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Hoover and the Historians: The Resurrection of a President

Part I

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THE MOST HIGHLY regarded man of his generation when elected president, Herbert Hoover was vilified when he left office. The public considered him aloof from the Great Depression that ravaged America, too inept and callous to generate economic recovery and provide relief to needy citizens. Historians contributed to Hoover's image as an irresponsible reactionary who lacked a sense of humanity. That image has gradually and largely been supplanted in historical writing as historians now often describe a humane reformer with an idealistic vision of America. This essay describes the historical resurrection of Hoover.

This essay has historiographical, bibliographical, and "editorial" dimensions.¹ It describes in general terms the transition

The selected bibliography following Part II of this article (in the next issue of *The Annals*, Fall 1981) contains full citations for works mentioned in the text and in short form in footnotes.

¹An expansive and valuable bibliography is included in Joan Hoff Wilson, *Forgotten Progressive*, pp. 284-300. Hoover receives only perfunctory attention in McCoy, "Trends in Viewing Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower." A substantive consideration of current literature is in the review article by Zieger, "A Reinterpretation."

of the Hoover image in historical writing, identifies the pivotal contributors to the public and professional historical impressions of "the Chief" (a sobriquet acquired in his early mining career), and summarizes the influences on Hoover revisionism. This admittedly selective and cursory study is thereby an attempt to outline the fluid and complex contours of the historical writing on Hoover.

Herbert Hoover had one of the most interesting and productive backgrounds of any president. Exceptional ability, a prodigious capacity for work, and expansive interests enabled him to become a successful businessman in mining ventures on a global scale and among the most highly regarded public figures and humanitarians of his generation. Lionized as the secretary of commerce in the Warren G. Harding and Calvin Coolidge administrations, Hoover was a logical selection as the Republican presidential candidate in 1928.

Although Hoover was shy, his organization adeptly used the machinery of modern publicity to impress voters with his virtues in the 1928 presidential campaign. The hyperbolic 1928 campaign biographies presented Hoover as the new American folk hero. Will Irwin, newspaperman and friend of the next president, introduced the "log cabin" motif in *Herbert Hoover: A Reminiscent Biography*. As a descendent of solid colonial stock, Hoover was equated with Abraham Lincoln in that fate had chosen each of them to guide America. Ray Lyman Wilbur invoked the same analogy in his preface to Hoover's *The New Day: Campaign Speeches of 1928* when he compared the 1928 election with the cataclysmic 1860 election. In *The Presidency vs. Hoover*, Samuel Crowther described Hoover as a great organizer who fed "more human beings than any man in history and has saved more lives." Crowther ascertained that stewardship, not politics, explained Hoover's activity in public life. Earl Reeves, in *This Man Hoover*, concluded that "the Chief's" disregard of politics was his exemplary asset, and that the support for Hoover reflected a revolution in the society whereby administrators and efficiency experts would replace politicians. The 1928 campaign literature, which in summary presented Hoover as a disinterested and erudite public servant above politics,

Hoover and the Historians

closely corresponded to the public impressions of him.²

The Great Depression brought Hoover into public disrepute, and strong expressions of defensiveness were present in the articles and books written in his behalf in the 1932 presidential campaign. As an example, Arthur Train compared Hoover's ordeal to those of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln in *The Strange Attacks on Herbert Hoover*, and he accused the Hoover detractors of "malicious innuendo, deliberate false interpretations, and poisonous generalizations." In a more philosophical vein, Hugh A. Studdert Kennedy defined the persistence of individual liberty as the real campaign issue in *Hoover in 1932*, and ominously warned that "The day of principle is at hand."³

A few loyal and beleaguered defenders wrote in behalf of Hoover after his relegation to private life in the 1930s, but their influence on public opinion and the history profession was negligible. Of the several groups that supported Hoover, the most significant was composed of friends and public officials who had served under "the Chief" and published personal accounts and narratives to vindicate his policies and vision. William Starr Myers, an academician and friend, collected and edited *The State Papers and Other Public Writings of Herbert Hoover* in 1934. That same year, Hoover's press secretary Theodore G. Joslin published *Hoover Off the Record*. In 1936 Myers and Walter H. Newton, secretary to the president, authored *The Hoover Administration*. The next year, Arthur Mastick Hyde and Ray Lyman Wilbur, the former secretaries of agriculture and interior, contributed *The Hoover Policies*. These five writers postulated that "a fog of misrepresentation and calumny" obscured the Hoover years,⁴ and they expressed

