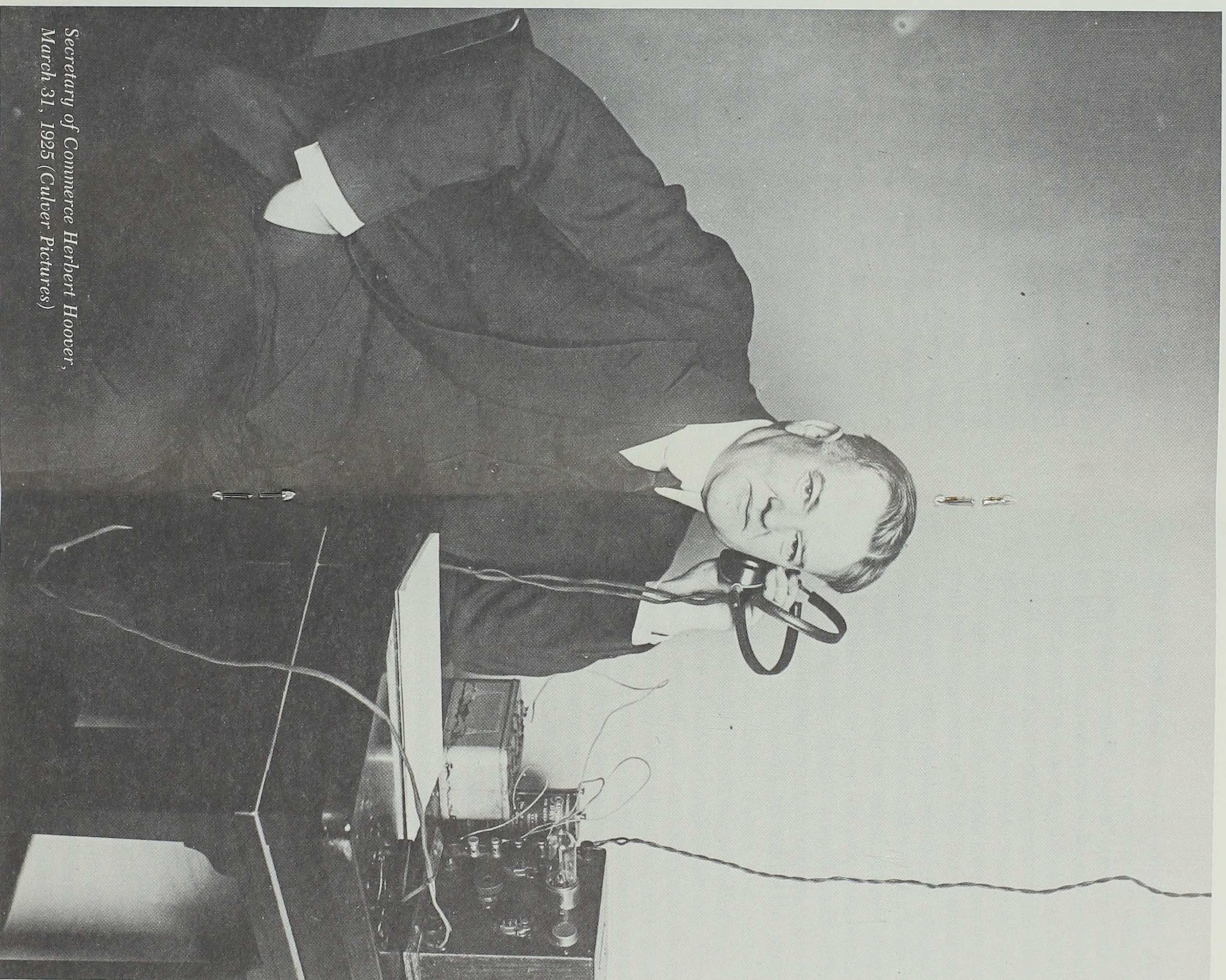
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Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover,
March 31, 1935 (Culver Pictures)



Herbert Hoover, June 1936, as seen by a cartoonist from the New York Herald-Tribune (courtesy Herbert Hoover Presidential Library)

unemployment did remain distressingly high throughout the decade. In 1938 Hoover went abroad, returning to blast Nazism but also to speak against American intervention in the approaching war. Apparently unmindful of his continuing unpopularity among much of the public, he hoped to be nominated by his party in 1940, though he could scarcely have failed to notice that for years Democratic campaigners had been attacking Hoover and "his" Depression more than the actual Republican candidates. But when Wendell Willkie was nominated and then defeated in Roosevelt's third-term victory, Hoover must have known

that, at the age of sixty-six, his hopes for elective office were over.

After Pearl Harbor, Hoover supported America's war effort wholeheartedly. Early in 1946, now in old age and a widower, he was asked to perform public service again. President Truman sent him around the world to survey and plan against the threatening post-war famine. In 1947, Truman appointed him chairman of the Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, which became better known as the Hoover Commission after its work was completed in 1955. Then Hoover retired, though he continued to lecture and write virtually until his death on October 20, 1964.

