



HAROLD GILES HOFFMAN (February 7, 1896–June 4, 1954), forty-first governor of New Jersey, was born in South Amboy, New Jersey, the descendant of a family which traced its lineage to the Dutch colonial settlement of New Amsterdam.

While still in high school, Hoffman became a reporter for a Perth Amboy newspaper and an occasional stringer for the *New York Times* and the *New Brunswick Daily Home News*. Upon graduation, Hoffman joined the *Perth Amboy Evening News* as a full-time employee, and quickly rose to assistant city editor and later sports editor. A dispute with the paper's owner ended Hoffman's newspaper career, and he took a job with the Du Pont Laboratory at Parlin. Shortly after the United States declared war on Germany, Hoffman enlisted with Company H, Third Infantry, New Jersey National Guard (later part of the 114th infantry of the 29th—Blue and Gray—Division of the American Expeditionary Force). The young enlistee quickly earned the rank of sergeant and was enrolled in officers' training school. Graduating third in his class, Lieutenant Hoffman rejoined his regiment as it was about to embark for France. He saw action in the Meuse-Argonne offensive, and, at twenty-one, he was promoted to captain on the battlefield.

Hoffman returned to South Amboy a war hero and took a position as treasurer of the South Amboy Trust Company. Over the next ten years, he assumed a prominent place in South Amboy's business community. He served as vice-president of his bank, president of the Hoffman-Lehrer Real Estate Corporation, president of the Mid-State Title Guaranty & Mortgage Company, treasurer of the National Realty & Investment Corporation, and director of the Investor Building & Loan Association. Hoffman also

became well known in New Jersey banking circles. In 1919, Hoffman married Lillie May Moss, daughter of a prominent South Amboy dentist, Dr. William Penn Moss.

Young Hoffman also became active in South Amboy and Middlesex County Republican politics. Beginning his political career with an appointment as treasurer of South Amboy, Hoffman entered electoral politics in 1923 as Middlesex County assemblyman. In 1925, the Republicans nominated him for mayor of South Amboy with a write-in vote, and he handily won the fall election. Hoffman continued his meteoric political career as secretary to Senate President Morgan F. Larson, and in November 1926 he defeated Democrat Fred W. De Voe for congressman from the Third District by a wide margin. He won reelection in 1928, easily defeating Democrat John R. Phillips, Jr. Though Congressman Hoffman's career in Washington was undistinguished, his success in the usually Democratic Third District earned him the chairmanship of the Middlesex County Republican party and a prominent place in the state's Republican hierarchy.

When Morgan F. Larson became governor in 1929, Hoffman was slated for a prominent position in his administration. The young congressman had endeared himself to the state's strong Republican machines, in particular the Camden County organization of David Baird, Jr., and when William L. Dill's term as commissioner of the Department of Motor Vehicles expired in 1930, Hoffman gained the four-year appointment, which paid \$10,000 annually. Rightfully uncertain of Republican chances in the special election his resignation from Congress would necessitate in the Third District, Hoffman refused to step down, serving out the remainder of his term and holding the motor vehicles position at the same time.

Hoffman used the motor vehicles post to its fullest advantage, speaking at functions of all kinds throughout the state. He was a brilliant speaker, debater and campaigner, and as commissioner he had an

ideal platform from which to exercise his skills. He was even able to build a rather substantial national reputation as a spokesman for highway safety, a comparatively new concern in 1930.

Hoffman always considered the visibility afforded the commissioner of motor vehicles a stepping stone to higher elected office. He built an efficient and fiercely loyal personal political organization, and his arduous campaigning for Republican functionaries from Newark to Cape May earned him the gratitude of many party workers.

