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Stories to Remember

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Stories to Remember

Every old newspaperman remembers a few special episodes from his past which may or may not be as interesting to others as they are to him. One of these, in my case, was an article I wrote in *The Globe* which was the instigating factor in the building of millions of dollars' worth of new five-story walk-up apartments in New York City.

As happens after all wars, we were in the midst of a severe housing shortage. People evicted from their apartments had nowhere to go. Some were being housed temporarily in armories and even in a few churches with compassionate pastors. Builders claimed that because of high taxes and costs of labor and materials they could not afford to erect new apartment houses except for the rich (for whom construction went on as usual).

I have always had a keen interest in urban and regional planning, and had made some friends in this field. One day I was having lunch with several of them, and among us we hammered out a possible solution to the problem; I promptly wrote a signed piece on the idea for *The Globe's* editorial page.

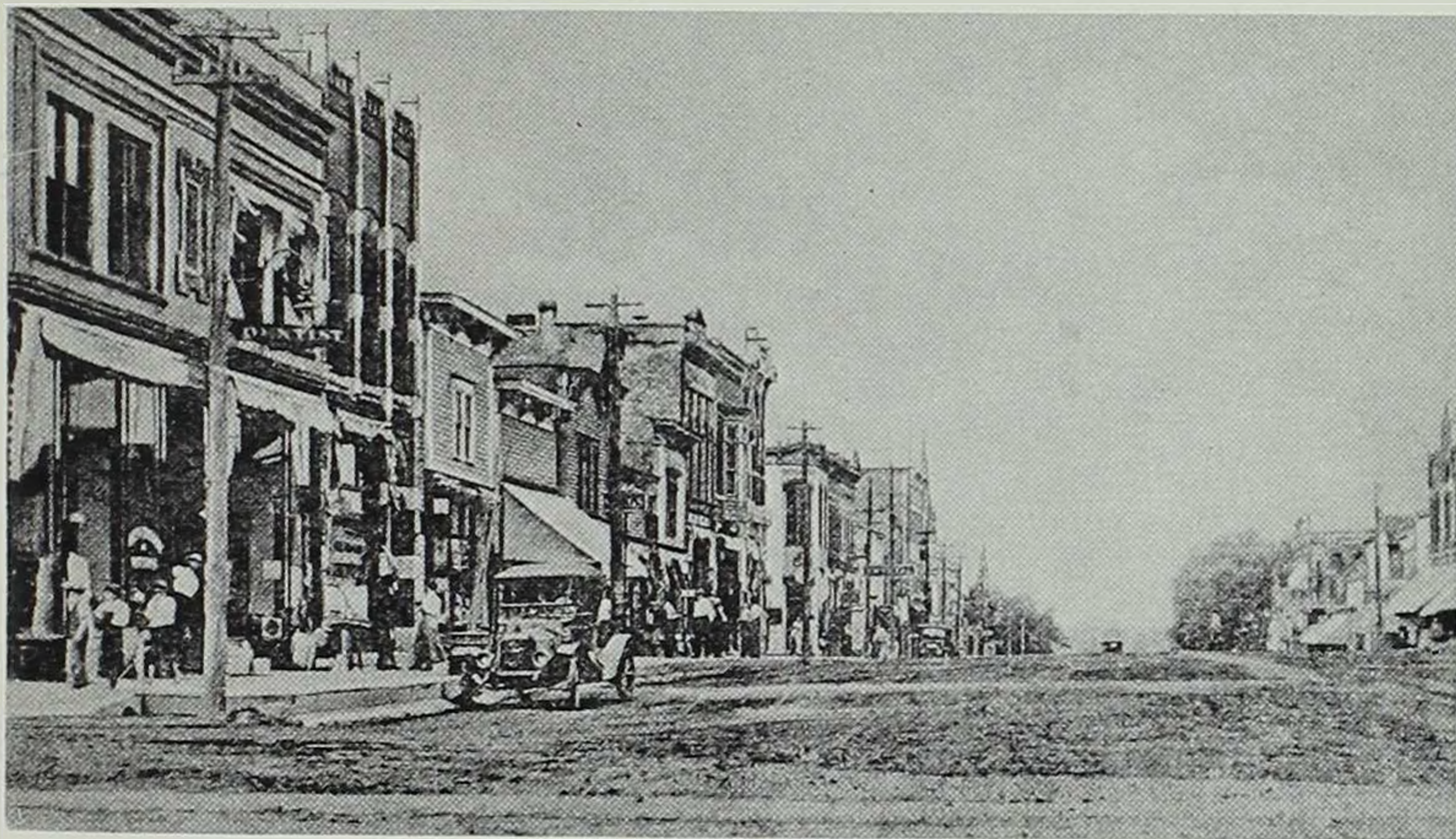
The real estate tax was at that time about three per cent of the actual value of the property. I sug-

gested that the state should exempt new apartment buildings of a specified character from taxation for a period of ten years, which would mean a subsidy of thirty per cent. I stipulated that such new buildings should be of good quality and should be rented at not more than a set price per month per room. The land would be taxed as usual, so that city and state revenues would not be reduced on what were then vacant lots.

My article attracted a good deal of attention, but no immediate action. I therefore got an appointment with Governor Alfred E. Smith in Albany, and went up to see him. Smith had just begun the first of his four highly successful terms as New York's governor. A gravelly-voiced man who grew up in poverty in New York's slums, Smith had little formal education, spoke with a pronounced East Side accent, and was one of the ablest political leaders of his time.

As he sat behind his desk in the Governor's Mansion, I handed him a clipping of my article and, while he glanced over it, explained the idea in a few words. He asked me several abrasive questions, and then astonished me by saying, "If it's legal, I'll do it."