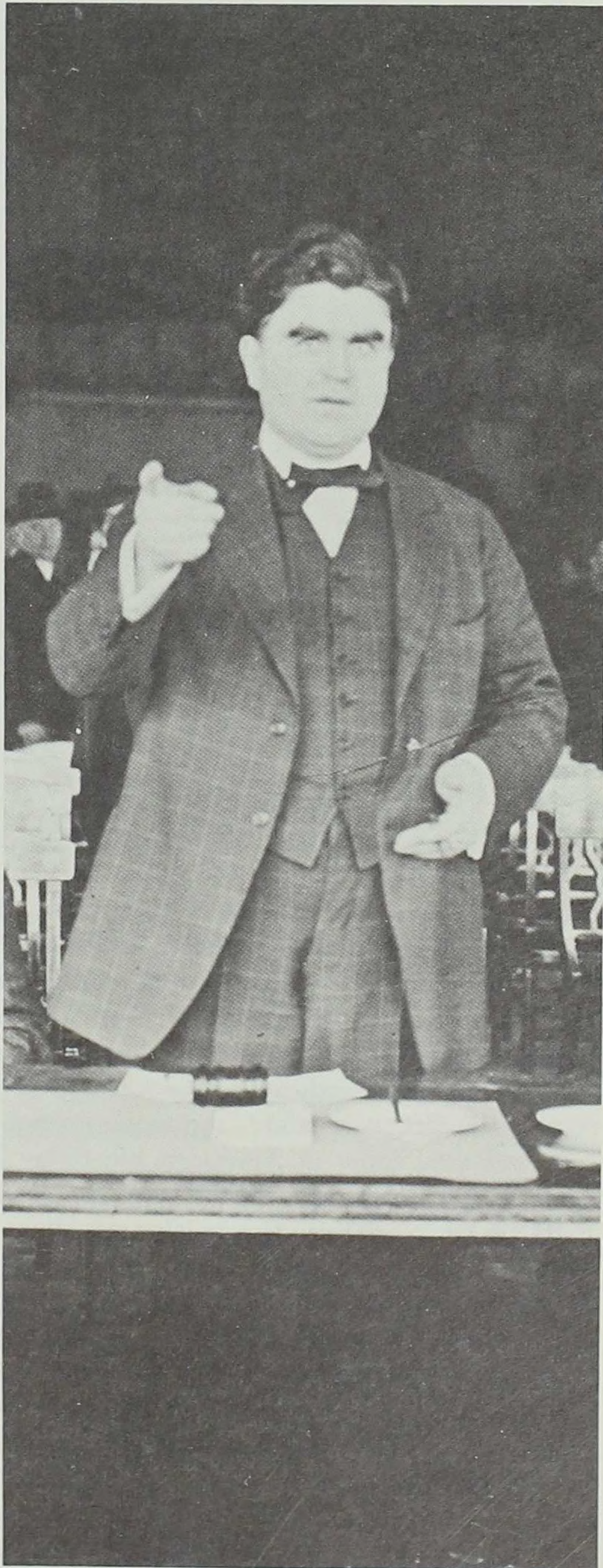
As Hoover's career plunged to its nadir in the 1930s, John L. Lewis's career reached its zenith. The two men had much in common. Hoover the manager and Lewis the labor leader did not hold basically different economic views. Lewis never questioned the principle of free enterprise, though he wanted a larger slice of the pie for the workingman. Lewis supported Hoover in 1928 and, as we have seen, was rebuffed when he made himself available for political appointment. But, astonishingly, he then backed Hoover in 1932, though historians believe he hedged his bets a bit. In personality, the men were reverse images of each other. Hoover, reserved in public, is said to have blossomed among small groups. Lewis, by contrast, seems to have been shy in intimate circumstances, but in public he became a burly, beetle-browed Glendower calling metaphors from the vasty deep to sway the American public as no other labor leader has before or since.

But in 1930 Lewis and his miners were in serious trouble. UMW membership was sinking below the 80,000 mark, and union-set daily minimums of \$6.10 to \$7.50 were fast becoming unenforceable. In 1931 Lewis urged Hoover in vain to use the federal government

to revive the moribund coal industry. By 1933 union power had been erased in all but a few dozen mines, and those few miners who were working earned only \$1.50 to \$4.00 a day. Poverty and outright hunger stalked the coal fields.

His biographers call the rest of the 1930s Lewis's "years of glory." After Roosevelt's election, Lewis demanded legalized union organization and collective bargaining, stabilized prices, and national planning. The National Industrial Recovery Act as passed by Congress in June 1933 embodied much of this, though there had been a great furor over the clause concerning union rights. Lewis then staked the whole UMW treasury on an organizing campaign. Coal miners, heartened by the NIRA and a federal administration that seemed friendly to union organizing, responded by joining the UMW in huge numbers. That summer, strikes and other militant actions achieved widespread union recognition from coal operators. Wages stabilized at between \$3.40 and \$5.63 per day, and the wage scales in northern and southern mines were somewhat equalized. West Virginia miners who had earned as little as \$1.50 a day now received \$4.50 for an eight-hour day. In 1934 miners won a seven-hour day, a five-day week, and a \$5.00 daily minimum in the North and a \$4.60 minimum in the South, with fairer treatment of black workers. And they gained virtually a closed shop in the mines.

But now Lewis turned to a new objective: the broadening and reshaping of the whole American labor movement. Against the wishes of most of his fellow AFL union leaders, he resolved to build a numerically overwhelming labor movement around a core of mass-production workers. Hopes for rapid union growth appeared dashed by the Supreme Court's May 1935 decision that the NIRA was unconstitutional, only to be lifted high the next month by congressional passage of the Wagner Act, which has been described as "labor's Magna Charta." With unrest swelling among workers



John L. Lewis in the 1920s (Bettmann Archive)

in the mass production industries, the American labor movement now faced its greatest organizing opportunity in history.

At the AFL convention in Atlantic City in October, a raging debate developed over whether to give AFL charters to emergent unions in the mass industries, with Lewis arguing in favor. The debate culminated in a fist-fight between Lewis and the president of the AFL carpenters. Lewis won the fight, lost the convention vote, and went on two weeks later to form and become president of the Committee for Industrial Organization. While AFL conservatives busied themselves drawing up ultimatums demanding the CIO's dissolution, Lewis helped new CIO-affiliated unions win contracts in such mass industries as automobile and rubber manufacturing. Then he launched a giant organizing drive in steel. The demands for CIO dissolution were ignored.