²Crowther, *Presidency vs. Hoover*, pp. 126-127. Also see Hard, *Who's Hoover?*

³Train, *Strange Attacks*, p. 5; Kennedy, *Current Example*, pp. v, 3. On the 1932 campaign also see Marsh, *Our President*; Marsh and Marsh, *Vote for Hoover*; Hoover and Coolidge, *Campaign Speeches*; and Dexter, *Hoover and American Individualism*.

⁴The statement of Lewis Strauss in the introduction to Brandes, *Economic Diplomacy*, pp. vii-viii. For an unusually objective view by a Hoover partisan see Davis, "Another Appraisal."

faith that history would verify that Hoover, who had responded with originality and decisiveness to the Great Depression, was one of the ablest chief executives in modern American history.

In opposition to the small and uninfluential circle of defenders, the preponderance of polemicists, journalists, and historians zealously castigated Hoover. The acrimonious 1932 presidential election evoked a rash of malicious books. They agreed with each other that the president was a danger to the Republic, the premise in *Tough Luck: Hoover Again* by John C. Heaton. Representative "smear" biographies include Walter W. Liggett, *The Rise of Herbert Hoover*; Clement Wood, *Herbert Clark Hoover: An American Tragedy*; John Knox, *The Great Mistake*; and John Hamill, *The Strange Career of Mr. Hoover Under Two Flags*. Hoover is variously described in these works as a misfit warped in childhood, a financial charlatan, and a perpetrator of slavery. Never have so many written so much to besmirch one man would be an apt paraphrase.

Journalists and historians were usually more ethical and less histrionic than the authors of the smear biographies, but their equally uncomplimentary judgments of Hoover would be more cogent to the subsequent generation. The columnist Arthur Krock dismissed Hoover as an egregious failure as a party leader, economist, business authority, and personality. Allan Nevins completed the list of liabilities with his description of the president as an "exponent of narrow nationalism" and an inept political conservative. Hoover "botched the tariff, he botched farm relief, he botched prohibition—because he showed a Bourbon temper and an inelastic mind."⁵

These contemporary impressions of Hoover were transmitted and incorporated into the first generation of history. Ideologically liberal, politically partisan, and often personally influenced by the vicissitudes of the Great Depression, the bulk of historians reiterated and embellished the contemporary characterizations of Hoover in the 1940s and early 1950s. They were unimpressed with presidential policies; for example, Theodore

⁵Krock, "Hoover's Two Years," p. 494; Nevins, "Hoover's Record," pp. 386-394.

Saloutos considered the Hoover farm program "a tragedy and a farce." Karl Schriftgiesser confidently repeated the previous prediction that "Hoover was to go down in history as the Great Failure" in *This Was Normalcy*. The history profession was basically united in its derogatory interpretation of Hoover.⁶

An exception to the pattern was an essay in *The American Political Tradition*, written by Richard Hofstadter and published in 1948. The low ebb of Hoover's reputation and the ideological lens of historians obscured the revisionist germ in the essay. In a somewhat vague and contradictory exposition, Hofstadter expressed a comprehension of Hoover that was unusual in the history profession and identified his neglected virtues. Hofstadter thought "There was nothing mythical about Hoover's vaunted ability;" stated that he had much in common with progressive premises and goals ("but he expected to reach it along the traditional highway"); allowed that Hoover opposed unregulated and predatory individualism; and concluded that Hoover's policies "did require a great deal more initiative than any president had ever brought to bear to meet a depression." The inference is that Hoover provided the groundwork for the New Deal.⁷

Hofstadter practiced the maxim of damn by faint praise. Acute personal and philosophical deficiencies nullified Hoover's merits; he represented the "last presidential spokesman of the hallowed doctrines of laissez-faire liberalism," and the "key-note" of his public life was "a return to the conditions, real or imagined of the past." Historians disregarded the revisionist possibilities in the Hofstadter essay and selectively adopted the conclusions that substantiated the political and ideological vices of Hoover.

