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## LIFE AND LEGACY OF HERBERT H. LEHMAN

Adapted from *Herbert H. Lehman: A Life of Public Service* by Duane Tananbaum

"Citizen and statesman, he has used wisdom and compassion as the tools of government and has made politics the highest form of public service"<sup>1</sup>





Mayer Lehman taught his son Herbert that he had a responsibility to help others and an obligation to do good works, and Herbert Lehman learned the lesson well. For most of his life, Herbert Lehman was heavily involved in charitable and philanthropic endeavors, including his long involvement with Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In 1928, Lehman began a new phase of his service to others when he was elected Lieutenant Governor of New York, a post to which he was re-elected in 1930. Two years later, when Franklin Roosevelt was elected President of the United States, Herbert Lehman was elected to succeed him as Governor of New York, and he was re-elected as the state's chief executive in 1934, 1936, and 1938. After ten years as Governor of New York, Lehman moved on to serve a larger public when Roosevelt called him to Washington in 1942 to head the State Department's Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations. A year later, representatives of forty-four nations elected Lehman as the first Director-General of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Even though Herbert Lehman was seventy-one years old in 1949, his public service was not yet finished as New Yorkers elected him to fill a one-year vacancy in the U.S. Senate, and then re-elected him to a full term in 1950. Senator Lehman declined to seek another term in 1956, when he was seventy-eight years old, but that did not mean he was retiring to a life of comfort and contemplation. Instead, along with Eleanor Roosevelt, he led the reform movement that ended the grip of Tammany Hall and the political bosses on the Democratic Party in New York. When he died in 1963, Herbert Lehman was preparing to go to Washington to receive the Presidential Medal of Freedom honoring him for his lifetime of public service.

## LEHMAN'S EARLY YEARS





Herbert Lehman was the youngest child of Mayer and Babette Lehman. Mayer Lehman had followed his older brothers Henry and Emanuel to the United States in 1850, leaving Germany for economic, political, and religious reasons. He settled in Montgomery, Alabama, where he and his brothers owned a general store which they eventually called Lehman Brothers. Mayer and Emanuel soon became cotton brokers, accepting cotton rather than cash for their merchandise, and purchasing cotton to resell in New York City. Emanuel moved to New York in 1858 to handle the cotton sales, while Mayer remained in the South through the Civil War, trying to ship cotton to England through the Union blockade. In 1858, Mayer married Babette Neugass, whose family had come to New Orleans from Germany in the mid-1850s. Mayer and Babette's first four children (one of whom died in infancy) were born in Montgomery before Mayer moved the family to New York in 1868. Mayer and Babette had four more children in New York, including Herbert, the baby of the family, who was born in 1878. Lehman Brothers prospered and diversified, growing from one of the nation's leading cotton and commodity brokers to a major investment banking firm by the early 1900s.

Instead of entering the family business immediately after graduating from Williams College in 1899, Herbert Lehman worked for a

textile manufacturer for a few years before joining Lehman Brothers in 1908 when his oldest brother Sigmund retired from the firm. Two years later, Herbert married Edith Altschul, whose father was affiliated with Lazard Frères, another prominent investment banking house. Edith Lehman shared her husband's sense of social responsibility and his philanthropic endeavors over the next fifty years. She also became his closest political advisor.

## THE BIRTH OF A POLITICAL LIFE



Herbert Lehman became actively involved in Democratic Party politics in the 1920s through his association with Governor Al Smith, eventually serving as one of Smith's top lieutenants in the Governor's efforts to win the presidency in 1928. Though ultimately failing in his own bid, Smith did help engineer Lehman's Democratic nomination for Lieutenant Governor in 1928 on a ticket with Franklin Delano Roosevelt for Governor. Roosevelt fondly recalled working with Lehman in the Navy Department during the war and looked forward to his help in administering the state's affairs "on a sound and business-like basis." The *New York Times* observed that it was "a fine thing for the State when a man of Colonel Lehman's range of experience, covering as it does not only large business interests, but even larger undertakings in charitable and philanthropic work for all sorts of men, women, and children, is ready to respond to the call for public service." Joking with reporters about Lehman's integrity (and wealth), Roosevelt noted that if he had to leave the state for any reason, "I can leave the combination of my safe to Colonel Lehman, knowing that it will be in safe hands."<sup>2</sup>