The 1936 presidential campaign saw Lewis working vigorously for Roosevelt, and many feel that FDR's landslide win over Landon was in part a triumph for Lewis as well. The year 1937 started off brilliantly for Lewis and the CIO; they achieved contracts with General Motors and U.S. Steel, the giants of the auto and steel industries. Union membership doubled in 1937, with most of the new members belonging to CIO affiliates. CIO unions now had a larger membership than the AFL. In *The Nation* the CIO was called "the most progressive and vital force in American life today." Later in 1937, however, the CIO was repulsed in its efforts to organize the smaller steel companies, known as "Little Steel." An angry Roosevelt called down a plague on both parties, and his criticism of labor and Lewis contributed to the split that later developed between the two men. The next year the CIO broke entirely with the AFL and held a constitutional convention in which Lewis was again chosen president.

In the next couple of years Lewis, nursing his grievance against the President following the



John L. Lewis tells a Senate committee that labor must have the right to organize, 1933 (Harris and Ewing photo; courtesy U.S. Department of Labor)

Little Steel episode, also found other reasons to turn cool toward FDR. The "Roosevelt Depression" of the late 1930s was a nagging worry for labor. And Lewis, sure that American involvement in a war would be costly for labor's hard-won gains, threw all his influence on the side of peace for the United States, crying out against Roosevelt's moves toward intervention.

All this seems sufficient to have caused Lewis's bitter opposition to FDR's third-term candidacy, though a more interesting explanation is the dubious story told by Frances Perkins, FDR's secretary of labor, who has asserted that Lewis baldly pushed his own name at Roosevelt as a vice-presidential candidate and, when turned down, sought revenge. Historians Dubofsky and Van Tine point out that Lewis's vanity was not likely to permit his laying himself open to such a rejection. For whatever reason, Lewis urged labor to vote for Willkie in 1940, vowing to resign as CIO president if Roosevelt won. FDR did win, handily, and Lewis did resign.

The decade of the Forties was not the triumphal march for Lewis that most of the Thirties had been. Of course, he remained as president of the miners, leading them to significant gains in the decade that saw America's involvement in World War II and its aftermath. Frequent walkouts before, during, and after the war made Lewis a formidable problem for Roosevelt and his successor, Truman, and may have made him, as some said, "the most hated man in America." No matter; obloquy rolled off Lewis's broad back—off the back of the public Lewis, at least—and did not deflect him from his goals. In 1941 the miners won a union-shop ruling in the steel industry's company-owned coal mines. In 1943 they gained the equivalent of portal-to-portal pay. And in 1946 they won welfare and retirement funds and a variety of improvements in working conditions. On the other hand, they and Lewis were troubled by mechanization in the coal mines and competition from other fuels, both of which reduced mine employment and thus led to declining UMW membership.

In the 1950s Lewis, now in his seventies, found the world passing him by, though honors came his way. In 1956 he was paid homage at the Beckley, West Virginia dedication of a group of hospitals that the miners' money had built, and he was honored, too, by Georgetown University and Iowa's Buena Vista College. When he resigned as UMW president in 1960, he received messages of affection from both rank-and-file miners and establishment greats, including Herbert Hoover. Despite failing health, he survived, outliving most of his associates and family—his wife, his daughter Kathryn, his brothers and sisters. His son and grandchildren were virtually estranged from him.

In the years before his death on June 11, 1969, he was a lonely man. But in his lifetime he had seen the American workingman make gains unprecedented in the country's history. Lewis had provided the leadership that



