

A Time of Preparation

Of the four men considered here, Herbert Clark Hoover was the oldest and, as thirty-first President of the United States, certainly preeminent. He was born of Quaker parents, Jesse and Huldah Minthorn Hoover, on August 11, 1874, in West Branch. His father died when Herbert was six, his mother—a victim of pneumonia complicated by typhoid fever—when he was nine. After the death of his mother, the child was sent to live with his uncle, Allen Hoover, and his aunt Millie on a Cedar County farm. The Allen Hoovers had little money, but as Quakers neither they, nor indeed their community, could have failed to provide for the orphaned boy. Later, Hoover wrote in almost idyllic terms how his eyes were “filled with the wonders of Iowa’s streams and woods, of the mystery of growing crops.” And his heart and mind were filled with the faith and sturdy independence of the Society of Friends. At the age of eleven he was sent to another of his uncles, Dr. Henry John Minthorn, in Oregon, where there was a greater likelihood of his obtaining a college education.

In 1891 he entered the newly established Stanford University in California, and there he met a young woman of his own age, Miss Lou Henry, who had moved with her family from Waterloo, Iowa to the West Coast at about the same time as Hoover. By the time of his graduation in 1895, “an understanding” existed between the two, and they went on to correspond over the next four years while Hoover launched a career in international mining engineering in Australia’s “outback.” Hoover returned to the United States in 1899 to marry Miss Henry, and the two departed for China, where Hoover was to spend the next three years. (His wife had unusual interest and ability in languages, and it is said that in later years the two frequently conversed domestically in Chinese.) Thereafter, his work, first for a London-based firm

and later as a freelance engineer, was to take him to a score of nations on four continents and earn him a worldwide reputation as technician, manager, and businessman. He also stirred admiration for his honesty by paying a group of creditors a great sum of money that had been embezzled by a business associate of Hoover’s and that he and his firm were not legally liable for.

It was during World War I that Hoover leaped to fame as a public servant. August 1914 found him in London, in charge of a far-flung mining and engineering empire that had brought him much more than the million dollars that he had once said any capable man should be able to make by the age of forty. At the outbreak of war, the United States embassy in London found itself besieged by thousands of Americans stranded in Europe. It asked the Great Engineer for help. Hoover organized an effective volunteer effort—the American Relief Committee—which sent 120,000 of his fellow citizens home in good shape, though in the meantime his own business went to pieces. Next, he set up and directed the Commission for Relief in Belgium, which fed ten million civilians in German-occupied Belgium and northern France, and he headed several organizations aimed at averting famine in postwar Europe. Alexander Solzhenitsyn has remarked that the Hoover-directed American Relief Administration saved millions of lives in Russia during the early Twenties.

Now committed to public service, Hoover became secretary of commerce in President Warren G. Harding’s cabinet and continued in that position under President Calvin Coolidge. In accepting the position, Hoover had exacted from Harding the promise that his influence would not be restricted to Commerce, and certainly he played a far more influential role than his position in the Commerce Department would suggest. His experience with food relief