## LT. GOV. LEHMAN ARRIVES IN ALBANY

Herbert Lehman won that 1928 race in close fashion, creating the opportunity for himself and Roosevelt to transform the Lieutenant Governor's position from a mostly ceremonial office to one in which Lehman played a major role in developing and implementing state policies. The two men developed such a close working relationship that Roosevelt frequently described Lehman as "that splendid right hand of mine." He utilized Lehman's business expertise to streamline state purchasing practices and promote cooperation and prevent duplication among state agencies. Lehman's investigation of state mental hospitals revealed deplorable conditions, leading Roosevelt to ask for a \$50 million bond issue to construct new facilities, and as Acting Governor while Roosevelt was out of the state, Lehman had to use state troopers to quell a riot at Auburn State Prison and deal with the failure of the City Trust Company bank.<sup>3</sup> Roosevelt later acknowledged that it had been his good fortune to have a Lieutenant Governor "who is not only fully as capable of running the government as I am, but probably a good deal more so." When Roosevelt and Lehman ran for re-election in 1930, they both triumphed by large margins.<sup>4</sup>

Lehman and Roosevelt devoted the next two years to helping New Yorkers cope with the worsening effects of the Depression. Roosevelt asked Lehman to "speed up as far as possible all of the public works of the State" so they could "employ several thousand additional men during the winter months," and Lehman took the lead in 1931 in persuading the state legislature to establish a Temporary Emergency Relief Administration, making New York the first state to enact a comprehensive unemployment relief program to help its citizens during the Depression.<sup>5</sup>

## A CHANGE IN POSITION, NOT PRIORITIES: LEHMAN AS GOVERNOR

In 1932, Democrats nominated Franklin Roosevelt for the presidency, and Herbert Lehman hoped to succeed him as Governor of New York. Later that November, Roosevelt easily defeated Herbert Hoover for the presidency and Herbert Lehman was elected Governor of New York by a then-record plurality of 840,000 votes. As the *New York Times* noted, Lehman's victory was "both a tribute to him and a sign that the people know how to appreciate and reward a faithful and able public servant." Two years later, New Yorkers re-elected Lehman as Governor, again by a margin of more than 800,000 votes.<sup>6</sup>

Herbert Lehman believed that "government is for the people," that it should "concern itself with the solution of human as well as material problems," and that "it must be flexible enough to meet the changing conditions of the world." As Governor, he sought to expand on the policies of Al Smith and Franklin Roosevelt and use the power of the state government to help New Yorkers deal with the devastating effects of the Depression. Despite the opposition of Republicans, who controlled at least one house of the state legislature for all but one of his ten years as Governor, Lehman won approval of his "Little New Deal," patterned after FDR's reforms on the federal level. Lehman led the way as New York enacted a minimum wage bill for women and children and a reduction in their working hours, relief for the unemployed and those unable to work, a state unemployment insurance program, an improved Workmen's Compensation plan, limits on the use of injunctions in labor disputes, mortgage relief for home owners, an increase in public housing, cheaper utility rates, and help for farmers. The Governor also worked to ensure that New York obtained the maximum funding from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, the National Recovery Administration, the Civil Works Administration, the Works Progress Administration, and other federal programs.