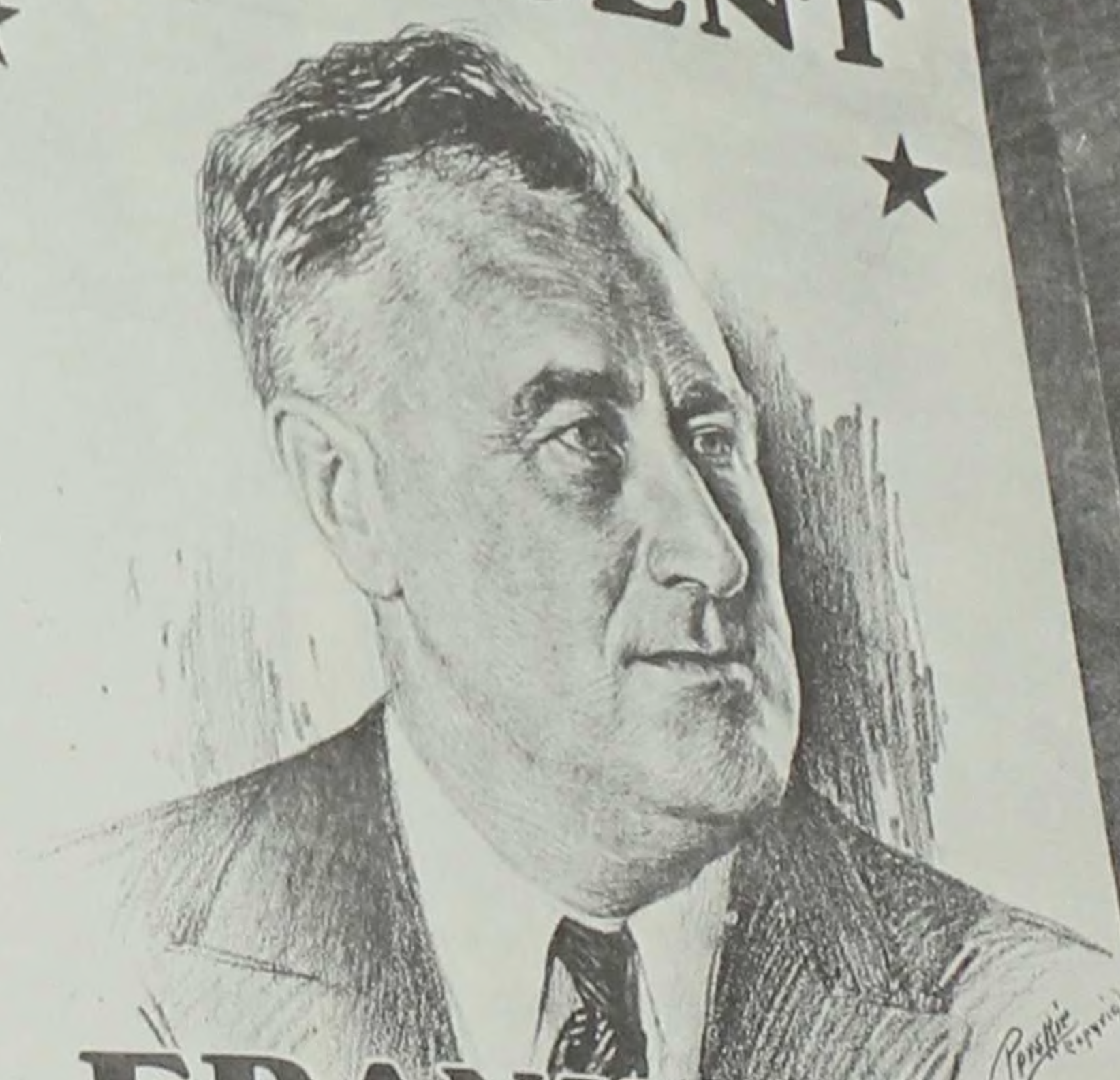
John L. Lewis, age seventy-one, inspects damage caused by a mine explosion in West Frankfort, Illinois, 1951. One hundred nineteen miners died in the blast. (courtesy United Mine Workers Journal)

brought his coal miners a living wage, reasonable hours, and some protection against the vicissitudes of desperately hard and often deadly jobs. Sometimes berated as a revolutionary, he was actually the foe of revolutionaries. He simply wanted a society in which prosperity was widely shared, in which laboring people—by organized power—could obtain high wages to spend on the products of capitalism.

As the decade of the Thirties opened, Henry A. Wallace was engrossed in editing *Wallaces' Farmer* and in conducting his seed business, and he was scoring successes in both. It was in August 1932 that he



**RE-ELECT
PRESIDENT**



**FRANKLIN D.
ROOSEVELT**

Roosevelt

W. T. WAGER - 2752 37 AVE. BROOKLYN, N.Y. TEL. MO. 8-8764

Vice-presidential candidate Henry A. Wallace during the campaign of 1940 (Bettmann Archive)

met Franklin Roosevelt for the first time, and he was impressed by the candidate's vigor, humor, and knowledge of agriculture. And the Iowa editor impressed the candidate as well. FDR appointed Wallace secretary of agriculture—an appointment that surprised those who forecast such matters. Wallace told the readers of *Wallaces' Farmer* that he was going to Washington under "a chief who is definitely progressive, entirely sympathetic toward agriculture" and "a courageous man with a kindly heart."

By all accounts, Wallace, green as June corn to the ways of Washington at the beginning, grew in the job. His path was predictably bumpy. When the controversial Agricultural Adjustment Act was implemented, Iowa's Milo Reno, the Farm Holiday radical, called it diabolical and demanded Wallace's resignation. But Wallace soon became adept at defending unpopular measures—"the slaughter of the little pigs," for example. His speeches varied from lectures in economics to sermons to frank and friendly conversations. In various crises of the period, Wallace and other New Dealers found themselves in conflict with more conventional farm theorists, like the deans and faculty of land-grant agricultural colleges, over planned production—particularly planned restrictions on production. In the dust storms of 1934, the AAA proved useful in soil conservation, though that had not been its original purpose. And Wallace, of course, interested himself in distribution, as his father had wanted to but had been prevented from doing by Hoover. Meanwhile, he competently administered a department somewhat polarized between young urban liberals—mostly in the legal division—who clustered around Undersecretary Rexford Tugwell, and other men with more traditional and knowledgeable agrarian viewpoints. The split finally ended with the resignation of most of the urban group. In January 1936 the Supreme Court declared the AAA unconstitutional. That was a blow, but

Congress passed new legislation to enable Wallace to keep his programs going. One of Secretary Wallace's last projects, in 1939, was to establish the food-stamp program, using agricultural surpluses to improve the well-being of American society as a whole.

Wallace left his mark on the Department of Agriculture; after his tenure it would never be the same. Under him, as Frank Freidel has remarked, "national planning in the area of agriculture became accepted federal policy." He was able to implement the idea that he and his father had proposed as early as 1912: that government warehouses should be built to store grain withheld from the market in years of plenty and to release it when lean years ar-



Henry A. Wallace, plant breeder. Wallace's experiments with hybridization led to the formation of the Pioneer Hi-Bred Corn Company of Des Moines, a leader in the twentieth-century revolution in corn production techniques. (courtesy University of Iowa Library)

rived. Wallace termed this "the Joseph Plan" and later "the ever-normal granary," characteristically drawing his first title from the Book of Genesis and his second from the writings of Confucius, which he had studied in the Des Moines Public Library. School lunches were a brainchild of Agriculture under Wallace. He seemed often to have the needy in mind—the marginal farmer, the sharecropper. Later, during World War II, he is reported to have explained half-seriously to the wife of the Soviet ambassador: "The object of this war is to make sure that everybody in the world has the privilege of drinking a quart of milk a day." Though not always in tune with the politics of Iowa, Henry Wallace was perhaps the most basically Iowan of our four leaders in his approach to providing life's necessities to his fellow man.