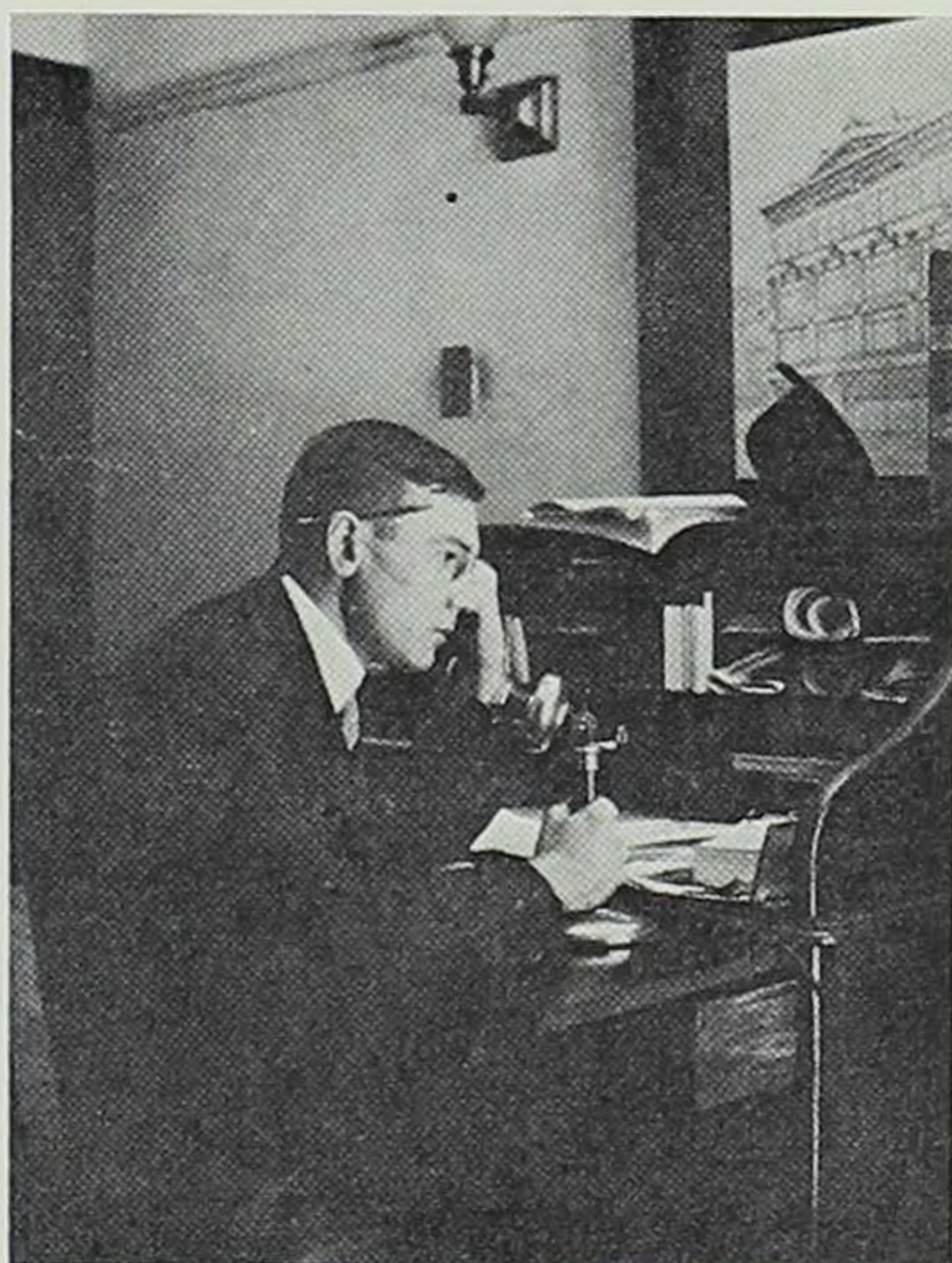
He picked up the telephone and got the state attorney general on the line. Clearly and succinctly, he outlined my scheme which he had grasped in every detail. In a few minutes he said thanks and turned to me.



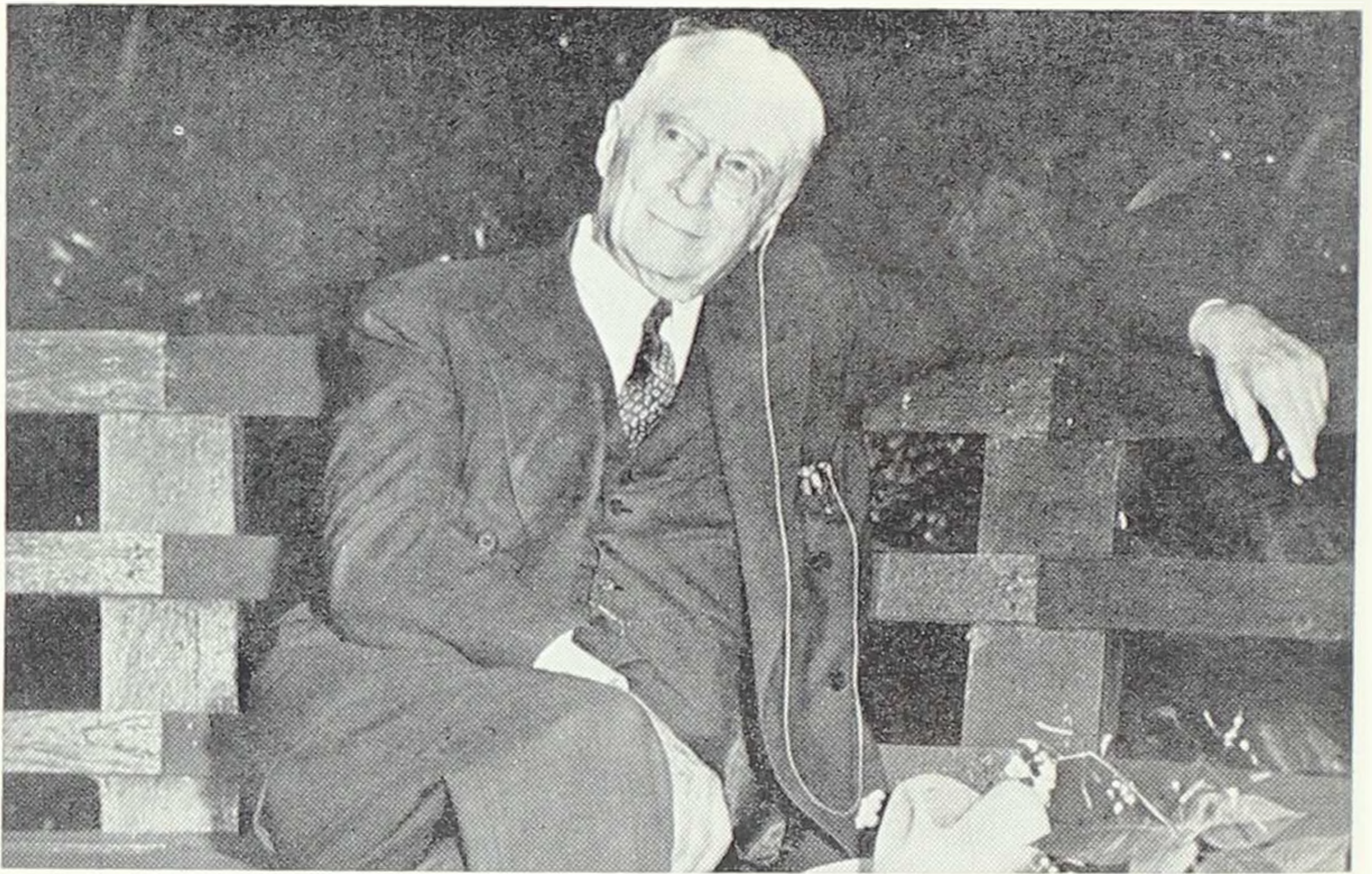
Emmetsburg about the time the author left for Stanford.