The contribution of leftist historians such as Hofstadter to the resurrection of "the Chief" is an anomaly in Hoover historiography. When an allowance is made for leftist axioms and perspectives, their contribution to revisionism is explicable. The "old leftists" subscribed to the premises of traditional socialism

⁶Theodore Saloutos, "William A. Hirth: Middle Western Agrarian," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 38 (September 1951): 221; Schriftgiesser, *Normalcy*, p. 264.

⁷Hofstadter, *Political Tradition*, pp. 283-314.

or its derivatives. They considered capitalism of whatever form as invalid and its exponents of whatever ilk as misguided at best. The distinctions that liberal historians made between the New Era and the New Deal were largely inconsequential to the old left. Leftists could thereby practice "objectivity" toward Hoover in the sense that they were often equally harsh in their criticism, for example, of FDR and conscious of the affinity between Hoover and progressivism and the New Deal. Although the old leftists did not intend to raise the status of Hoover, their analysis could have contributed to it had the profession been conscious of the opportunity.

The preponderance of Americans acquired information about Hoover not from monographs, but through textbooks and professorial perorations in the classroom. The textbook interpretations of Hoover ranged from highly critical through ambivalent to almost nonexistent. Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager were the authors of *The Growth of the American Republic*, which was among the most respected texts of its generation. It was generally derogatory of Hoover. The eager undergraduate reader was informed that Hoover was a capable food administrator, but a rugged individualist who adopted some "half-hearted" measures during the Great Depression. *Land of the Free* by Homer Carey Hockett and Arthur Meier Schlesinger complimented Hoover on his early public career, but stated that as president he was "faithful to his creed of rugged individualism" and adopted a few desultory policies during the economic conflagration. Hoover was nearly deleted from *The United States: From Wilderness to World Power* by Ralph Volney Harlow. The author compensated for the nearly studious neglect of Hoover with the generous statements that "President Hoover recommended an impressive program of public works to provide employment and to create a market for raw materials," and "For Latin America Roosevelt found the basis for a new policy already laid down by President Hoover." The bias of the history profession was transparent in most textbooks.⁸

⁸Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 4th ed. rev. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950);

The generally uncomplimentary characterizations of Hoover in textbooks and monographs were indicative of the low regard for "the Chief" within the historical circle. A small unscientific survey of historical opinion, published in 1948, described Hoover as just an average president in the twentieth position in the presidential hierarchy.⁹ Although Hoover was rated higher than nine presidents of obviously dubious competence and integrity, he was included in the same category with chief executives of the ilk of Chester Arthur. There was little to indicate that Hoover would be the subject of historical revisionism, but a confluence of circumstances would be responsible for a reexamination of Hoover and his administration.

The vehemence that most historians expressed toward Hoover was consistent with their "Progressive" interpretation of history. "Progressive" historians considered clashes of principle and philosophy between factions and classes endemic to the American past. They interpreted history in terms of conflict between selfless, idealistic reformers and selfish, predatory interests, usually business and its minions. Nearly all historians readily identified with the representatives of reform, and they were uninhibited about it in their writing. Fortuitous circumstances made it plausible for them to represent Hoover as the nemesis of democracy and economic justice and conversely to effuse over FDR and the New Deal.

A PHILOSOPHICAL BREACH developed in the history profession when some practitioners began to expound the "Consensus" interpretation in the 1950s. The axiom of the Consensus school was that Americans were united by principles that provided consistency in their past. Consensus and continuity, not conflict

Homer Carey Hockett and Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *Land of the Free: A Short History of the American People* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1946); Ralph Volney Harlow, *The United States: From Wilderness to World Power*, 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1949), 2: 527, 567.