When Wallace left the Department of Agriculture in 1940, it was because wider horizons beckoned. During the 1930s he had demonstrated not only administrative talent but political promise. In 1939 he was one of a number of cabinet people with legitimate presidential ambitions who were, however, quite willing to defer to the plans of FDR as commander-in-chief. Who among this group first publicly called for a third term for Roosevelt is a matter of debate, but Wallace was at least one of the first, in January 1940. He had demonstrated loyalty, as in the Supreme Court-packing fight in 1937. But he had also demonstrated independence, as in his support of some conservative Democratic senators, including Guy Gillette of Iowa, whom Roosevelt wanted to defeat in the 1938 primaries. Gillette's victory enhanced Wallace's prestige. For these and other reasons, he became a leading candidate for the vice-presidential nomination. The clincher, no doubt, was that Roosevelt then thought of him as a man capable of taking over as president.

So Roosevelt forced through Wallace's nomination, and when that ticket was elected over Willkie and Charles McNary in 1940, Wal-



Henry Wallace greets reporters as he leaves meeting with President Harry Truman, September 18, 1946. Truman had hoped to silence his secretary of commerce on matters related to foreign affairs. When Wallace proved reluctant, Truman demanded his resignation. (courtesy University of Iowa Library)

lace himself and others must have regarded the Iowan as heir apparent. But things turned sour for him. His far-sighted views on how the post-war world should be molded were no doubt an irritant to Roosevelt's wartime pragmatism. A worse irritant was a bitter public clash between Wallace, as chairman of the Board of Economic

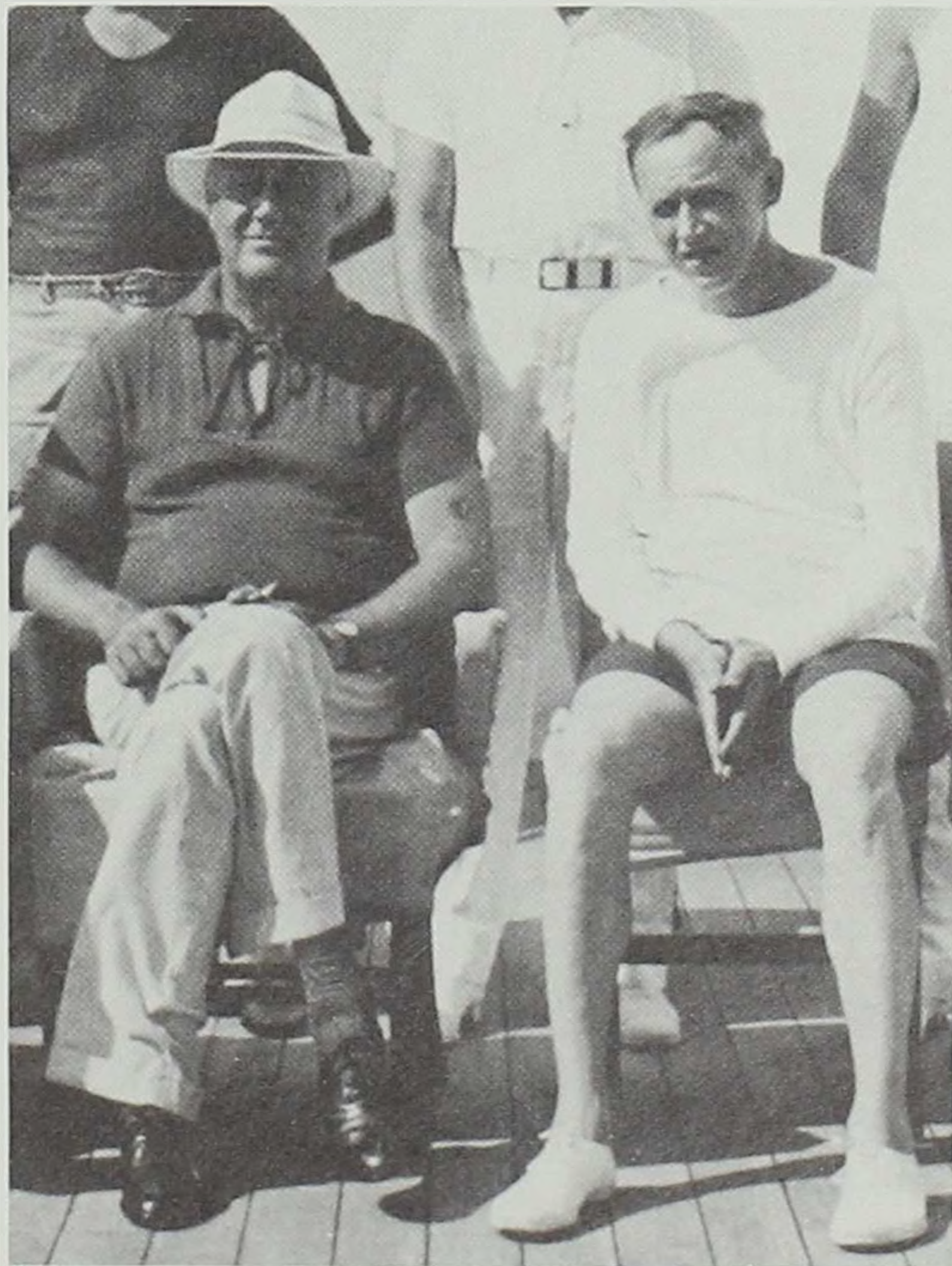
Warfare, and Commerce Secretary Jesse Jones, as chairman of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, over the failure to meet priorities in raw materials. Roosevelt resorted to his plague-on-both-your-houses approach: Wallace and Jones lost their chairmanships, and the Board of Economic Warfare was reorganized under a man sympathetic to Jones. From that time on, Robert Sherwood has written, White House insiders knew that Wallace was no longer the anointed. When Roosevelt ran for a fourth term, he ran with Senator Harry Truman, who became president upon FDR's death.