Bliven wears the hat that members of the sophomore class at Stanford were required to wear.

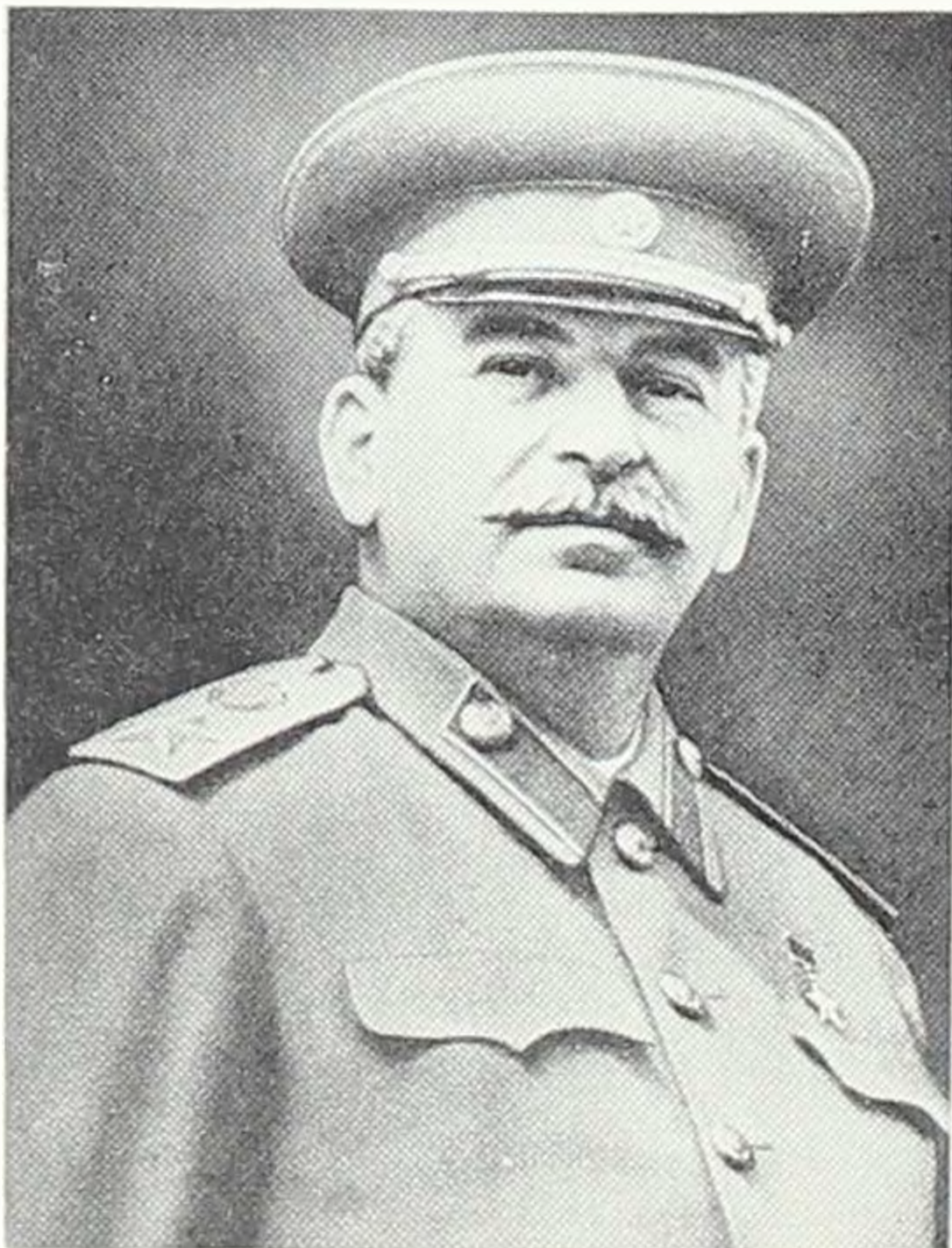


The overnight expert in advertising copy writing is pictured at his desk at Harris & Frank in Los Angeles.



International News Photo

Bernard M. Baruch, confidential advisor to presidents, had a passion for meeting people on park benches. He once offered to loan Bliven two million dollars to buy *The New York Globe* when it was about to go under.



International News Photo

Josef Stalin—"that bloody-handed tyrant had the world's best censorship and the world's best propaganda machine."



