

# Herbert Hoover: A Life/Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency

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presence of 4-H there. Additionally, rural historians, scholars of gender and sexuality, and those examining the development of the modern American state will be among the many to find it absorbing.

*Herbert Hoover: A Life*, by Glen Jeansonne. New York: New American Library, an imprint of Penguin Random House, 2016. viii, 454 pp. Essay on sources, notes, index. \$28.00 hardcover.

*Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*, by Charles Rappleye. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016. xx, 555 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$32.50 hardcover, \$16.99 e-book.

Reviewer Kendrick A. Clements is professor of history emeritus at the University of South Carolina. He is the author of *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism: Engineering the Good Life* (2000) and *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Imperfect Visionary, 1918–1928* (2010).

Herbert Hoover's name rarely arises in conversations about American presidents—unless the country is in economic trouble, when he is routinely cited as the president who mishandled the Great Depression. That charge infuriated him during his long post-presidency, and many of his biographers have shared his outrage. Even his defenders, however, have to admit that he was singularly inept in defending his policies to the American people while he was in the White House. Whether his actions were right or wrong, most Americans then and since got the impression that he didn't care about the suffering of his fellow citizens.

Hoover began his career as a mining engineer, and most of his public and private documents are dense with facts and figures—not easy reading. Although, as Glen Jeansonne points out, in later life Hoover worked hard to make his writings and speeches more “literary” and easier for general audiences to follow, much of his earlier work is pretty soporific. Digging through the mountains of material in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library in West Branch, the Hoover Institution at Stanford, and elsewhere is a daunting task. The evidence illustrates Hoover's enormous contribution to America and the world, but making the story accessible to modern readers is a challenge for any biographer.

Fortunately, identifying the central themes of complex issues and explaining them clearly and briefly are among Glen Jeansonne's great strengths. Insofar as any account of Hoover's career can be easy, pleasant reading, *Herbert Hoover: A Life* is such a book. Its coverage of Hoover's early life, in particular, reveals a warm human being very different from the iceberg who is the thirty-first president in most people's minds. Tracing Hoover's careers as a mining entrepreneur and pioneer in distant corners of the world, creator and manager of a relief program for

Europe and the Soviet Union during and after World War I, and an innovator in federal service to the nation through the Commerce Department, Jeansonne makes a strong argument that "the kaleidoscopic range of his life would justify an inclusive biography even if he had never been president" (1-2).

In 1928 Hoover won a landslide election to the presidency as "the great humanitarian" and one of the principal architects of Republican prosperity during the 1920s. There seemed every reason to believe, as Hoover memorably declared at the close of his campaign, that America was "nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land." But it was not to be; beginning with the stock market crash in the autumn of 1929, the United States slid into a decade of the worst depression in its history. Hoover's remarkable efforts to stop the collapse and lift the country back into prosperity are a central focus of both Jeansonne's biography and Charles Rappleye's *Herbert Hoover in the White House: The Ordeal of the Presidency*.

Drawing on his experience with relief in Europe, the management of the American Food Administration during the war, and flood relief in the Mississippi valley in 1927, Hoover believed at first that he could also fight the depression by mobilizing business volunteers, private charity, and local governments. Urging businesses to resist pressure to cut wages and jobs and asking local governments to accelerate public works programs, he did not at first believe that more direct federal intervention would be necessary. His initial efforts had some success, but a cascade of bank failures and growing unemployment halted progress. By late 1930 he had to recognize that the voluntary approach alone would not bring recovery.

Late in 1931 Hoover asked Congress to create a Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) with unprecedented authority to lend to endangered banks and other large corporations. His theory was that if the banking system could be stabilized, credit would again become available to businesses, and the resulting surge in production and hiring would bring recovery. In combination with new efforts by the Federal Reserve to stimulate the economy, the RFC's loans sharply slowed the rate of bank failures. The program was so successful that, according to Jeansonne, "the Depression had been stopped by the summer of 1932" (306).

Had voters been willing to stay the course with Hoover, Jeansonne argues, full recovery would have come fairly soon. Instead, "the uncertainty of Roosevelt's policies . . . spiked business fears" (305-6), and a major bank panic during the interregnum plunged the nation back into depression. The guiding motives of the New Deal, Jeansonne contends, were "patronage" and "political opportunism" (306), which delayed recovery and led to "the imposition of a leviathan government" (279).

