

## Herbert Hoover

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ISSN 0003-4827

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### Recommended Citation

Jeansonne, Glen. "Herbert Hoover." *The Annals of Iowa* 68 (2009), 323-325.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.1367>

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*Herbert Hoover*, by William E. Leuchtenburg. The American Presidents Series. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009. xviii, 186 pp. Illustration, milestones, bibliography, index. \$22.00 cloth.

Reviewer Glen Jeansonne is professor of history at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. He is working on a biography of Herbert Hoover.

The books in the American Presidents Series, written by prominent historians or well-known public figures, are brief, unfootnoted, and designed to appeal to nonspecialists, relying on the name recognition of the authors and the subjects to attract readers. The series is designed to cover the entire life of a president in broad strokes. The author of the installment on Herbert Hoover is a prominent scholar of twentieth-century history who has focused chiefly, although not exclusively, on Franklin D. Roosevelt. The present work seems partly a distillation of his early study, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914–1932* (1958).

William E. Leuchtenburg's study traces Hoover from an impoverished boyhood, orphaned in Iowa, passed to a maternal uncle in Oregon, educated at Stanford, and through a successful business career. He saved Belgium from starvation during the First World War, served as U.S. Food Administrator, and was an influential figure at the Versailles Peace Conference, director of the American Relief Administration, a highly active Secretary of Commerce, and a depression-era president. The book, organized chronologically, devotes four chapters to Hoover's presidency and one 14-page chapter to the 31 years after he left the presidency in 1933. Hoover died in 1964.

The author's style is brisk, opinionated, and irreverent. Frequently sarcastic and overwritten, he offers grudging respect to Iowa's only president. Iowa readers will find sparse details of his Quaker upbringing in West Branch. The Iowa portion of Hoover's life is dismissed in less than four pages. Iowa appears a quite dismal outpost. "For the most part . . . his childhood was as monotone as the drab prairie schooner bonnet his mother habitually wore" (2). From Iowa, the book skims through Hoover's Oregon rearing by a maternal uncle and his years at Stanford. The biographer finds Hoover a brooding presence on campus, virtually friendless, incapable of having fun, "largely clueless about a career" (7) until the end of his freshman year and "too ungainly to play shortstop at Stanford" (8). Actually, Hoover made lifelong friends at his alma mater, and an injured hand ended his in-fielding.

Hoover had a brilliant career as a mining engineer. The author acknowledges that he sent part of his income, anonymously, to needy friends and relatives. Yet, to Leuchtenburg, he was tyrannical as a supervisor in Australia. "In fact, Hoover held far less liberal social views

than contemporary Tories" (11). He writes, "Whenever Hoover appeared on the scene, workers wondered how many of them had seen their last payday" (11). Moving to a higher-paying job in China, Hoover is depicted as an engineer who exploited workers, failed to appreciate Chinese culture, and might have swindled the Chinese parent company that employed him, although Leuchtenburg acknowledges that Hoover developed more enlightened views on labor later in life.

In 1914 Hoover gave up business, forfeiting a potentially great fortune, to direct the Commission for the Relief of Belgium (CRB). "If a man without Hoover's daring had held his post, many thousands would have starved to death," the historian writes (26). Despite his apparent lack of warmth, Hoover's staff idolized him.

As head of the Food Administration, as in all his public life, Hoover served without pay and was an adept administrator. Yet "Hoover circulated misinformation and when he was caught in a lie, juggled the figures to place the blame on someone else" (39). After a brief presidential boom fizzled in 1920 Hoover became the most active member of the Cabinet under Harding and Coolidge. He defined his personal and political views in *American Individualism* (1922), in all of which, the author writes, there is but "one pellucid sentence" (66). "It is hard to fathom why this jejune screed, little more than a pamphlet, has been taken seriously as a meaningful contribution to social theory," he concludes (67).

After Coolidge withdrew, Hoover easily won the presidential election of 1928 but experienced a mixed record during his first year. "Well before the Wall Street crash, Hoover had been exposed as politically inept and incapable of mobilizing his own party," Leuchtenburg asserts (91). The author finds Hoover weak on foreign policy, but concedes that neither the public nor the Congress would have supported a war with Japan over Manchuria. He assesses the president's 1931 debt moratorium as "the boldest initiative of his presidency" (126). Leuchtenburg gives Hoover credit for responding to the economic downturn more aggressively than any predecessor would have, yet his program was too limited, relying excessively on voluntarism. "At a time when Hoover was trumpeting the superiority of free enterprise over foreign systems, the Soviet Union publicized six thousand job openings," he states (129). Leuchtenburg rates the Reconstruction Finance Corporation as a failure and concludes of Hoover's program: "Only unwittingly — by revealing the inadequacy of his voluntaristic approach — was Hoover the progenitor of FDR's enlargement of federal authority" (133).

Hoover tried, unsuccessfully, to find political redemption as an ex-president, but made himself a useful citizen, Leuchtenburg believes. He concludes the book on a note more upbeat than most of the text: "But there was more to his career than the four years in the White House. Hoover, an associate told the press, 'fed more people and saved more lives than any other man in history'" (161).

Hoover's reputation among historians seems carved in stone, and Leuchtenburg only reinforces it. He includes nothing, whether of fact or interpretation, that cannot be found in previous Hoover studies. The biographer, at least indirectly, employs Hoover as a foil for FDR. Almost every statement on policy is a comparison by inference to the New Deal. Some of the passages quoted above read like caricature. We see nothing of the Hoover who was kind, gentle, sincere, modest, and unselfish, who battled tenaciously, if unsuccessfully, to tame the Great Depression, and who loved children. The book is a rehash, one more nail driven into a coffin already nailed shut. The lack of new facts or original ideas is a sad commentary on how little distance Hoover historiography has traveled during the past 50 years. Some original revisionist work was done in the 1970s, but it died stillborn. It is unfortunate that this eminent historian, with the opportunity to reflect in maturity, missed the chance to write something new and different and instead leaped aboard a train that had left the station long ago.

Nonetheless, with the economic downturn of 2008–2009, scholars and journalists are newly interested in Hoover and the formidable problems he encountered, and are examining him again for new lessons — and finding them.

*The Impact of the New Deal on Iowa: Changing the Culture of a Rural State*, by Gregg R. Narber. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008. xi, 314 pp. Illustrations, charts, tables, notes, appendixes, bibliography, index. \$119.95 cloth.

Reviewer Timothy Walch is the director of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library–Museum.

Everyone knows that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover. It's also true that you shouldn't judge a book by its title. That bit of wisdom bears repeating when considering Gregg Narber's new book, *The Impact of the New Deal on Iowa: Changing the Culture of a Rural State*. Simply stated, this book is both more and less than the title implies.

First it's important to note that this is *not* a book about the impact of the New Deal on Iowa's economy. For example, there's nothing in the book about Roosevelt's agricultural or industrial policies or pro-