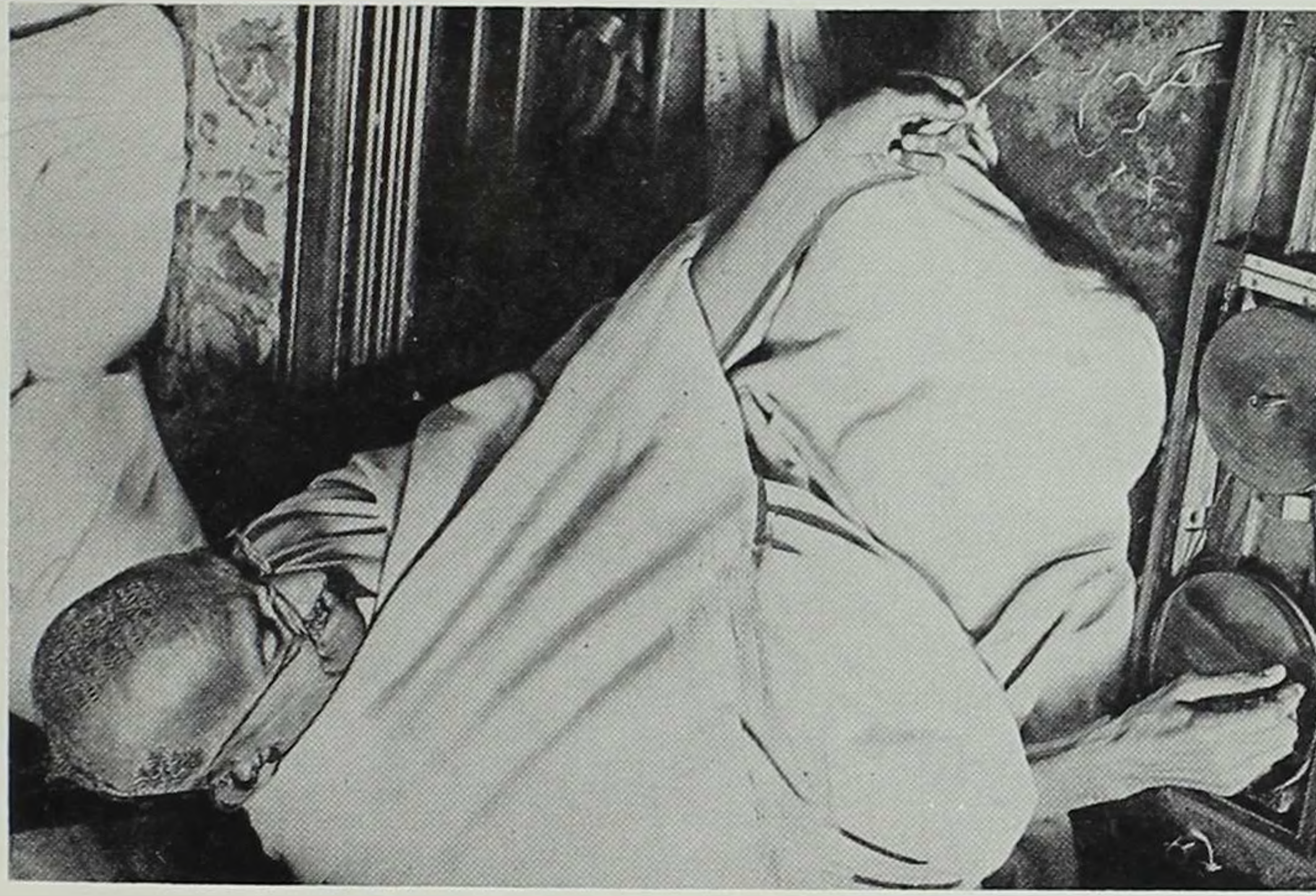
Associated Press Photo

Winston Churchill "was smoking his usual stage prop, a big, expensive cigar. He never smoked more than an inch or so."



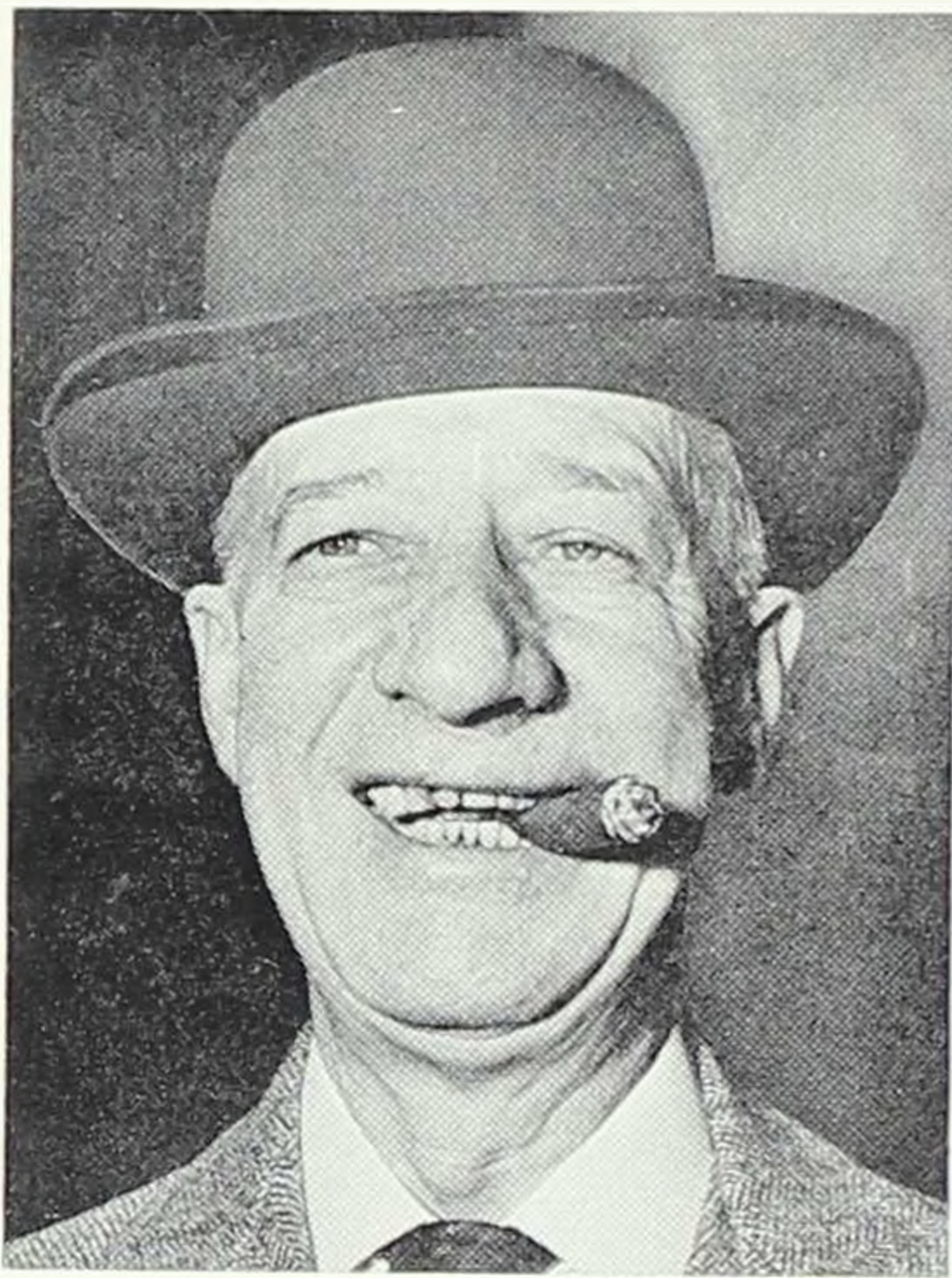
Des Moines Register Photo

In introducing Bliven to a Washington audience, Carrie Chapman Catt said she had dandled him as a baby on her knee in his parent's home.