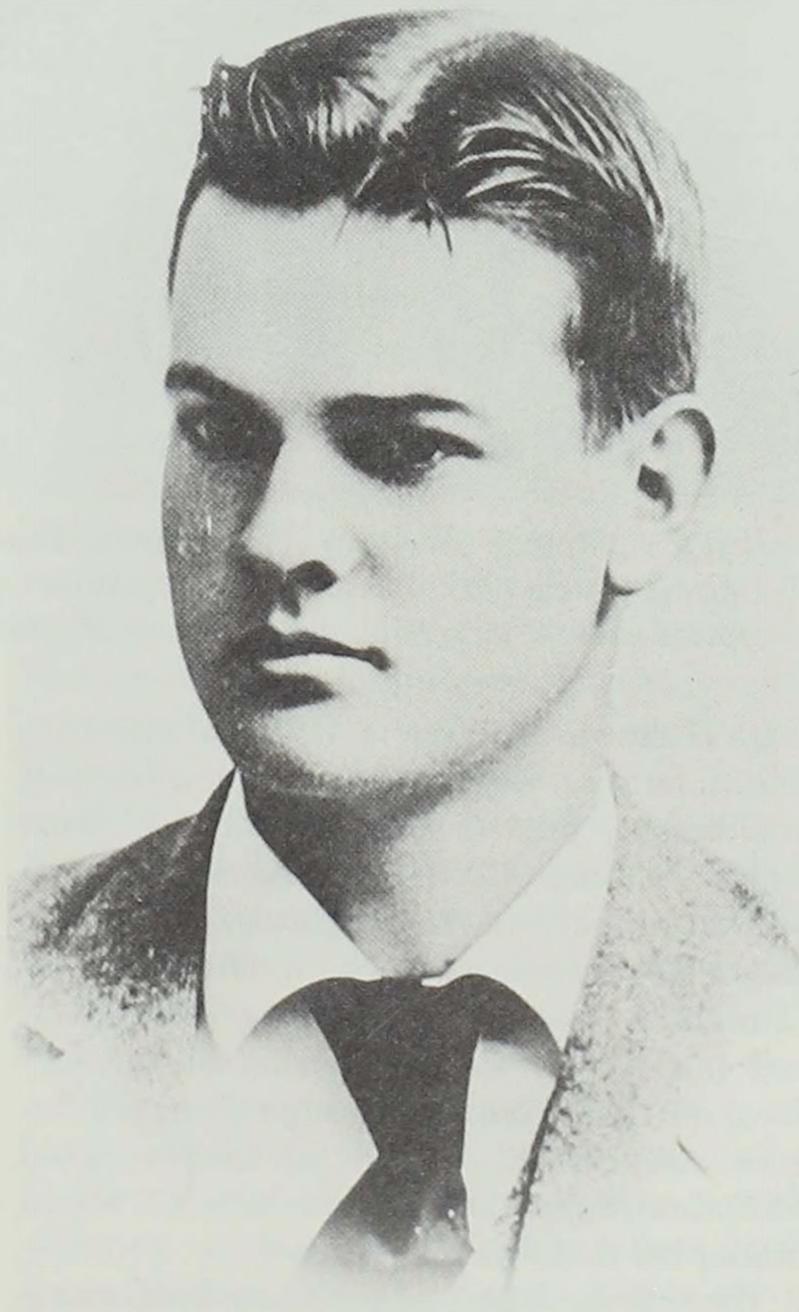
gave him a strong interest in the marketing of farm products, and this brought him into jurisdictional and philosophical conflict with another Iowan, Henry C. Wallace, the secretary of agriculture. Friction increased after Calvin Coolidge became president. Though he thought Hoover a busybody, the President disliked Wallace and distrusted his programs, and thus he supported Hoover in what became a continuing conflict. Though Hoover regarded Wallace as a "dour Scotsman" who "made trouble for the Department of Commerce," he had recommended the Ames professor for his cabinet position and does not seem to have felt any personal animosity toward him. Since Hoover was winning the arguments, he was probably insensitive to the resentment he was raising in Wallace. Resentment in Henry C. Wallace the father became enmity in Henry A. Wallace the son, who at one point blamed the frustrations of the cabinet struggle for his father's death in 1924.

Hoover had eyed the Republican presidential nomination as early as 1920. When Coolidge did not choose to run in 1928 there was little doubt that Hoover, widely regarded as the ablest man in public life, would receive the Republican nomination. He did, and he easily defeated Al Smith in November. But eight months after Hoover took office in 1929 the stock market crashed.