⁹ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "Historians Rate U.S. Presidents," *Life* 25 (1 November 1948):65. Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to the Present* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966) is an interesting reference on the evaluation of presidents, and the Schlesinger surveys are considered on pages 23-34.

and disruption, were the realities of American history.¹⁰ The "Consensus" historians often discerned merit in Hoover that had eluded their "Progressive" colleagues. That merit was usually that Hoover had ideological parallels with FDR and established precedents that would come to fruition in the New Deal. Hoover was thereby often considered in the New Deal context and not on his own terms.

The prognosis that Hoover's reputation would rise as the society became more conservative fails to explain the actual course of revisionism. Consensus historians were not perforce conservative, and many of them had marked political and ideological affinities with the Progressives. The static 1950s may have helped to impress historians with the veracity of Consensus, but their low opinion of Dwight D. Eisenhower as a passive-conservative president and symbol of the placidity of the era demonstrates that they did not discard their liberalism.¹¹ Although Hoover revisionism became respectable in the 1950s, the most original and provocative revisionism was not written in the "torpid fifties," but in a later era when Consensus was in eclipse. Consensus history may have been emphasized in the 1950s, but it was not the exclusive or even preponderant interpretation in the history profession, which is a confederation of methodological and philosophical factions. Both Progressive and Consensus interpretations were salient in historical writing during the 1950s.

Easily the most influential Progressive study of Hoover was by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. He wrote in 1957 the "definitive" work on the Hoover era, *The Crisis of the Old Order*,

¹⁰Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1955) is regarded as an exemplary "Consensus" statement. References on "Progressive" and "Consensus" history include John Higham, Leonard Krieger, and Felix Gilbert, *History* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1965); John Higham, ed., *The Reconstruction of American History* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962); Cushing Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); and John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," *American Historical Review* 67 (April 1962): 609-625.

¹¹The 1962 Schlesinger poll rated Eisenhower as an average president and tied with Chester A. Arthur in twentieth position out of the twenty-nine presidents in the survey.

1919-1933, the first volume in the series on The Age of Roosevelt. Replete with epic form, impressive literary style, and footnotes, the book substantiated the Hoover stereotypes. FDR was the hero of the Great Depression, and Schlesinger used Hoover as a weak and archaic foil. The venial criticism of one reviewer that "with Roosevelt to explain is too often to condone; with Hoover to condemn" did not prevent Schlesinger from receiving the Francis Parkman Prize. The tendentious Harvard professor, attracted to activist Democrats of all generations, did not present an original explication of Hoover, but it was the most cogent scholarly indictment written of Hoover. Although even Schlesinger admitted that Hoover was not without compensatory virtues, he represented Hoover as a regressive president who by 1932 "moved from the New Era philosophy . . . toward something much closer to old-fashioned laissez-faire."¹² To have concluded otherwise would have, of course, nullified the Schlesinger thesis.

Although the strident Progressive interpretation of Hoover became less pronounced in the historical literature of the 1960s, it was far from extinct. Editors Henry Steele Commager and Richard B. Morris report of Hoover in the introduction to *Republican Ascendancy, 1921-1933* that "not since the fateful decade of the 1850s had there been so egregious a failure of leadership in American politics." The book was a standard reference on the era. Its author, John D. Hicks, expressed the ambiance of the book in this representative passage:

The leaders of business and industry were no longer content to have a politician in the White House who would do their bidding; they wanted a businessman as President, one who would instinctively reflect their every prejudice. In Hoover they had their ideal candidate.

Represented as an abject failure and flawed chief executive, Hoover could not be redeemed by the appreciable concession that he "made the nation's economic plight his concern to a

¹²Schlesinger, *Crisis of the Old Order*, p. 235. See the review by Clarke A. Chambers in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44 (September 1957): 379-380.

degree that previous depression Presidents had never deemed necessary or feasible," and "In a sense the measures he ultimately felt obliged to support paved the way for the New Deal."¹³

Walter Johnson's *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* profiled an intractable and inept chief executive who, through a myopic belief in the basic soundness of American capitalism, prolonged the Great Depression. Then Burl Noggle unabashedly pronounced in 1966 that "Hoover had little more depth than a Kiwanis Club noontime speaker." He also postulated that access to Hoover's papers would not change historical opinion.¹⁴