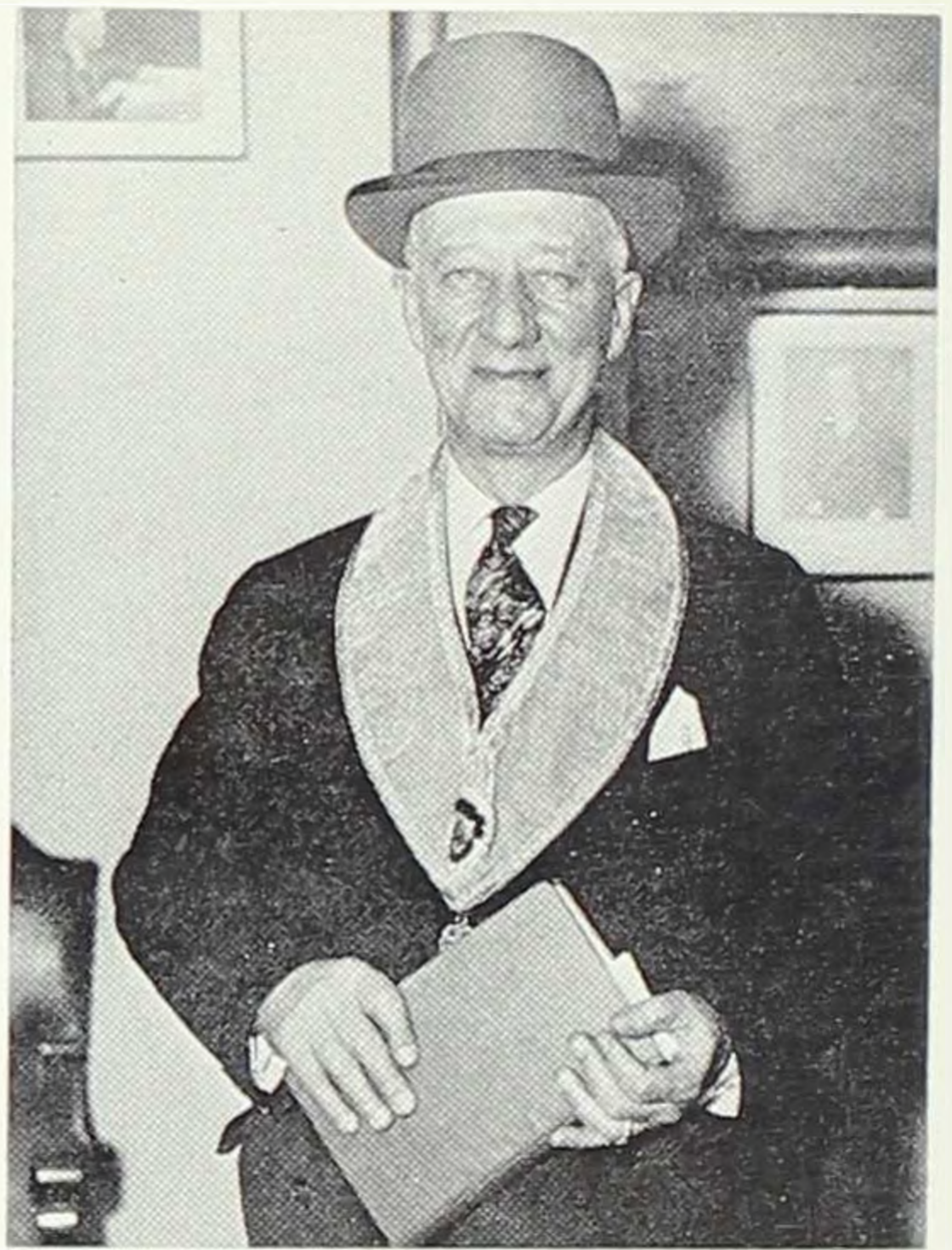


Wide World Photo

"Mahatma Gandhi was sitting on the floor with the little hand spinning wheel that he carried everywhere; he was wrapped in a huge white blanket."



Acme Photo



Associated Press Photo

"A gravelly-voiced man who grew up in poverty in New York's slum, Alfred E. Smith had little formal education, spoke with a pronounced East Side accent, and was one of the ablest political leaders of his time." At the right he wears the red and gold insignia of the Tammany Sachem.



International News Photo

"A favorite of mine, and of a great many other people, was Fiorella La Guardia," mayor of New York from 1933 to 1945. He had "a personality so vivid that he became the hero of a musical comedy on Broadway."