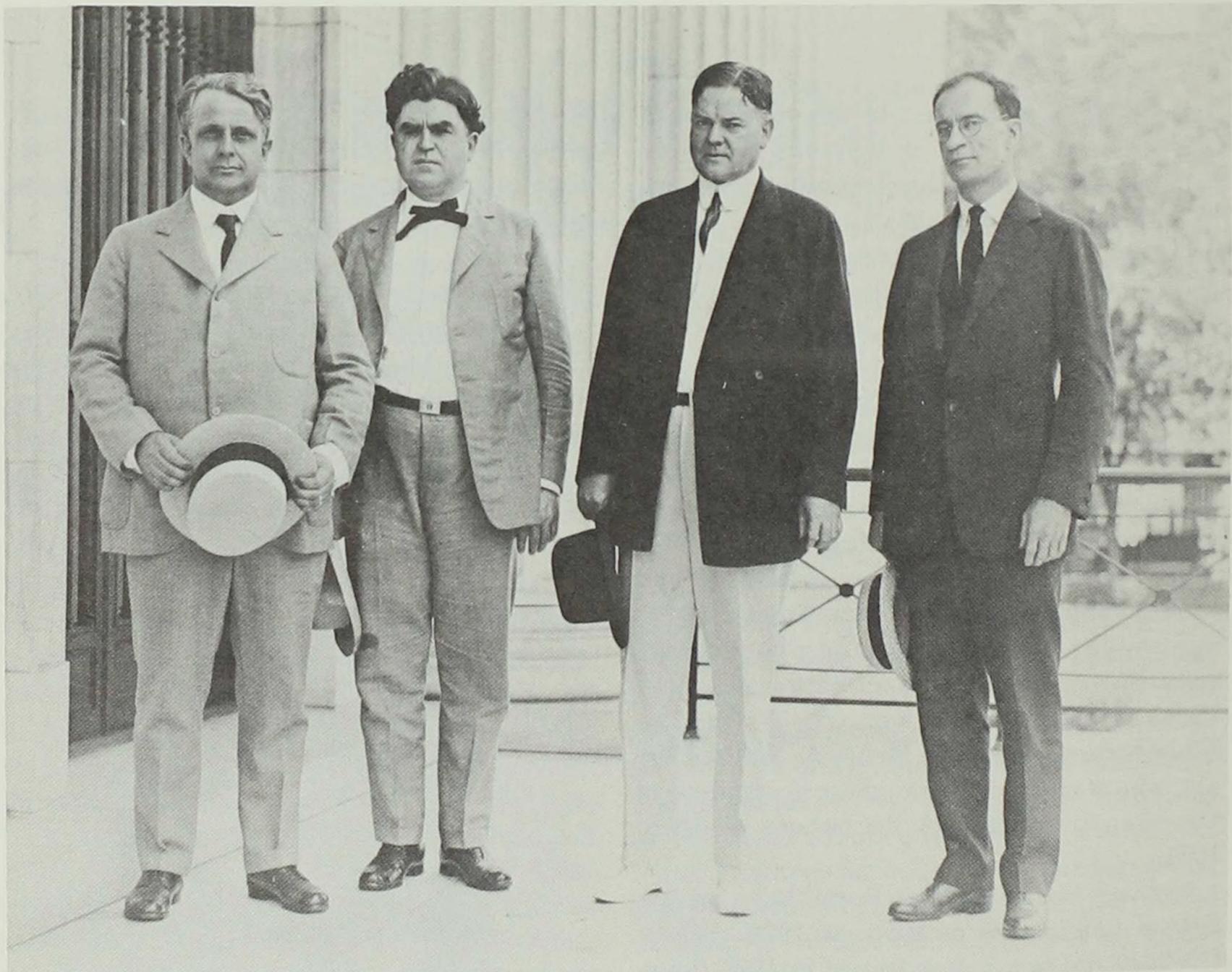
Now, a half-century later, the popular impression is that stocks plunged off the Big Board, investors leaped from skyscrapers, millions of workers got dismissal slips in lieu of pay, and the Depression settled over everything like a pall. Older people recall that misery was not ushered in so flamboyantly. The market, in fact, rebounded after a day or so and seemed to stabilize. In November it fell again, sharply, but the outlook was still "hopeful." Most economic activity continued, perhaps on sheer momentum, for some months. If Herbert Hoover surveyed the country's prospects as the bells rang in the new year 1930, he may have

felt some uneasiness. Yet he also must have felt that the crisis would prove manageable. Confidence must have seemed justified by his own and his country's past performance.

But past performance may have led another Iowa native of Hoover's generation to regard the start of the decade with something less than optimism. John Llewellyn Lewis was six years younger than Hoover; he was born on February 12, 1880, in the hamlet of Cleveland, near the town of Lucas, in Lucas County. The discovery of a rich



Herbert Hoover, age fifteen or sixteen, in Palo Alto, California (courtesy Herbert Hoover Presidential Library)



(left to right) U.S. Secretary of Labor James Davis, John L. Lewis, Herbert Hoover, and Alfred M. Ogle, president of the National Coal Operators Association, at the Conference of Coal Miners and Operators held in Washington, D.C., 1921 (Culver Pictures)

seam of coal in the area in 1876 had attracted John's father, Thomas Lewis; his maternal grandfather, John Watkins; and the Watkins family. Thomas Lewis married Ann Louisa Watkins, John Watkins' daughter, in 1878. She was a devout member of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, and thus Lewis was the second of our four Iowans to come under a strong religious influence early in life, though he later rejected Mormonism, possibly because he felt it would hinder his trade union career.