In 1945 Wallace may have derived some satisfaction from replacing Jones as secretary of commerce, but even there his days were numbered. He was fired by Truman in September 1946 for public utterances too friendly to Russia. After a stint as editor of the *New Republic*, Wallace became the presidential candidate of the Progressive party, which opposed the Marshall Plan and called for disarmament and accommodation with the U.S.S.R. The ticket failed to carry any state, though its popularity in New York permitted Thomas E. Dewey to defeat Truman there, and thus to make the GOP look like the victor nationally for a few hours after the polls had closed on the East Coast.

Becoming disenchanted with his Progressive associates, Wallace quit the party in 1950 and later repudiated his sympathy with Russian aims. In his last years, withdrawing from politics, he returned to his Pioneer Hi-Bred Corn business. He died on November 18, 1965 in Danbury, Connecticut, and is buried in Glendale Cemetery in Des Moines.

In 1930 the youngest of our four leaders, Harry Hopkins, was doing two men's jobs in New York City. In the early months of the Depression, his boss at the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, William Mathews, secured \$70,000 from

the Red Cross to pay for emergency jobs, and Hopkins was assigned to do what his enemies always maintained he did best: spending other people's money. The original \$70,000 didn't last long, but Mathews managed to continue Hopkins' funding until August 1931, when then Governor Franklin Roosevelt established the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration. The supposedly temporary nature of this agency discouraged some people who might have worked for it, but when Hopkins had a chance to become deputy in charge, he accepted quickly. Soon he became TERA's top administrator. He got to know the governor, as well as people who would later become important in Washington, people like Frances Perkins and Henry Morgenthau, Jr. Always more comfortable in two full-time jobs than one,



President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Hopkins enjoy a holiday cruise aboard the USS Houston, October 1935. (courtesy Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library)

Hopkins became involved in supporting Roosevelt's try for the 1932 presidential nomination, which was being astutely and, it turned out, successfully directed by James Farley.

Hopkins was called from Albany to Washington in May 1933 to head the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, a project he had done as much as any individual to design. It is said that he spent more than \$5 million in his first two hours in office, dispatching relief funds to governors of six states, including Iowa. Hopkins kept on top of the program nationwide by consulting with field representatives and by close personal attention to the states' priority proposals. He saw to it that states paid their share of relief costs, using the threat of withholding federal funds, for example, to bludgeon the Illinois legislature into passing a state sales tax to generate needed state revenues.

During the grim winter of 1933-1934 Hopkins showed his skills as an improviser and expediter. When the Federal Emergency Relief Administration proved unequal to some relief problems, he and Roosevelt worked out plans for the Civil Works Administration. To provide the \$400 million necessary to start paying the workers, Harold Ickes was persuaded to make funds available from the unpaid balance of his Public Works Administration. The CWA was established in early November. Hopkins had nearly two million men and women at work by December and more than four million by January. Roosevelt, hearing cries about abuses in the program, sent his longtime friend Frank Walker to check it out. Walker reported that Hopkins was doing "a magnificent job." He was handling both the FERA and the CWA, but he was approaching physical exhaustion.

Roosevelt sent Hopkins to Europe, ostensibly to rest, but while there he observed how much further Europe had gone than the United States in matters of government social assistance, and he returned determined to institute a permanent work-relief program. After New Deal Democrats smote most of their enemies

in the congressional elections of 1934 (during which Hopkins made his debut as a political speech writer), the time seemed ripe: in 1935 the Work Relief bill was passed, and FDR installed himself as titular head of the complicated relief structure, with Ickes in charge of a huge and high-sounding advisory committee as well as the PWA, and Hopkins heading the Works Progress Administration, which got most of the work done. Washington found the infighting between Ickes and Hopkins fascinating. When Ickes won the point that the WPA should be limited to projects costing less than \$25,000, Hopkins' answer was to divide large projects into enough smaller ones to bring the cost of each below the critical sum.

So Hopkins enjoyed both intramural and extramural victories. But in 1935 he was afflicted with an ulcer. From then on, his enormous quantity of work was accomplished by a frail man whose cumulative illnesses were to kill him in a little more than ten years. Recovering from the ulcer, Hopkins was desolated by the ultimately fatal illness of his second wife, Barbara, who died in 1937. Hopkins himself underwent cancer surgery within three months after her death.

But his WPA work went well, gaining him the ever firmer regard of the President and the ever greater antagonism of his political foes. In the floods and droughts of the mid-1930s, the WPA was invaluable, but it also became the target of strong criticism for waste and graft. Hopkins was able to defend the organization pretty well against the graft charge; as to waste, that was so strongly colored by political views that no explanations could change any minds on the subject. In 1937, wars in Spain and China presaged a shift in emphasis in America from national to international events, but that year's recession kept Hopkins' attention at home. He and others convinced Roosevelt early in 1938 that recovery demanded renewed government spending, and a relief package of nearly \$5 billion was drawn up. Roosevelt thought that



Harry Hopkins meets the press to announce his appointment as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's personal representative to England, January 1941 (Culver Pictures)

(right) Representatives of the Allied nations meet at Tehran, November 28-December 1, 1943 to discuss strategy for the defeat of the Axis powers. (left to right) General George Marshall, Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, Harry Hopkins, interpreter M. Parlov, Josef Stalin, and Foreign Minister V. Molotov (courtesy Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library)

he needed a Congress more sympathetic to his aims and tried to purge his party of conservatives, so Hopkins worked in Iowa for the nomination of Otha Wearin for senator but, as we have seen, Guy Gillette was the winner and subsequently retained his senatorial seat. Now Hopkins began attending cabinet meetings as a kind of minister without portfolio. Clearly, he was the most powerful man in the administration next to Roosevelt.