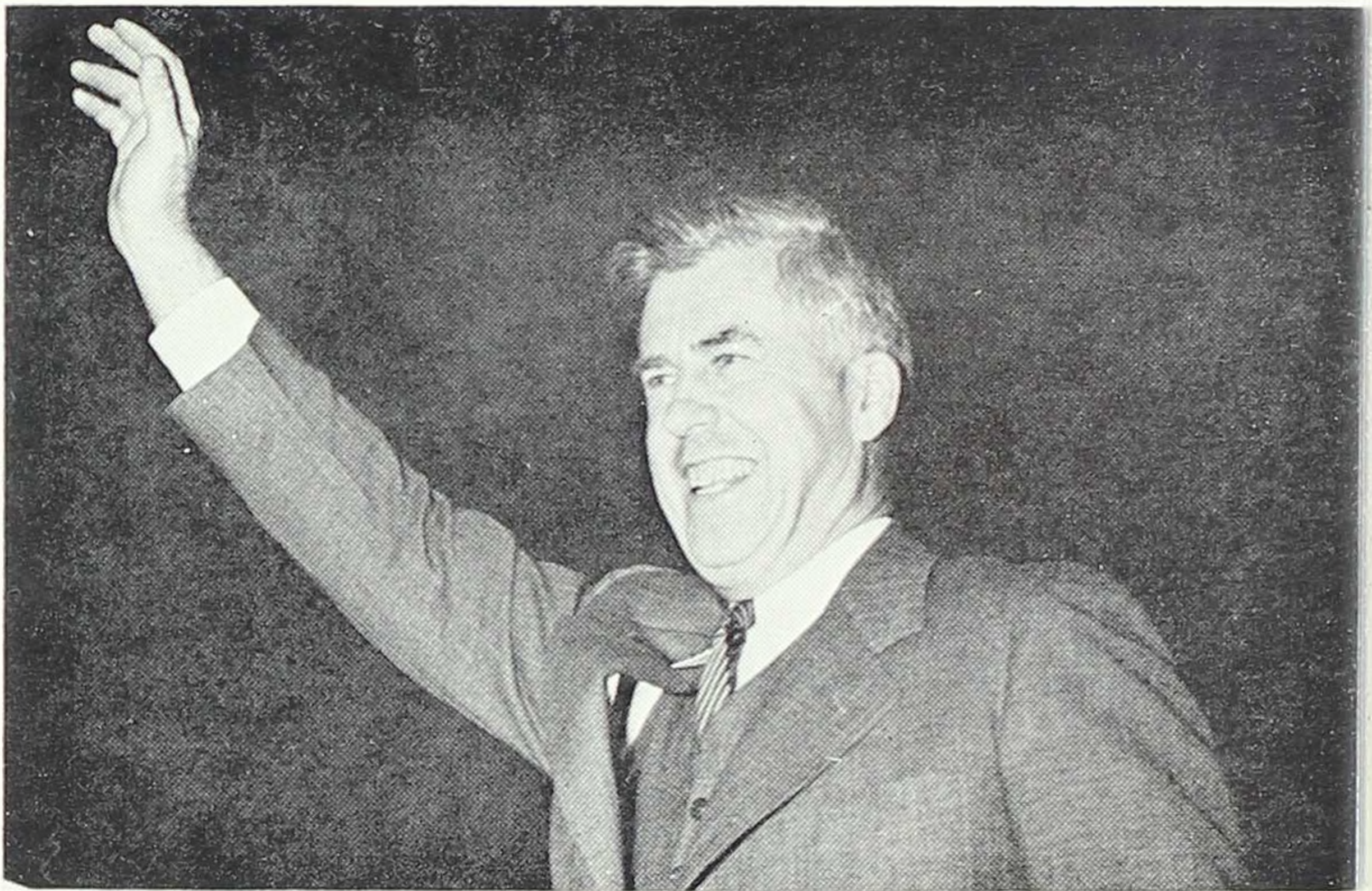
Des Moines Register Photo

Iowa Senator L. J. Dickinson, Alf Landon, Republican presidential candidate, President F. D. Roosevelt, Iowa Governor Clyde Herring. Man on the far right was not identified in 1936 but became president of the United States in 1945.



Oedar Rapids Gazette Photo

Hoover and Truman became fast friends after World War II. Both were principal speakers at the dedication of each other's Presidential Libraries. They meet informally before the dedication of the Hoover Presidential Library at West Branch on August 10, 1962.



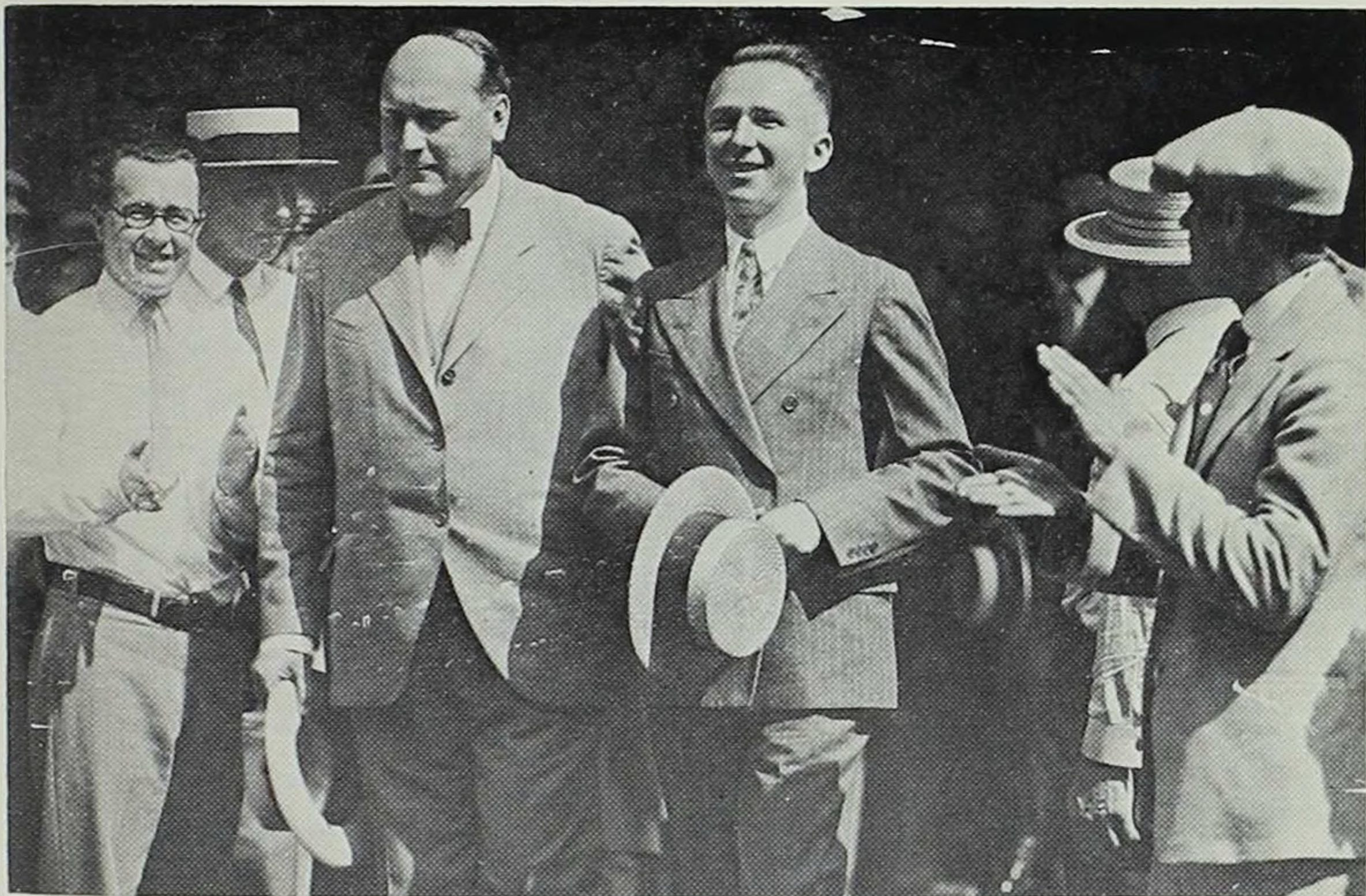
Acme Photo

Henry A. Wallace waves to a crowd at an outdoor rally, in Washington, D. C., where he threatened to form a third party if the Democratic administration persisted in its "anti-Russian course." His Third Party received "only about 1,100,000 votes."