The more complimentary Consensus interpretations of Hoover gradually supplanted the tenacious Progressive stereotypes in the 1950s and 1960s. Although Consensus history often emphasized his virtues, academicians generally avoided the hyperbole of the sententious biographies of those decades and excessive reliance on Hoover's own *Memoirs*.¹⁵ The former president's ponderous three-volume autobiography, which was published in 1952, confirmed that he had never been his own most cogent defender. Although volume one of his *Memoirs*, which concluded with 1920, was generally well received by historians, the volumes on public office and the Great Depression were characterized by reviewers as bitter, inconsistent, and biased.

Hooverian foreign policy first attracted the interest of Consensus revisionists. In 1951 Alexander DeConde exploited a germ in previous literature to convincingly demonstrate that the FDR Good Neighbor policy was firmly rooted in the Hoover administration. *Herbert Hoover's Latin American Policy* described the reorientation of United States policy through Hoover's visits to South American nations, mediation of disputes, and withdrawal of occupation troops from the region.¹⁶ Richard N. Current con-

¹³Hicks, *Republican Ascendancy*, pp. xiii, 202, 234.

¹⁴Burl Noggle's review of Romasco, *Poverty of Abundance* in *Journal of American History* 52 (March 1966): 858-859.

¹⁵Examples of the effusive biographies that unconvincingly represented Hoover as one of the greatest men of the twentieth century include McGee, *Hoover*; Emery, *American Friend*; Hinshaw, *American Quaker*; Terzian, *Many Worlds of Hoover*; and Carol Green Wilson, *Challenge for Today*.

¹⁶DeConde somewhat revised his opinions. See his review of Brandes, *Eco-*

tributed to the resurrection of Hoover when he contrasted the president's plan for peace with the secretary of state's policy of conflict in the explosive East Asian situation. Hoover was the definite "winner" over Henry L. Stimson in Current's comparative study. Robert H. Ferrell, *American Diplomacy in the Great Depression*, perceived Hoover as an able president who "represented some of the best informed thought of his time." He responded dramatically to the economic cataclysm, but had "received no credit for his change of tactics toward the Depression."¹⁷

Revisionism on foreign policy had sufficiently grasped the history profession that by 1968 a reviewer omitted even a reference to the generally complimentary description of Hoover presented by L. Ethan Ellis in his highly regarded synthesis of *Republican Foreign Policy, 1921-1933*. The Republicans inherited a cycle of global turbulence, and Ellis concluded "that Republican leadership did achieve a considerable degree of adjustment to this new world." Ellis expressed a high regard for Hoover and, in particular, thought his foreign policy shift toward Latin America was "deliberate and positive," and his depression diplomacy was based upon "intelligent perception . . . and prompt action."¹⁸

Historians were more dilatory when it came to revision of Hoover's domestic career than they had been on foreign policy. It was in 1956 that Harold Wolfe published the revisionist biography *Herbert Hoover: Public Servant and Leader of the Loyal Opposition*. Although Wolfe admitted that "it is too early for a definitive biography to be written," he nevertheless established a strong revisionist precedent. He cited the impressive record of Hoover as secretary of commerce, including his promotion of commercial aviation and radio broadcasting. The two themes that became widely accepted in Consensus writing were graphically developed in the biography. Wolfe demonstrated first that Hoover actively intervened in the depression economy

omic Diplomacy in American Historical Review 68 (January 1963): 559.

¹⁷Ferrell, *Diplomacy in the Depression*, pp. 10, 15. Also see Current's *Secretary Stimson: A Study in Statescraft* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1954), and DeConde's review in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 41 (September 1954):360-361.

¹⁸Ellis, *Republican Foreign Policy*, pp. 367, 26.

and second that many New Deal policies originated in the Hoover administration.