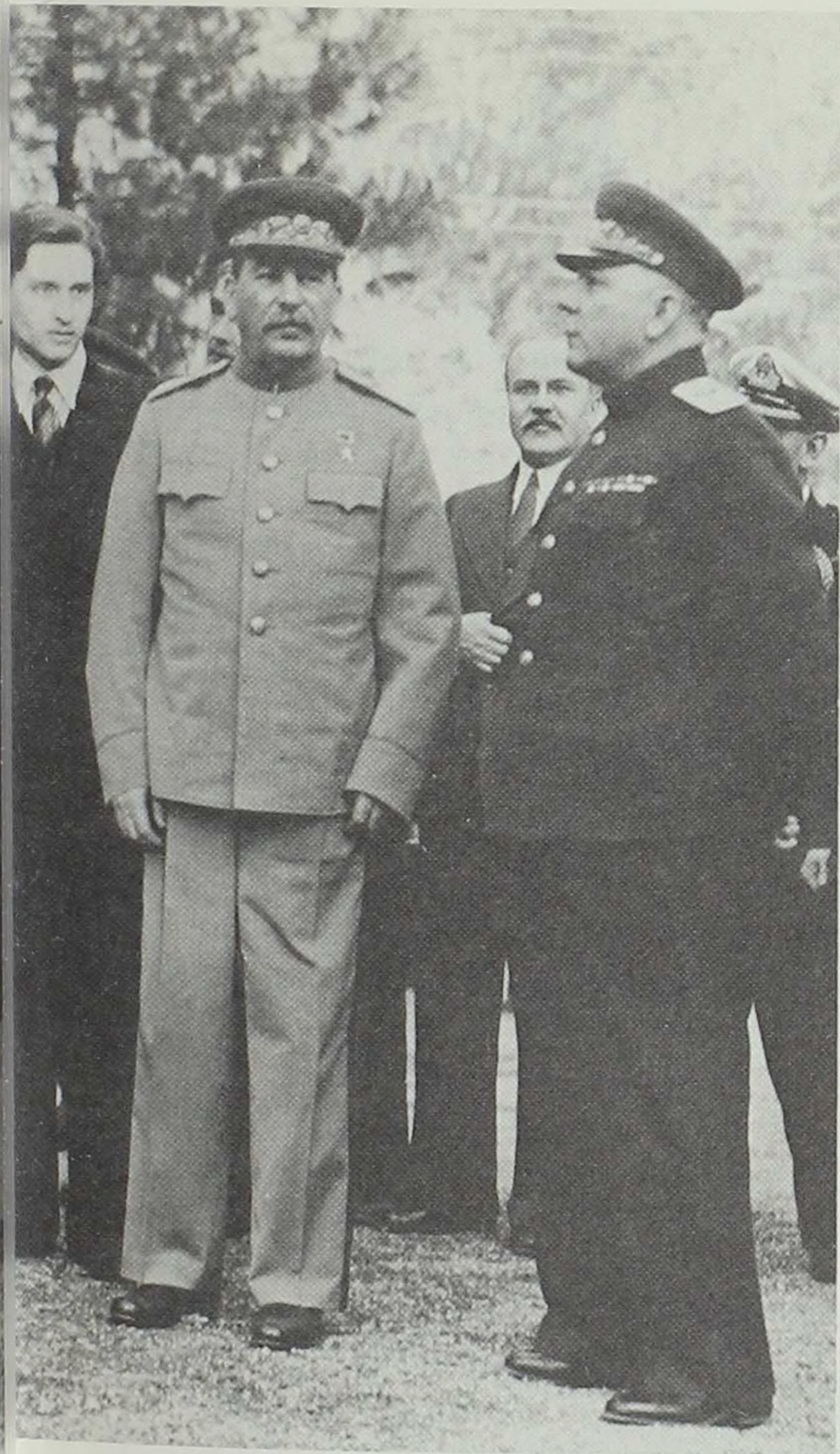
Late in 1938 he was relieved as WPA administrator and appointed secretary of commerce, as FDR moved to groom Hopkins as his successor in the White House. Biographer Henry H. Adams says that Hopkins considered buying a farm in Iowa to meet residency requirements there, though his official residence was then in New York. He did lease a farm, near Grinnell, and about that time became a trustee of Grinnell College. But illness struck again in 1939—so severely that he was unable to function as commerce secretary and saw his presidential ambitions fade away. He was virtually bedridden all summer and fall. As the Thirties ended, Hopkins was so sick and depressed that he sometimes talked about places where he might go to “end his days.”

Had Hopkins in fact ended his days—or at least his working days—in 1939, he would still have been one of the most influential men of his generation. As much as any one man, he implemented the welfare state in America. What Hopkins provided in the 1930s was jobs. His creed was simple: if people need work, it should be made available to them, and in his



view government, particularly the federal government, could do that better than any other institution. Hopkins saw to it that government did, at a total cost of some \$9 billion. Afterwards, his friends and foes agreed on at least one point: not a penny ever stuck to Hopkins' fingers.