## ADVOCACY AND MOBILIZATION: GOVERNOR LEHMAN IN WORLD WAR II

Like many American Jews, Herbert Lehman feared the worst once Hitler and the Nazis came to power in Germany. In March 1933, Lehman urged President Roosevelt to convey to German officials a strong protest over attacks and boycotts against Jews in Germany. When the Nazis stripped Jews of their citizenship in 1935, Lehman pointed out to the President that the number of German immigrants coming to the U.S. was far below the quota, and he asked Roosevelt to liberalize the immigration regulations to allow more German Jews to enter America. In response to the British government's decision to restrict the number of Jews allowed

into Palestine in 1939, Lehman implored the President to use his influence to keep Palestine open as a refuge for Jews fleeing from Europe. Roosevelt responded sympathetically to Lehman's importuning, but saving European Jews was not a high priority for the administration, and the President was not about to challenge the isolationists and others who vehemently opposed any easing of the immigration restrictions or special treatment for Jewish refugees.

Certain that Hitler and the Nazis would initiate another war in which the United States would have to participate, Lehman emphasized the need for preparedness in the late 1930s. After World War II broke out in Europe in September 1939, Lehman supported Roosevelt's efforts to build up America's military strength and provide all possible assistance to England and France. The Governor was one of the founding members of William Allen White's Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, and he endorsed the transfer of American destroyers to Great Britain, the institution of a draft, and the President's Lend-Lease proposal. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Lehman accelerated New York's civil defense activities, agreed with Republican legislative leaders to waive maximum-hours laws so as to maximize production for the duration of the war, and led the state's efforts to conserve steel, rubber, and other scarce materials.

## A NATIONAL EFFORT: LEHMAN IN WASHINGTON

Eager to become involved in the war effort, Lehman resisted all entreaties to run again for Governor in 1942. In November 1942, FDR asked Lehman to come down to Washington to head the State Department's newly created Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations (OFRRO), which would assist refugees and inhabitants of nations freed from Axis rule. The President believed that Lehman's humanitarian work with the Joint Distribution Committee and his administrative experience in New York made him the perfect choice to lead the effort to feed and clothe people as they were liberated in Europe and Asia and help nations rebuild after the devastation of the war. Lehman agreed that this was the right position for him, and on December 2, 1942, he resigned as Governor so that he could begin his new duties in Washington immediately.

Lehman's tenure at OFRRO proved to be the most frustrating period of his life as he became bogged down in the conflicting and overlapping jurisdictional lines within the Roosevelt administration's bureaucratic morass. He had to compete with the Army and the Navy, Lend-Lease, the Bureau of Economic Warfare, the War Food Administration, the Red Cross, and rivals within the State Department for food and other commodities that were in short supply. The situation improved temporarily in March 1943 when the President clarified Lehman's role and responsibilities, enabling Lehman to travel to London to confer with European leaders and heads of state, but the Governor soon found himself dragged back down into the bureaucratic muck. Finally, in late September, Roosevelt removed Lehman from the State Department, appointing him instead as a special assistant to the President to plan for the upcoming establishment of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).

Representatives of forty-four nations gathered at the White House on November 9, 1943, to create UNRRA, and the UNRRA Council unanimously elected Herbert Lehman as Director General. Lehman welcomed the opportunity to serve his fellow man, promising to do everything in his power to bring hope and relief to the oppressed and starving people of Europe and Asia who were suffering under Axis occupation. At UNRRA, Lehman had to overcome many difficulties, including continuing competition with other agencies for supplies and for shipping, and the Soviet Union's reluctance to let UNRRA supplies and personnel into Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, Lehman later remembered his time at UNRRA as "the most important part of my life," taking great pride that he and his staff "did finally whip UNRRA into shape so that it served not only as the first great international operating organization, but unquestionably saved the lives of millions of people and placed scores of millions back on the road to economic and social recovery."<sup>7</sup>

Lehman persisted in his work at UNRRA despite personal hardships and tragedy. In March 1944, he suffered a broken leg while inspecting UNRRA operations and meeting with British and Free French officials in North Africa. The condition of his leg forced Lehman to return home without stopping in England to visit his son Peter, who was serving in the American Air Corps. Upon his return to New York, Lehman learned that Peter had just been killed when his plane crashed while on a training flight. Herbert and Edith Lehman took solace in knowing that Peter, like so many Americans, "willingly and courageously gave his life for his country and for a great cause."<sup>8</sup>