There is no dearth of anecdotes concerning Lewis's childhood and youth, but Lewis—as image-conscious as any modern adman—later became notorious for fitting his personal his-

tory to whatever the occasion demanded, and hard facts are few. As his family moved here and there in Iowa, he apparently attended schools in Oskaloosa, Colfax, and Des Moines, concluding his formal education after seventh grade, although he himself later claimed to have gone to high school in Des Moines. (Hoover and countless others, however, have attested to the high quality of Lewis's continuing self-education.) He lived with his family until he was twenty-one, by which time he had worked as newspaper boy, farmer, miner, and—not surprisingly—as an amateur actor and theater manager. He seems to have served as secretary of the United Mine Workers Union Local 1933 of Chariton, Iowa in 1901.

Then Lewis left Iowa for the Rocky Mountain mining region. Stories of that period abound. One tells how Lewis the humanitarian happened upon the Hanna, Wyoming mine disaster of 1903, where more than two hundred men died, and rendered incalculable aid; another tells how Lewis the warrior, attacked by a crazed mule in a mine shaft, stunned the beast with one blow of his fist and dispatched it by clubbing it with a two-by-four.

In 1906 he was back in Lucas County, and the next year he married Myrta Edith Bell, daughter of a doctor who was one of Lucas's leading citizens. Shortly afterwards, Lewis ran for mayor of Lucas and lost; he and a partner then opened a grain and feed business and failed. In the spring of 1908 he and his wife made a fateful decision. Along with Lewis's parents, five brothers, and a sister, they moved to the town of Panama, Illinois, in a relatively prosperous coal region. There the Lewises found jobs and the chance to become English-speaking leaders in an immigrant community. They entered town and union politics. John was quickly elected president of UMW Local 1475, one of the largest in Illinois. In 1909 he became a lobbyist for the UMW at the state capital in Springfield, and in 1911 Samuel Gompers appointed him an organizer for the American Federation of Labor. His activities and influence burgeoned. He became known as an artful and forceful negotiator. In 1917 he was elected vice-president of the United Mine Workers, and after rising to national prominence in the coal strike of 1919, he was elected union president in 1920.

The 1920s were hard times for the coal industry and its workers, with the UMW membership falling from 400,000 to 80,000. Still, Lewis prospered personally. He consolidated his position in the union and strengthened his reputation as labor autocrat, political powerhouse, and public personality. His name was mentioned as a Republican vice-presidential nominee in 1924 and, following Coolidge's

election, as a possible secretary of labor. Nothing came of either idea, though the administration flattered him as "a statesman of labor," and he and Commerce Secretary Hoover formed what historians Melvyn Dubofsky and Warren Van Tine have called "a mutual admiration society." Thereafter, the two Iowans occasionally supported each other under surprising and none-too-convenient circumstances. With his union in disarray, Lewis made a bid for influence by solidly backing Hoover for the presidency in 1928, but Hoover won so easily that Lewis could not pretend his aid had been crucial. He hoped to be appointed secretary of labor in the new administration, but apparently Hoover never seriously considered him. The President explained in his memoirs that such an appointment would have been impossible because of "a disgraceful incident at Herndon, Illinois." (Hoover meant the 1922 massacre of nineteen strikebreakers at Herrin, in which Lewis as UMW president played no direct role.)

Lewis could scarcely have been complacent as the 1920s ended. The first chill of the Depression had been felt in the mines, and his union was virtually in tatters. True, Lewis had used coal's troubles with rare skill. Economies he had instituted, for instance, left the national organization relatively stronger than the unruly districts and locals, and hence strengthened the union president's position. But, though he was able to suppress revolt to remain indisputably master in his own house, as the Thirties dawned that house was hardly more than a shell.

In the early 1920s, while Hoover and Henry C. Wallace, two strong-minded cabinet officers, struggled to provide differing solutions to the nation's farm problems, Wallace's son was demonstrating one of his several outstanding skills as editor of the family's great farm magazine, *Wallaces' Farmer*. The Des Moines-based magazine had