Hoover revisionism was assisted by inquiry into his tenure as secretary of commerce. His contribution to conservation through the efficient and careful management of natural resources was emphasized by J. Leonard Bates in a 1957 article. A. Hunter Dupree identified Hoover as a technological progressive and administrator of research in *Science in the Federal Government*, which verified that he "was the one major political figure of the decade with an active appreciation of science."¹⁹ In a monograph based upon the records of the Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, Joseph Brandes described the secretary as both a powerful policy maker and "trouble-shooter for the Harding and Coolidge Administrations." A bold and able administrator, he was a bureaucratic imperialist who adopted an ambitious international program and "built the Department of Commerce into one of the most influential in the Federal Government."²⁰

The disparate ideas of the revisionists were united into a comprehensive monograph in 1959. Convinced that historians had been unjust to Hoover, Harris Gaylord Warren's objective in *Herbert Hoover and the Great Depression* was to rectify that transgression. He stated unapologetically that Americans should be grateful that Hoover was president and that he was the "greatest Republican of his generation." An activist secretary of commerce, Hoover had a program more expansive than that of a chief executive. Unparalyzed by economic vicissitudes, President Hoover was responsible for the precedent of strong federal government activity against the Depression. Besides regarding Hoover as the progenitor of the New Deal, Warren paid "the Chief" the dubious compliment that he played politics "with a

¹⁹J. Leonard Bates, "Fulfilling American Democracy: The Conservation Movement, 1907-1921," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 44 (June 1957): 29-57; A. Hunter Dupree, *Science in the Federal Government* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1957), p. 338. Also see Rexmond C. Cochrane, *Measures for Progress: A History of the National Bureau of Standards* (Washington: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1966).

²⁰Brandes, *Economic Diplomacy*, pp. x, ix. Also see James H. Shideler's review in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 49 (March 1963): 729.

skill worthy of Indiana's James E. Watson."²¹

An article by Carl N. Degler exemplified the revisionist current in the history profession and marked the furthest limit of the Consensus reexamination of Hoover. Well received and considered highly cogent in most history circles, the lucid Degler exposition had unusual influence for an essay. "The Ordeal of Herbert Hoover" in the *Yale Review* recognized his genuine progressivism and active economic intervention against the Great Depression. Degler also narrowed the gulf between Hoover and FDR: both were Wilsonians, accepted government intrusion in the economy, relied on World War I experience, and favored control of big business. Hoover was the transitory figure between the New Era and the New Deal, according to Degler.

Some historians synthesized the Consensus and Progressive interpretations. Although they acknowledged Hoover's unprecedented activism in the Great Depression, they usually regarded him as a poor politician with personality defects and ideological intractability. Albert Romasco, *The Poverty of Abundance*, was representative of this thesis. He refuted that Hoover was either an "ineffectual" or "weak President" and complimented him because he "was courageous enough to assume . . . leadership." Yet, the premises of Hoover's policies were archaic and even by his "new departure . . . was restricted by old ideas and old assumptions." "An idealist and conservative," Hoover "prepared the way for Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal: because he had failed" and "Hard experience taught . . . that new methods must now be tried."²²

A randomly selected textbook off a library shelf documents both the diffusion of revisionism in the history profession and the impression that an undergraduate student would receive from assiduous study of class assignments. *The History of the United States*, written by Oscar Handlin, stated that in 1928 the Republicans nominated "Herbert Hoover, a Wilsonian who had

²¹Warren, *Hoover and the Depression*, pp. 24-32, 63-71. Warren relied upon Raymond Moley's characterization of Hoover in *Masters of Politics in a Personal Perspective* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1949), p. 28.