In March of 1946, Lehman resigned as Director General of UNRRA when he realized that the agency ranked very low on President Harry Truman's priority list, which became obvious as American food contributions to UNRRA were reduced despite the threat of worldwide famine. Lehman cited health reasons in explaining his departure from UNRRA, but he was upset with the appointment of Herbert Hoover as honorary chairman of the President's National Famine Emergency Council, and he strongly disagreed with Truman's reliance on a voluntary program rather than rationing to reduce American food consumption and make more food available for UNRRA to feed starving people overseas. Despite his resignation, Lehman emphasized that his "interest in the work and complete sympathy with the essential principle of international cooperation in relief – and many other activities if we are to have a world of security and peace – remain unabated."<sup>9</sup>

# THE ROAD TO THE SENATE



Lehman hoped that his retirement from public service would be short-lived. In 1946, he sought to realize his long-held dream of serving in the U.S. Senate, only to suffer the one electoral defeat of his career. The New Deal coalition was splintering over both foreign and domestic issues, and there was widespread dissatisfaction with Truman's economic reconversion policies, as well as growing frustration and fear over the spread of Communism in Eastern Europe, all of which resulted in Republican victories across the nation. Lehman ran 400,000 votes ahead of Democratic gubernatorial candidate James Mead, but still lost to Republican Irving Lves by 250,000 votes. The former Governor had no regrets, however; he promised to continue the fight for liberal and progressive government, which he now feared would be under attack, and "to continue my service to the community."<sup>10</sup>

When Senator Robert Wagner retired in 1949, however, Herbert Lehman was interested in running for the one year remaining in Wagner's term and won the Democratic nomination in the race. Governor Dewey had appointed noted attorney and diplomat John Foster Dulles to fill Senator Wagner's seat, and Democrats knew that they needed a strong candidate of national and international stature to counter Dulles's status and reputation. The election between Lehman and Dulles deteriorated into a bitter battle, with Dulles resorting to anti-Semitic innuendos to try to appeal to voters upstate, while Lehman emphasized his record of public service and his belief that the social welfare programs of the New Deal needed to be preserved and expanded. Lehman defeated Dulles and won election to the Senate by 200,000 votes.

## ONE LAST JOB: SENATOR LEHMAN

Even though he planned to run for a full Senate term in 1950, Senator Lehman was one of the first to defend civil liberties against the reign of terror instituted by Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI). When McCarthy charged on the floor of the Senate in February 1950 that there were eighty-one known Communists or Communist sympathizers working in the State Department, Lehman immediately challenged McCarthy "to submit the names to the responsible official, the head of the State Department." Lehman

rejected McCarthy's use of "guilt by association" – condemning people as Communists because some of their friends or relatives might have some connection to communism or to an alleged Communist-front organization. When McCarthy read excerpts from a classified letter that he claimed showed that Owen Lattimore, a former advisor to the State Department, had advanced the Communist cause in the Far East, Lehman complained about the unfairness of using selective excerpts from a secret document to destroy a man's reputation. McCarthy offered to show Lehman the letter if he would come over to McCarthy's desk, but when Lehman walked over and called his bluff, McCarthy refused to show him the document and insisted that Lehman return to his seat.<sup>11</sup>

In September 1950, the Senate considered the McCarran Internal Security Act, which, among its many objectionable provisions, authorized the detention in internment camps of individuals who might, allegedly, commit acts of espionage or sabotage. Herbert Lehman understood that the McCarran bill enjoyed widespread popularity among an American public willing to do almost anything in the name of anti-Communism, but he believed that the measure was "unwise, unworkable, and indefensible." He realized that many of his colleagues were voting for the bill to protect themselves politically, but as for himself, Lehman declared,

I will not compromise with my conscience... I am going to vote against this tragic, this unfortunate, this ill-conceived legislation. My conscience will be easier, though I realize my political prospects may be more difficult. I shall cast my vote to protect the liberties of our people.<sup>12</sup>

Lehman was the only senator running for re-election in 1950 who voted against the Internal Security Act, which was enacted into law despite Lehman's opposition and President Truman's veto. But the voters in New York endorsed Lehman's principled stand, and he easily won re-election in 1950, his eighth triumph in a statewide election, a record that still stands today.