In 1934, Hoffman reportedly considered challenging Senator Hamilton Fish Kean for the Republican senatorial nomination, but was persuaded instead to seek the GOP gubernatorial nomination. His primary opponents were controversial Atlantic County Senator Emerson L. Richards, Essex County Senator Joseph G. Wolber, and Robert Carey. Hoffman easily won, drawing more votes than his three opponents combined. William L. Dill, Hoffman's predecessor as commissioner of motor vehicles and now a judge of the Court of Errors and Appeals, received the nomination of the Democratic party. Dill, a protégé of Mayor Frank Hague of Jersey City, won an impressive primary victory over Monmouth County's maverick Assemblyman Theron McCampbell. In a show of backing for Dill, the Hague Hudson County machine turned out more than 110,000 votes, of which 107,000 went to Judge Dill. The Democratic nominee had previously been defeated for the governor's post in the Republican landslide of 1928.

The campaign was unimpressive. Dill, though an inadequate campaigner who avoided the public spotlight, attempted to develop issues, primarily in the area of tax reform. Hoffman, an eager and superb campaigner, remained deliberately aloof from issues. The candidates, traditionally but appropriately, accused each other of being the tools of bossism.

The election was an upset. For the first time in twenty-seven years, the Democrats lost the governorship in a non-

presidential election year. Mayor Frank Hague's inability to put his candidate over would be interpreted years later as a sellout of Judge Dill in order to get the affable Hoffman, later branded a Hague Republican, elected to the governorship. Little evidence exists to substantiate this contention. Actually, the vote illustrated the continued power of the Republican county machines, especially Enoch L. (Nucky) Johnson's Atlantic County organization. It also strongly indicated a far-reaching personal popularity for the thirty-nine-year-old governor-elect. And in a period of dramatically declining Republican fortunes throughout the country, Hoffman was widely championed as a potential contender for national office.

When Harold Hoffman became governor, an estimated 650,000 New Jersey residents were directly dependent on state and local government for public relief. Many thousands more were severely affected by the deepening economic depression. In the face of rapidly declining tax revenues New Jersey's municipal governments were hard-pressed to deliver essential services. Several cities defaulted, and others verged on financial collapse. With the full effect of the New Deal depression-fighting programs still in the future, the problems of meeting the depression crisis fell squarely on the shoulders of state and local government.

As governor, however, Harold Hoffman stood only on the peripheries of many of the important developments in state and local government that took place during his tenure. Although he was deeply embroiled in controversy and constantly in the news, his influence on the direction of state affairs declined continuously during his term as governor.

One of the first problems Hoffman attempted to meet—and, owing to his heavy-handed and conspiratorial manner of handling it, the cause of his first controversy—involved increasing state revenues to meet the increased demands for services from the state. In his inaugural address, Hoffman asked for a state sales tax, an unpopular issue he had skillfully

avoided mentioning during the campaign. A sales tax, or some other broadening of the state's taxes, had wide support among the state's big-city politicians. However, numerous powerful business and taxpayers' associations, as well as the majority of the governor's own party, opposed any new taxes. To these people, fiscal responsibility meant reduced expenditures and a balanced budget, not increased spending.

Actively opposed by many Republican legislators, Hoffman made the fateful decision to deal with Hague's Democratic supporters in the legislature. Amidst an uproar from his fellow Republicans, Hoffman used his newfound allies to ram through the sales tax. The Hoffman-Hague "unholy deal," coming after just six months of the new governor's term, destroyed the credibility of his leadership with much of the Republican party. It had an especially adverse effect on Hoffman's relationship with the increasingly powerful Clean Government Group, a Republican faction headed by Essex County lawyer Arthur T. Vanderbilt.

The Vanderbilt wing of the party gave lip service to liberal and reformist ideals, but though it understood that the Republican party must change its public image to win elections and influence public policy in the Democratic New Deal era it was fundamentally conservative. Indeed, the Clean Government Group capitalized on Mayor Hague's failure to give the New Deal more than lukewarm support by implying that the Clean Republicans would be the New Jersey standard-bearers of progressive politics. In reality, however, in the mid-thirties the Clean Government faction devoted most of its energies to preaching governmental cost cutting and maintenance, if not reduction, of existing tax rates.