been founded by Henry A. Wallace's grandfather, "Uncle Henry" Wallace, an ordained minister who ever after sermonized with passion and knowledge in the editorial columns of his magazine. His grandson is said to have taken after Uncle Henry. "Young Henry" (Russell Lord says Iowans still called him that at mid-century and no doubt a few today remember him that way) was born Henry Agard Wallace on October 7, 1888, on a farm near Orient in Adair County. In 1892 his father, Henry C. Wallace, accepted a position as a professor at Iowa State College, and the younger Henry grew up in Ames. He was befriended by research scientist George Washington Carver, then a student at Iowa State. It was Carver who, Wallace later wrote, "first introduced me to the mysteries of plant fertilization," and as a teenager Wallace went on to conduct row-yield tests of corn that were to play a significant part in the revolution in plant genetics and the development of high-yield hybrid seed corn. Upon graduating from Iowa State in 1910, he joined the staff of *Wallaces' Farmer*, and in 1914 he married Ilo Browne, daughter of an Indianola merchant and land dealer. He became the magazine's editor when his father moved to Washington in 1921, and he took full charge upon Henry C. Wallace's death in 1924. All the while, he continued the corn-breeding experiments he had begun as a youth, and he now headed his own seed company. He became involved in politics—naturally enough, for *Wallaces' Farmer* had always fought for the interests of midwestern agriculture on all fronts, and in the late 1920s farmers needed help. Wallace had been raised a Republican, but after vainly backing Illinois Governor Frank O. Lowden against Hoover for the 1928 GOP presidential nomination, he supported Al Smith in the election. Sensing greater sympathy for his farm-aid approach among Democrats than Republicans, he became a Democrat henceforth, though he did not formally make the switch until well into the New Deal years.

By 1930 Wallace was engaged in three successful careers: he was the respected editor of a distinguished farm magazine; he was therefore also a powerful voice in agricultural politics; and at forty-one he was beginning to enjoy the financial rewards of being the president of the Pioneer Hi-Bred Corn Company. His star was high and rising.

Harry Lloyd Hopkins, youngest of the group, was born on August 17, 1890, in Sioux City. His father, David Aldona Hopkins—known as Al—was a sociable, somewhat footloose man who at various times was a gold prospector, traveling salesman, and harness shop proprietor, but he was at his best as a bowler. His wife had been a schoolteacher in South Dakota when he met and married her. She was a serious woman, a devout Methodist, and it was she who steered the family to Grinnell in anticipation of her children's college education. Harry Hopkins appears to have been more interested in athletics than scholarship when he was in high school, but he evinced an interest in politics—significantly, working for someone else's politi-



Henry A. Wallace in Europe (courtesy University of Iowa Library)



Presidential assistant Harry Hopkins meets reporters, January 1941 (Culver Pictures)

cal success. Confronted with a tradition of faculty-dominated class elections in which top students were chosen, Hopkins managed the election of an engaging fellow who made no pretense of scholastic interest. The annoyed faculty scheduled another vote. Hopkins' candidate won again, and this time the victory was final.

As a college student in Grinnell, Hopkins played baseball and entered class politics on his own, being elected class president in his senior year. No more serious a student than in high school, he was nonetheless influenced by several faculty members, among them Professor Edward A. Steiner. Steiner called his course "Applied Christianity," and in it Hopkins, who up to this point had shown himself to be his father's son, now showed that he was also his mother's. The course was, in fact, sociology,

and in it Hopkins received one of his few A's.

When Hopkins was graduated from Grinnell in 1912, he had planned to take over the operation of a newspaper in Montana. Instead, after a talk with Steiner, he headed in the opposite direction, to serve as a summer-camp counselor for the Christadora settlement house, headquartered in New York City. On the way east he stopped to watch William Howard Taft frustrate Theodore Roosevelt's effort to capture the Republican presidential nomination at Chicago and to see the Democrats nominate Woodrow Wilson at Baltimore. Politics and welfare work—those were to be his interests for the next thirty years.

In 1913 Hopkins worked days at Christadora and evenings for the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP), a major city charity. He also found time to marry Ethel Gross, a settlement-house colleague, and to campaign for John Mitchel for mayor. Mitchel won, and Hopkins was rewarded with a city job in child welfare. In 1917 he was rejected for military service because of his poor eyesight, though he had also recently suffered one of the succession of serious illnesses that plagued his adult life. He worked for the Red Cross mostly in the South, until returning to New York in 1922. Two years later he became the director of the New York Tuberculosis Association. In the autumn of 1928 he met Franklin Roosevelt for the first time. Roosevelt was then campaigning for the governorship of New York. It was a fateful meeting, presaging perhaps the closest and the most important personal-political relationship of this or any other century.

For the next couple of years the pace of Hopkins' life was as hectic as ever, and the year 1930 found him working days at the Tuberculosis Association and nights at the AICP. His marriage had failed, his wife winning custody of their three children and half his salary. His hours, responsibilities, and money worries would have left most men frazzled. But Hopkins was probably too busy to notice.