Lehman continued to speak out against Senator McCarthy and McCarthyism. He gave speeches in McCarthy's home state in which he denounced the Senator and his followers for inciting fear in order to achieve their political ambitions, and he lamented the failure of President Dwight Eisenhower and the Republicans to disavow McCarthy and his methods. Lehman rejoiced when the Senate finally voted to censure McCarthy in December 1954, but he warned that "the forces of fear," the "anti-Communist vigilantes of the present day," still posed a grave danger to "our liberties, our traditions, and our way of life," and that the struggle must continue to safeguard "freedom, our civil liberties, and the principles of justice, of decency, and morality."<sup>13</sup>

It was not just Lehman's defense of civil liberties and his opposition to McCarthyism that led Eleanor Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and others to refer to him as "the conscience of the Senate." Lehman's experience as Director General of UNRRA gave him first-hand knowledge of the widespread suffering in Europe caused by World War II, and as a Senator, Lehman fought to allow European refugees and Displaced Persons to enter the United States. He sought to repeal the restrictions on immigration that had been included in the Internal Security Act, revise the quota system, and bitterly opposed the McCarran-Walter Act which imposed even more stringent restrictions on immigration, but he was on the losing side in each of these battles. Lehman also led the unsuccessful fight in the Senate to change the rules that made it impossible to end southern filibusters that prevented enactment of civil rights legislation. And Lehman was one of only three Senators to vote against the Formosa Resolution in 1955 (a precursor to the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution nine years later), warning that authorizing the President to use the armed forces as he deemed necessary to protect Formosa and the surrounding islands against armed attack was tantamount to giving him "a blank check of dangerous authority – authority which can be used, or which might be used, to involve us in a war which we did not want and which the free world does not want, and indeed greatly fears."<sup>14</sup>

## OUT OF OFFICE, NOT INFLUENCE

Herbert Lehman celebrated his seventy-eighth birthday in 1956, and while he was still in reasonably good health, Mrs. Lehman was always concerned about his physical condition, and he did not relish the rigors of another campaign. Accordingly, after almost thirty years of public service as Lieutenant Governor and Governor of New York, Director General of UNRRA, and U.S. Senator, Herbert Lehman declined to seek re-election to the Senate. Lehman knew that he would miss "the high privilege I have had for so many years of serving the people of my State and of the nation," but he vowed to continue as a private citizen the fight "for high principles, for equal justice and dignity for all, and for a world at peace."<sup>15</sup>

Herbert Lehman remained busy during his so-called retirement years. He and Eleanor Roosevelt led the reform movement which stripped Carmine De Sapio and Tammany Hall of their stranglehold over Democratic politics in New York, and Herbert and Edith Lehman took special pleasure in donating the funds to build a Children's Zoo in Central Park. Lehman initially supported Adlai Stevenson for President in 1960, but after John Kennedy won the Democratic nomination, Lehman rallied liberals to Kennedy's side, believing that despite his flaws, a Kennedy presidency was preferable to Richard Nixon sitting in the White House.