High on the new movement's list of pariahs were the last vestiges of the old Republican organization in Essex, Camden and Atlantic counties. Hoffman, already suspect for his close ties to the state's Republican bosses (the governor virtually ignored the Clean Government

faction in awarding patronage) became the Vanderbilt Republicans' public enemy number one after the Hoffman-Hague sales tax deal.

The well-organized outcry against the tax measure was deafening. Skillfully using the issue to strengthen its position within the party, the Clean Government Group, made significant inroads throughout the state in the September 1935 Republican primary. Beaten, the governor was obliged to sign a sales tax repeal the following month. With his usual flair for the dramatic, Hoffman signed the bill in red ink, symbolizing what he foresaw as an "unbalanced budget and maybe hungry people."

Hoffman's first year as governor had not ended before a second major crisis rocked his administration. In late 1935, he embroiled himself in the sensational controversy surrounding the Lindbergh kidnapping case. Bruno Richard Hauptmann, convicted of the kidnap-murder of the Lindbergh baby, was awaiting execution at Trenton State Prison when the governor decided to reopen the case. The governor believed that Hauptmann had not committed the crime alone, and in the interest of justice he made a dramatic visit to Hauptmann's death cell, hoping to induce the convicted kidnapper to name his accomplices. The circumstances surrounding the governor's bizarre behavior suggest that Hoffman was more interested in the case for its potential publicity value than, as he professed, for justice.

Just before Hauptmann's scheduled execution date, the governor granted him a thirty-day reprieve and ordered the state police to reopen their investigation. What followed was a grotesque sequence of events which featured a further kidnapping, an induced confession, manufactured evidence, and assorted other travesties of justice, in all of which Governor Hoffman was deeply implicated. Hoffman's apparent intention to grant a second reprieve was blocked and Hauptmann was electrocuted. If the governor had hoped to advance his reputa-

tion by intervening in the case, he had severely miscalculated. A hostile press pilloried his behavior, and the resultant publicity further damaged his credibility.

Nonetheless, Hoffman still entertained national political ambitions. Going into the 1936 presidential election year, Hoffman's political associates were certain that the governor was maneuvering for either the presidential or vice-presidential nomination. However, if Hoffman was to have any chance at the Republican National Convention, it was essential that he emerge from a harmonious state primary in May as the head of his party's delegation to Cleveland. He was not to do so.

First, the strong sympathy in the state party for Governor Alfred M. Landon of Kansas made an unpledged delegation impossible. Second, the Republican state committee chose three at-large delegates who were less than enthusiastic about their governor (Hoffman was designated the fourth at-large delegate). Third, Hoffman faced a strong challenge for his place on the delegation from former Congressman Franklin W. Fort, who ran a vigorous campaign managed by the Clean Government faction.

Although the governor was able to beat Fort, he came in a poor fourth, thus destroying any chance he might have had at the Cleveland convention. The hollow victory in the 1936 state primary left Hoffman on the defensive within his own party. He devoted the remainder of his tenure as governor to his future political ambitions. Events, many of which carried far-reaching significance, were little influenced by the governor, who was taking on all the early characteristics of a lame duck executive.

In 1936, the state Emergency Relief Administration was disbanded, and the responsibility for administering and partially financing the relief burden was shifted back onto the municipal governments. That year, even though the governor had expressed reservations about the propriety of federal welfare, the legislature extended the provisions of the Fed-

eral Social Security Act to many New Jersey citizens.

The governor played a peripheral role in another hotly contested issue, the question of state supervision and control of municipal finances; his foes within the Republican party dominated in the struggle. Backed financially by the state's powerful business interests and politically by Vanderbilt's Clean Government Group, the Princeton Local Government Survey was launched late in 1935. Under the direction of Princeton University President Harold W. Dodds, a group of Princeton professors was commissioned to study and draft legislation which would severely restrict the powers of New Jersey local governments to administer their own fiscal affairs. In a skillfully orchestrated lobbying campaign supported by the Clean Government Republicans, the professors pushed the Princeton Survey bills through the legislature. Although the Princeton bills did not go as far as many of their business supporters had desired, they created a strong Department of Municipal Affairs with substantial control and supervisory powers over municipal finances. The governor did not play an instrumental role in these significant developments.