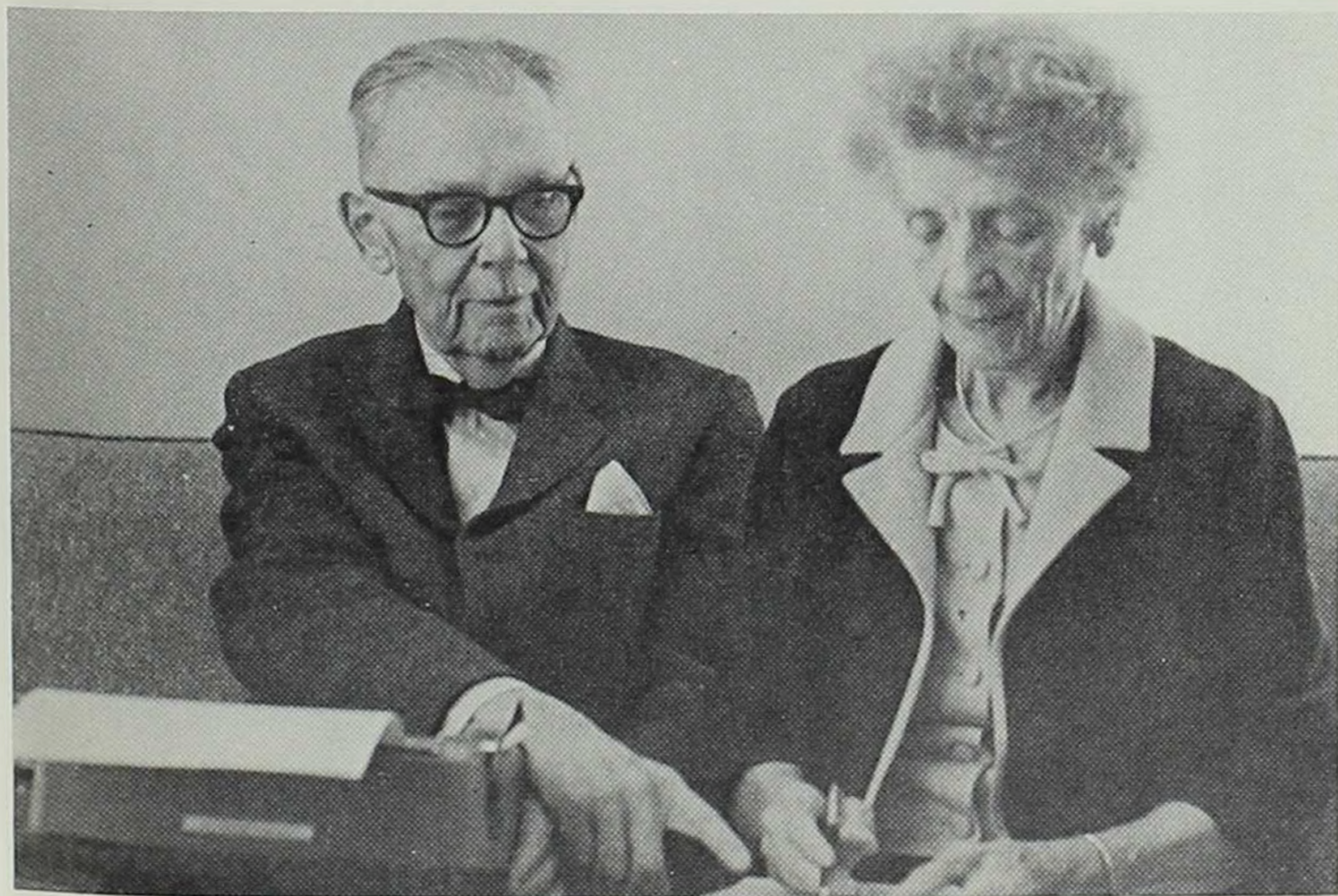
Des Moines Register Photo

William W. Waymack served on the Board of the Twentieth Century Fund with Bliven. He had served as editor of the *Des Moines Register* and was a member of the Atomic Energy Commission.



Des Moines Register Photo

Lieutenant Colonel Clarence Chamberlin, a resident of Denison, Iowa, flew the Atlantic in 1927. He is pictured here, right, in Des Moines on August 31, 1927, escorted by Governor John Hammill.

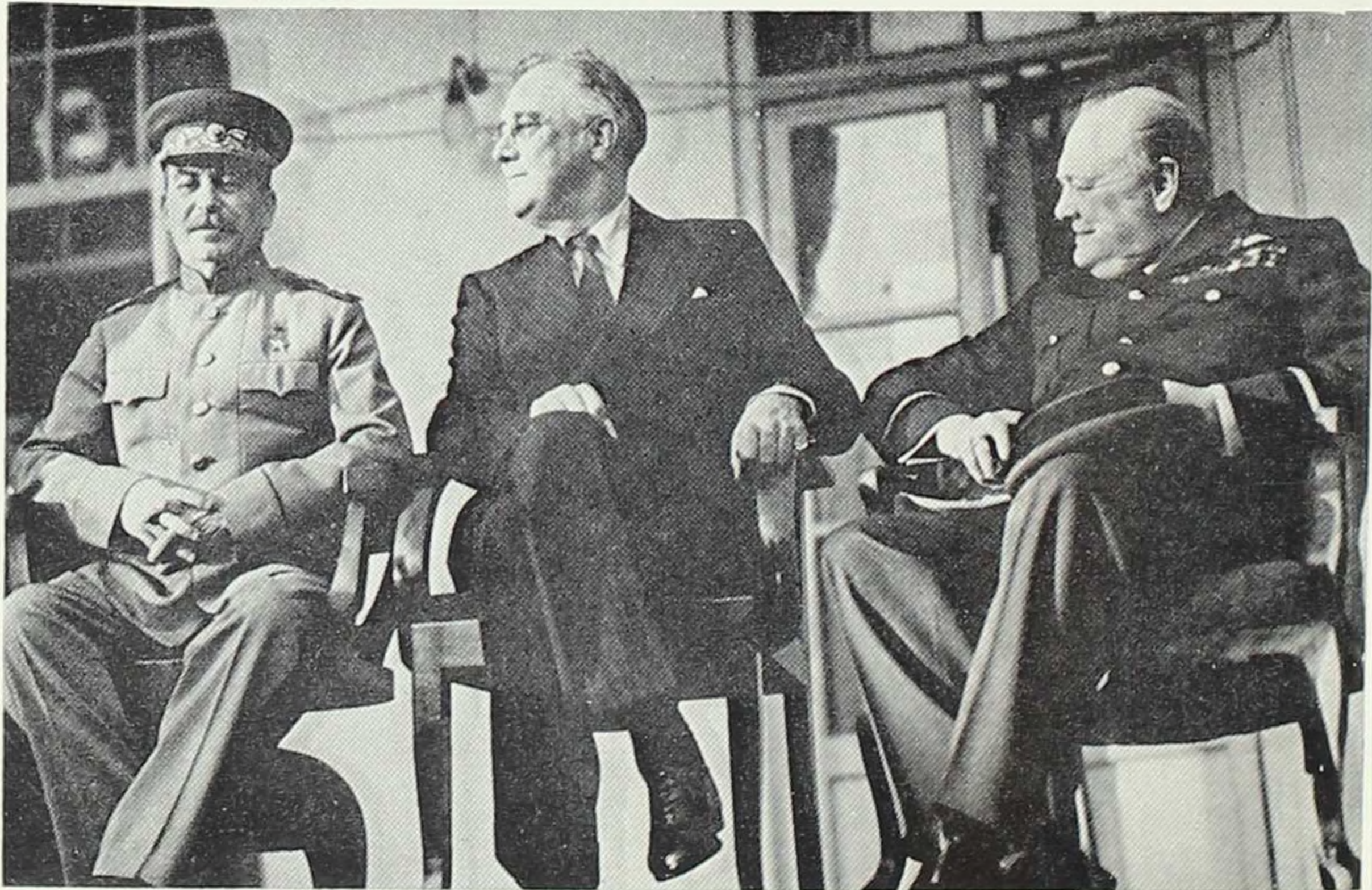


Bruce Bliven and his wife study a knotty problem as they work together on one of his recent manuscripts.