## HONORING AN ACTIVE LIFE

In July 1963, in recognition of his lifetime of public service, Herbert Lehman was among the initial honorees when President



Kennedy announced the first recipients of the new Presidential Medal of Freedom, “the highest civilian honor that the President can confer for service in peacetime.” The selection committee emphasized that Lehman had combined “the practical spirit of his sound business background with his sympathy for people and his vision of future progress,” and that his “courageous approach to problems, his independence, and his deep concern for human needs have earned him the respect and affection of the people he served.” The committee called special attention to Lehman’s “profound integrity,” and noted that “he rallied the state of New York in the years of depression, helped bind the world’s wounds after the agony of war and fought staunchly for freedom in the United States Senate.”<sup>16</sup>

The original plan was to present the awards at a special ceremony in September 1963, but the event had to be postponed until early December because of delays in striking the medals. Despite President Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, President Lyndon Johnson insisted that the occasion go forward as scheduled on December 6, 1963. On the morning of December 5, as Herbert Lehman prepared to leave for the ceremony in Washington, he suffered a heart attack and died. President Johnson summed up the feelings of many Americans when he paid tribute to Lehman by quoting the citation accompanying the medal he was scheduled to receive: “Citizen and statesman, he has used wisdom and compassion as the tools of government and has made politics the highest form of public service.” As the President acknowledged, Herbert Lehman had dedicated his life to serving others. From his days as a young volunteer at the Henry Street Settlement through his years as Governor, Director General of UNRRA, U.S. Senator, and even in his retirement, Herbert Lehman truly was drawn to public service.<sup>17</sup>

[1] “Roosevelt Held Out To The Last Minute,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1928, p. 12; “Roosevelt and Lehman,” Editorial, *New York Times*, October 18, 1928, p. 28; “Roosevelt Opposes Any Move to Revive New York Dry Law,” *New York Times*, October 9, 1928, p. 1.

[2] “Governor Roosevelt’s Address,” *New York Times*, October 5, 1932, p. 16.

[3] Roosevelt to Lehman, May 14, 1930, in Elliott Roosevelt, ed., *F.D.R.: His Personal Letters* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1950), I, 120-121.

[4] Roosevelt to Lehman, November 17, 1930, Lehman Papers, Special File, Franklin Roosevelt, doc. 0784-0015.

[5] “Governor Lehman,” Editorial, *New York Times*, November 9, 1933, p. 18.

[6] Lehman to Philip Jessup, January 14, 1957, Lehman Papers, Special File, Jessup, doc. 0447\_0036.

[7] Lehman to Franklin Roosevelt, April 28, 1944, Lehman Papers, Special File, Franklin Roosevelt, doc. 0784\_0379.

[8] “Truman Program Held Inadequate,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1946, p. 11.

[9] Lehman to June Bingham, November 9, 1946, Lehman Papers, Special File, Jonathan and June Bingham, doc. 0072\_0009.

[10] 96 *Congressional Record* 2068 (February 20, 1950).

[11] 96 *Congressional Record* 14817-18 (September 12, 1950).

[12] “Remarks By Senator Herbert H. Lehman on Receiving the ‘Franklin D. Roosevelt Four Freedoms Award,’” December 13, 1954, Lehman Papers, Special File, Frank Altschul, doc. 0015\_0464.

[13] Eleanor Roosevelt to Lehman, January 16, 1962, Lehman Papers, Special File, Eleanor Roosevelt, doc. 0782\_0305; Lyndon Johnson to Lehman, August 24, 1956, Lehman Papers, Special File, Lyndon Johnson, doc. 0453\_0074; 101 *Congressional Record* 992 (January 28, 1955).

[14] Lehman to Mary Dewson, September 5, 1956, Dewson Papers, Box 2, General Correspondence, Lehman, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library; “Text of the Announcement by Lehman,” *New York Times*, August 22, 1956, p. 20.

[15] White House Press Release, “Presidential Medals Of Freedom,” July 4, 1963, and “Robert J. Kiphuth, Edwin H. Land, and Herbert H. Lehman,” n.d., both in John F. Kennedy Papers, WHCF, Box 512, Subject File, MA 2-10, Presidential Medal of Freedom; and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Memorandum For John W. Macy, Jr., July 23, 1963, Schlesinger Papers, White House Files, Box WH-15, Subject File, 1961-1964, Medal of Freedom; all in John F. Kennedy Library.

[16] “Herbert Lehman, 85, Dies; Ex-Governor and Senator,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1963, pp. 1, 29.

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