In fact, Hoffman was increasingly preoccupied with his political future. His final annual message to the legislature was groundwork for a 1940 gubernatorial bid. (Hoffman was constitutionally prohibited from succeeding himself, but his vision of a second term in 1940 was not unreasonable. His predecessor and successor, A. Harry Moore, would serve three terms—a record under the 1844 constitution). Unfortunately, the governor's candidate for the 1937 Republican gubernatorial nomination, Senator Clifford R. Powell of Burlington County, was soundly defeated by the Reverend Lester H. Clee, Essex County's state senator, a Clean Government luminary who had made his opposition to Hoffman a central issue in his campaign. Clee lost a close November election to Moore.

Under the circumstances, Hoffman was

not sorry to see the Republican defeat. The former governor managed to maneuver his own appointment as executive director of the New Jersey Unemployment Compensation Commission (UCC) — a \$12,000-a-year post. From there, he could run a nonstop campaign for the 1940 GOP gubernatorial nomination. In the primary that year, however, he was narrowly defeated by Clean Government Republican Robert C. Hendrickson of Gloucester County, despite the considerable, and this time apparent, assistance of Hoffman's old friend, Mayor Frank Hague. But Hoffman's substantial organization within the Republican party withheld its support from Hendrickson, and Charles Edison, businessman son of the Wizard of Menlo Park, overwhelmingly defeated him.

Undaunted, Hoffman took leave of his post at the UCC in June 1942 to accept a commission in the Army transport command. (Reportedly, he had to drop thirty-six pounds in order to pass the Army physical.) He left the service in March 1946 with the honorary rank of colonel and returned to his post at the UCC.

When the Division of Employment Security was created in the Labor and Industry Department during Governor Alfred E. Driscoll's administration, Hoffman left his UCC position to become its first director. Aside from his official business, he was much in demand as a paid speaker, under the management of Thomas Brady, Inc., of New York City. He was a frequent toastmaster for the Order of Circus Saints and Sinners, an organization of which he was honorary life president.

On March 18, 1954, Robert B. Meyner, the newly inaugurated Democratic governor, suddenly suspended Hoffman from his post in the Division of Employment Security for alleged irregularities in purchases. For weeks the charges against Hoffman remained unsubstantiated, leading his loyal followers to charge Meyner with a political witch hunt. Then on June 4, while in the New York City apartment of the Circus Saints and

Sinners, Harold Hoffman died of an apparent heart attack. The calls for Meyner to clear the former governor's name became intense.

Several weeks later the government released its well-documented case against Hoffman. A letter Hoffman had written to his daughter shortly before his death substantiated the sordid tale, which spanned most of his political career. Hoffman had embezzled approximately \$300,000 from the South Amboy Trust Company, of which he was an officer, in order to pay off early campaign debts. According to Hoffman's letter, a "certain wealthy elder candidate who is now deceased" had agreed to pay Hoffman's campaign costs. The wealthy benefactor had reneged, and Hoffman had embezzled to cover his debts. From at least 1949 on, he had used state funds from the Division of Employment Security to cover his bank's shortages.

Other charges of malfeasance, misfeasance, misconduct and malconduct in office were leveled at the former governor and several close associates. In addition it turned out that another state official who had learned of the embezzlement had blackmailed Hoffman for \$150,000.

"Morality, in its ultimate determination, is a funny thing," Hoffman wrote to his daughter. Indeed, for Harold Hoffman, as for many other public officials over the years, morality was not an easily comprehensible commodity.

Records of Governor Harold G. Hoffman, New Jersey State Library, Bureau of Archives and History, Trenton, N.J.

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