International News Photo

Jaunty in his nautical garb, Winston Churchill is pictured on a visit to the United States.



Acme Photo

Marshal Josef Stalin, left, President F. D. Roosevelt, center, and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, right, are pictured during the historic Teheran Conference.

"He says it's not unconstitutional, but will need some legislation," Smith told me. "I'll try to get it through." A few minutes later, I found myself out on the street, stunned by my success and the speed with which it had been accomplished.

Governor Smith was as good as his word. He summoned the legislature into special session, and bullied and persuaded it into passing the necessary law, framed in such a way that it applied almost exclusively to New York City, where the shortage was at its worst. The city immediately adopted a necessary supplementary ordinance, signed by Mayor John F. Hylan.

The results surprised everyone and astonished me. With this 30 per cent subsidy, speculative builders ran up a huge quantity of apartment houses in the Bronx, where there was plenty of vacant land. Their total value amounted to many millions of dollars. There followed a great Hegira from the terrible slums of the Lower East Side. But the slum dwellings thus vacated did not, of course, stand idle; these flats were filled by new European immigrants.

A favorite of mine, and of a great many other people, was Fiorello La Guardia, whom I knew from 1922 until his death in 1947, a personality so vivid that he became a hero of a musical comedy.

After serving as Mayor of New York for three terms, from 1933 to 1945, he retired from this strenuous office because of impaired health. He

did heroic work in cleaning up the raging corruption in the city government, put through a badly needed new city charter, began a program of slum clearance, and took important steps toward the beautification of the town.

Somehow the Mayor got it into his head that I was a storehouse of information about the political leanings of New York Liberals. Every few months I would get a call from the Mayor's secretary toward the end of the afternoon, asking if Fiorello could pick me up at my office and take me to the Tavern-on-the-Green in Central Park for a drink. These were lively occasions; the Mayor rode in an official limousine, with a police chauffeur at the wheel, a plain-clothes detective beside him, and a shotgun in a special rack on the back of the front seat. I felt ignorant about the intricacies of local politics, but I knew how to ask questions, when I had a chance to insert one into the Mayor's monologue. Perhaps he just wanted a listener outside the circle of his official family.

Another article of mine succeeded in getting a sadistic army officer sent to a Federal penitentiary—the only such achievement in my life.

Though the First World War ended on November 11, 1918, many months later there were still numbers of American soldiers in Europe. They had little to do and discipline was a problem. There were several military prisons to which transgressors were sent for varying terms.

Soon after I became managing editor of *The Globe*, two or three men, recently discharged from the army, came to see me with tales of shocking cruelty practiced at one of these prison camps, just outside Paris. The officer in charge, Major F. H. Smith, was so rough on the prisoners in his care that he was universally known as "Hard-boiled" Smith. Men were gravely punished for minor infractions of prison regulations, some were beaten, put on bread and water, or forced to stand at attention for hours. Some were pegged down, on their backs, on the grass, arms and legs spread-eagled, gazing up into the hot sun.

I checked the stories of these men against each other, got verification from a correspondent in Paris, and then wrote several articles telling the whole story. (I had been in newspaper work long enough to know that a series has far greater impact than the same material told all in one day.) I had the stories set into type and then took a set of proofs down to Washington, where I had obtained an appointment with Wilson's Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker.

Baker was an odd choice for the job. He was an avowed pacifist, so much so that he was actually investigated by Congress for this reason during his term in office.

I handed him proofs of my articles and explained the story while he skimmed them. Then I made a short speech. "Mr. Secretary," I said, "there are

many thousands of American boys still in Europe. Their parents will be greatly worried at the news of what's going on. If you will give me your word that you'll investigate and stop this kind of thing, I'll kill my series."

Baker drew himself up to his full height, which was, as I remember, about five feet six. "I'll make no bargain with you," he said, "which implies any wrongdoing on the part of the American Army."

For probably the only time in my life, I answered like a movie hero. "Very well, Mr. Secretary," I said. "The first article will appear tomorrow."

It did, too, and the series, which was syndicated to other leading papers, created a national sensation. It was reprinted in *The Congressional Record*, and there were indignant speeches in the House and Senate. Major Smith was promptly recalled from France, tried and sentenced to eighteen months in prison. But he had political influence in the higher reaches of the army, and after serving four months, he was quietly paroled.

The most dramatic single episode in my reporting career was probably when I told the story, for the first time in any American magazine, of the horrors of the Machado regime in Cuba. I had gone to that country to report the Sixth Pan-American Conference, at which all the countries of North, Central and South America were represented (except Canada).

The conference did not make any world shattering news. Long before it ended, I was spending my time on another and different story. Members of the underground opposition contacted me with the real story of what was happening in the island.

The president at that time was General Gerardo Machado y Morales, who had been elected as a Conservative in 1924 for a term of four years. He was as bloody-handed a dictator as the hemisphere had seen in a long time, suppressing all civil liberties and relentlessly rooting out every opponent—especially liberals, radicals and trade union leaders. My informants supplied me with solid testimony about what was happening and I wrote a series of articles in *The New Republic*.

I charged Machado with the murder of several editors of opposition newspapers and named them. I reported how freedom of speech, of the press, and of assembly had been halted. Several hundred opponents, some of whom I listed, had disappeared without a trace. My informants believed they had been taken to old Morro Castle, at the entrance to the harbor; it was known there were dungeons near the waterline, with chutes down which bodies could be slid into the bay, swarming with sharks.

Machado had the approval of American capitalists, owners of two-thirds of the island's productive wealth. The United States ambassador was a close personal friend, which made it harder

for protests from the United States to be heard. Under the Platt Amendment of 1901, the United States had the right to intervene in Cuba whenever it deemed this desirable, but Washington showed no signs of doing so in 1928.

As far as I know, I was the first journalist to tell the truth about Machado in any American periodical of general circulation. My articles got a lot of attention, but if they had any effect in Washington, I was not aware of it.

After five years, Machado's misdeeds finally caught up with him; he had aroused so much and such bitter opposition that he was forced to flee the country. He was succeeded by a couple of puppet presidents, but a new strong man soon emerged—Fulgencio Batista y Zaldivar, who repeated all Machado's acts of suppression.