In the spring of 1940 Hopkins, still very sick, came to dinner at the White House and, like the main character in a popular play of the period, stayed on and on as a houseguest—three and a half years in Hopkins' case. He resigned as secretary of commerce and became something unofficial and infinitely more important—perhaps executive officer, or assistant president, or *eminence grise*, or FDR's alter



his presidential ambitions dashed and his health shattered, he began the 1940s with dim personal prospects. Yet he was the only one of our four Iowans for whom the decade was to bring genuine triumph. In 1940 he worked tirelessly to get Wallace nominated vice-president, then to get the Roosevelt-Wallace ticket elected. This accomplished, America's effort to help the beleaguered Allies in Europe began in earnest. To start with, Hopkins handled Lend Lease. He had a marvelous ability to perceive Roosevelt's thinking, so that when he was running a project it was the same as if the President himself were in charge. Then Hopkins served as a liaison with Great Britain, and after the United States entered the war, he not only interpreted America's positions to Churchill, Stalin, and Chiang Kai-shek but also helped determine those positions. Churchill in those years is said to have considered him one of the six most influential people on the face of the earth.

He was an indispensable aide to the President in the planning of the Great Powers' victory strategy at Tehran. Then, early in 1945, came the Yalta Conference. Hopkins, though ill—as Roosevelt was also—again served as aide to the President in efforts to work out a blueprint for lasting peace. Roosevelt died on April 12, not long after his return home, with victory over Germany imminent. Hopkins left government service on May 12, but he was called back and dispatched to Moscow to try to bring the Russians back to participation in the San Francisco Conference to establish the United Nations. In this, his last government mission, Hopkins established some American aims and no doubt did better than anyone else could have. On July 2, 1945, he resigned for good. That autumn, illness prevented his going abroad to receive an honorary degree at Oxford. In November he went to the hospital, and he died there on January 29, 1946.

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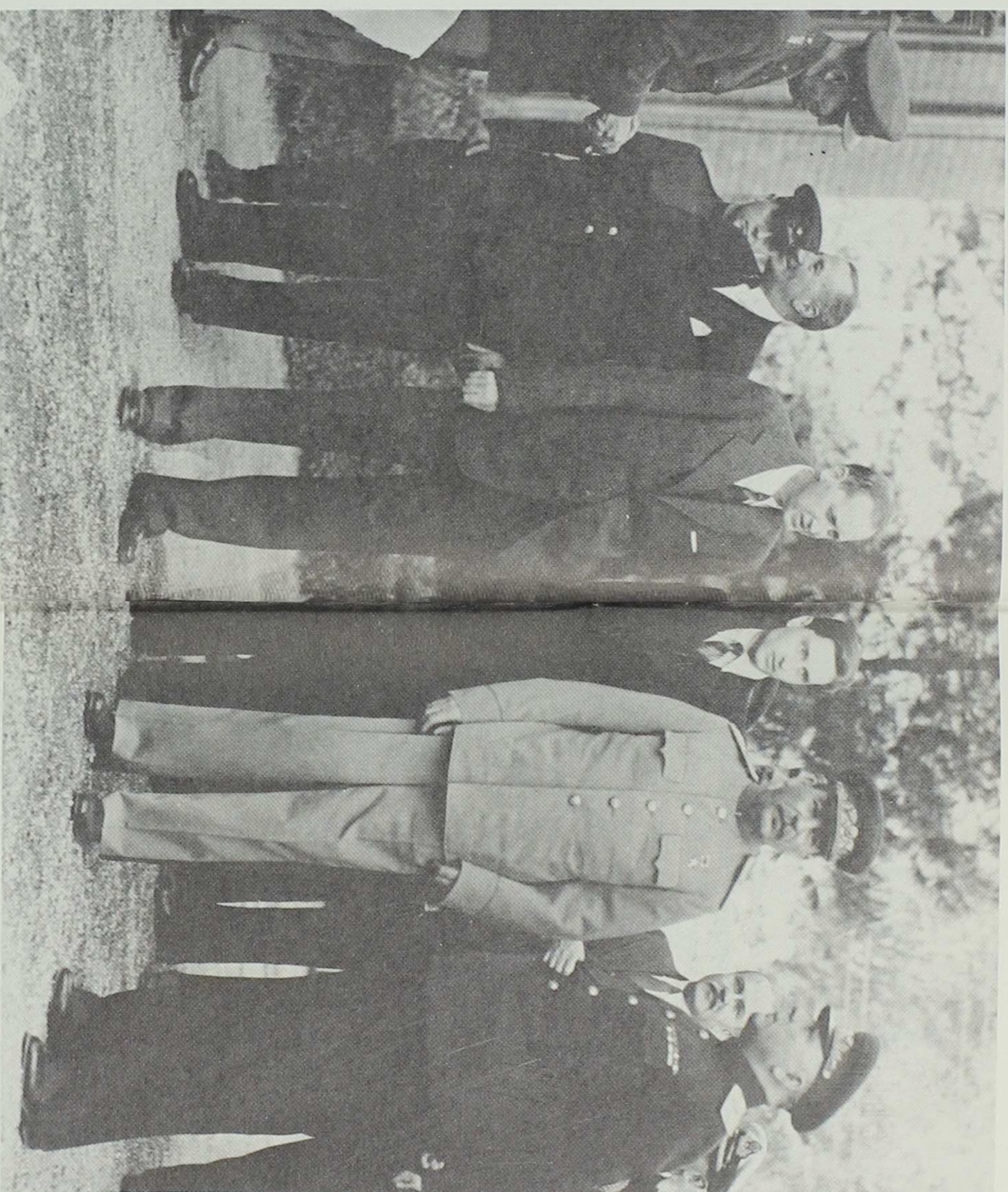
Winning the war is what occupied Hopkins for the remaining years of his active life. With

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