For the remainder of his life Hoover contended that, if given time, his policies would have ended the depression, and Jeansonne insists that he offered "a more comprehensive exposition of enlightened, sophisticated, humane conservatism than Ronald Reagan or Barry Goldwater" (301). During his presidency, however, Hoover's inability to sell his policies to the American public meant that he received little credit for his efforts and became, in the public mind, a cold, uncaring Scrooge totally insensitive to his compatriots' tribulations.

Rappleye's Hoover is a more complex figure than Jeansonne's "public servant with a set of objectives he wanted to achieve" (289). As Rappleye depicts him, Hoover was a pragmatic politician willing to play the race card in the South to win in 1928, and in office could be "surly, easily frustrated, and sometimes vindictive" (xvi).

If he is more willing to recognize Hoover's flaws than Jeansonne, Rappleye also admires Hoover's willingness to use the RFC and the Federal Reserve "to thaw frozen assets and open channels of credit by supporting banks and other private institutions with public funds" (xviii). As he digs into the details of the president's policies, however, Rappleye discovers some things that Jeansonne doesn't see. He argues that although the RFC was effective in slowing the flood of bank failures, it never achieved real recovery because "no matter how much money was sluiced into [the coffers of American banks], the bankers of America refused to push any back out the door" (364). Instead, they sat on their cash throughout 1932, leaving credit frozen while industrial production continued to decline and unemployment rose.

Nothing led to more criticism of Hoover than his refusal to support a major federal program for the unemployed. Part of the problem was that, as Rappleye points out, although Hoover had labored mightily as secretary of commerce to gather and disseminate statistics on the economy, the government still did not have accurate unemployment figures when the depression began. It was thus possible for officials to underestimate the problem, particularly because conventional economic wisdom held (even British economist John Maynard Keynes agreed as late as 1931) that private charity and local governments could and should be responsible for the unemployed. "Reliance on [the federal] government," the president and most professional economists believed, "bred bureaucracy and corruption, and stifled innovation" (233). Expansion of the federal bureaucracy through the creation of a "dole" was unnecessary in the short term and, more basically, would move the nation toward the sort of socialist policies that Hoover believed had undermined individual initiative and slowed economic progress in Europe.

When the RFC failed to get industry restarted by the fall of 1932, unemployment and bank failures rose, while the government's adoption of what were seen as inflationary measures led foreign investors to fear that the United States would soon abandon the gold standard as Britain and other nations had done. Those, particularly the French, who had gold in American banks, began to make heavy withdrawals. Hoover, believing that maintenance of the gold standard would be essential to restore international trade, resisted the pressure for devaluation but could not stop the runs. Banks weakened by heavy withdrawals were crippled, and a new surge of failures hit during the interregnum between the presidential election and Roosevelt's inauguration in March 1933. Any confidence created by previous Hoover policies evaporated. Rappleye doubts that the situation could have been stabilized, even if Roosevelt had been willing to endorse Hoover's policy during that period.

During his long post-presidency Hoover was obsessed with trying to persuade Americans that he would have handled the depression better than Roosevelt if only he had been reelected in 1932. The Democrats, who read public opinion more accurately, were delighted to campaign as if Hoover were the candidate, no matter who the Republicans nominated in election after election. Hoover's useful contributions to post-war foreign policy and to governmental reorganization, Jeansonne notes, were lost in the noise.

Whether one argues, as Jeansonne does, that Hoover's depression-era policy was selfishly subverted by Democrats, or that uncontrollable circumstances, fatal flaws in the president's personality, and rigidity in his ideology undermined his efforts, as Rappleye sees it, neither of these books is likely to reverse the popular image of the thirty-first president. Nevertheless, both are highly readable, and those who want to understand the evolution of American policy toward management of the economy should read them.

*Presidential Libraries as Performance: Curating American Character from Herbert Hoover to George W. Bush*, by Jodi Kanter. Theater in the Americas Series. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. xii, 179 pp. Table, illustrations, charts, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00 paperback.

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The presidential library—rarely has a research and educational facility caused so much consternation within the academic community. Critics