²²Romasco, *Poverty of Abundance*, pp. 9, 229, 232, 234. Also see Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*.

earned a progressive reputation during the war and who campaigned as a forward-looking engineer able to solve the country's problem scientifically." Elected because of his "progressive record," Hoover was "determined to be a forceful and vigorous President." He "was not content to let the depression follow its own course," and "The failure of the economy to recover was not his fault." This description is in sharp contrast to the earlier textbook characterizations of Hoover and demonstrates how extensively some historians had modified their judgment of him.²³

The revisionist influence did not, however, contribute appreciably to an increase of Hoover's status in the presidential hierarchy. In a 1962 survey, seventy-five respondents, including fifty-eight historians, classified twelve presidents as "average or mediocre." The rationale for classification indicates at least as much about the respondents as the presidents. Mediocre presidents "believed in negative government, in self-subordination to the legislative power. They were content to let well enough alone or, when not, were unwilling to fight for their programs or inept at doing so." Hoover was rated eighth among the mediocre presidents. William McKinley, Rutherford B. Hayes, Martin Van Buren, and James Monroe eclipsed Hoover, who was designated nineteenth out of thirty-one presidents.²⁴

An evaluation of presidents by historians that was published in 1970 indicated that Hoover was still regarded as weak, passive, inflexible, impractical, and unproductive. He was rated eighteenth of thirty-three presidents in General Prestige, which represented an advance in the presidential hierarchy.²⁵ Hoover's glacial upward mobility in the polls indicated that revisionism had only faintly contributed to his resurrection among historians. The negligible influence of scholarship on professional historians provokes interesting conjecture about how they form and modify opinions. The low opinion of Hoover in the surveys

²³Oscar Handlin, *The History of the United States*, 2 vols. (New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1968), 2: 393-394, 418-419.

²⁴Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr., "Our Presidents: A Rating by 75 Historians," *New York Times Magazine* (29 July 1962):12.

²⁵Gary M. Maranell, "The Evaluation of Presidents: An Extension of the Schlesinger Polls," *Journal of American History* 57 (June 1970): 104-113.

arrested neither the interest nor the revisionist impulses toward him in the history profession.

A "PARADIGM SHIFT," in the language of the advanced social sciences, is largely responsible for the present stage of Hoover revisionism that originated in about the middle 1960s. It is fairly easy to describe superficially the circumstances of the shift. The current generation of historians has detachment toward Hoover that was impossible for their predecessors. Perspective has made them receptive to markedly different conclusions about Hoover than the historians who personally participated in the political dynamics that they studied and explicated. Historians now are not antiseptically neutral toward Hoover, but their writing often has the distinct advantage of reflection enabled only by time.

Although historians have the advantage of perspective, they are no less immune to presentism than the contemporaries of Hoover. The American panorama since World War II, especially the spasms of the Great Society, Vietnam, and Watergate, has aroused reservations about New Deal precedents among historians of nearly all ideological hues. The scale and intensity of the disaffection cannot be stated with precision, but there are definite signs that New Dealism has waned in the history profession. This has enabled historians to discern previously unappreciated virtues in Hoover.

The premises of current and earlier Hoover revisionism often diverge. Consensus revisionism concentrated on the continuity between "the Chief" and the New Deal, and the resurrection of Hoover's reputation depended upon his identification as the progenitor of the New Deal and his affinity with FDR. Although the continuity thesis is highly visible in current historical writing, it often has a different emphasis than in the Consensus generation. This development combined with less fidelity to the New Deal has encouraged the study of Hoover on his own merits and in his own context, which has been fairer to Hoover and helpful to historical veracity. It is now even possible to consider Hoover's dissimilarity with FDR as a virtue.

An anomaly in the "paradigm shift" is that historians at the ideological poles have reversed themselves on Hoover. Whereas he was once anathema to the left and a paragon to the right, the opposite is now the case. The left and right generally agree in their descriptions, but their opinions of him stem from divergent ideological postulates.

Libertarian Murray Rothbard is probably the most voluble and harshest current critic of Hoover. He described Hoover as the activist instigator of the New Deal, which is the basis of his identification of Hoover as a protofascist. Hoover's presidential programs evolved logically from his secretariat. Government activism and intrusion in the society during the 1920s in the guise of Hooverian "voluntarism" was actually the "velvet glove of the mailed fist." All of Hoover's cooperative programs were predicated on government coercion should voluntarism fail. This background prepared Hoover to institute the "new economic science" in the Great Depression. Rothbard dismisses the 1933 "Roosevelt Revolution" as fiction because the New Deal originated in the 1929 "Hoover Revolution."²⁶

The libertarian influence on Hoover historiography has been less pronounced than that of the New Left, which has been instrumental in the Hoover renaissance. It has discerned character and vision in Hoover that eluded the "old left" and the bulk of the history profession. There is no ideological immunity to presentism, and the New Left has been influenced in its interpretations by the convulsions of society as well as dogma.

Hoover is the antithesis of the authoritarianism and duplicity of New Deal liberalism that the New Left imputes to government in the last generation. There are no precedents in the Hoover administration for the purported excesses of "imperial" presidents and unsavory government activities against dissidents and domestic radicals. Hoover himself was often the object, not the instigator of "dirty tricks." He warned Americans of the possible dangers of the welfare state in the New Deal

²⁶ See Rothbard, *America's Great Depression*; "Hoover Myth;" and contributions to *Hoover and Crisis of Capitalism*. Rothbard has relied heavily on the economist Benjamin M. Anderson. See Anderson's *Economics and the Public Welfare* (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., 1949), pp. 113-297.

form, and some members of the New Left have ascribed prophetic powers to him.

The New Left has even adduced at least faint parallels between the axioms of "participatory democracy" and "economic democracy" in the Hoover philosophy, but his foreign and military policy have especially elicited New Left approbation.²⁷ A virtual pacifist, Hoover opposed an extant military force capable of an offensive war, subscribed to disarmament, eschewed provocative policy, recoiled at the excesses of "economic imperialism" (including military intervention to protect American investments), and opposed a global crusade against Communism even in the most hyperbolic stage of the Cold War. Although historians need not be New Left to ascertain validity in Hoover's philosophy and policy, there is obviously much in them that is commendable to the New Left.

A seminal New Left contribution to Hoover revisionism was William Appleman Williams, *The Contours of American History*. It included a terse and thoughtful analysis of Hoover's economic and political theorems that verified his progressive and reform impulses and imputed the powers of a seer to him. Although Williams' conclusions would be disputed, his acute essay had a seismic influence on revisionism. It provided themes and perspectives that would be adopted, embellished, and often substantiated in later published works.

Williams lectured the history profession that:

Hoover offers a classic example of the necessity for historians to break out of their own frame of reference if they are to understand the past. More than any other 20th-century American's, Hoover's reputation is the product of misinformation and distortion. He is also a notable example of the man whose ideas are borrowed by others without acknowledgement, and of the man whose analyses and insights are proved valid

²⁷ Adler, "Hoover's Foreign Policy and the New Left," criticizes New Left interpretations and accuses leftist historians of the rehabilitation of Hoover to detract from FDR. Joan Hoff Wilson, "Reevaluation of Hoover's Foreign Policy," commends Hoover's opposition to "limitless open-ended" policies. On Hoover's attitudes toward the military see John Wilson, "Quaker and Sword."

THE ANNALS OF IOWA

after an unfavorable stereotype has been established. For that reason it is easy to overlook them, and to assume that his failures comprise the whole story.²⁸

In the vein of Polybius, Williams has unremittingly expounded the virtues of Hoover and the moral lessons to be drawn from his experience.

In conjunction with the "paradigm shift," accessibility to information has been responsible for the voluminous writing and influenced the nature of interpretations on Hoover. The Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, Iowa opened in 1962 and admitted researchers four years later. Correspondence between revisionism and the availability of research collections is not just fortuitous as the presidential papers largely substantiate a favorable reconsideration of Hoover. The West Branch repository has enabled a profusion of studies on Hoover that would otherwise never have been written, and permitted historians to rely upon evidence rather than conjecture.

This is the first of a two-part article. Part II, which includes a survey of the last decade of Hoover scholarship and a selected bibliography, will appear in the next issue of The Annals (Fall 1981).

²⁸ Williams, *Contours*, p. 426n. Also see Williams' "Legend of Isolationism;" *Tragedy of American Diplomacy*; and his chapter on Hoover in *Some Presidents*. Irwin Unger, "The New Left and American History: Some Recent Trends in United States Historiography," *American Historical Review* 72 (July 1967): 1237-1263, has some interesting impressions of the New Left.

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