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"DEAR MR. PRESIDENT:"

THE

HOOVER-TRUMAN

CORRESPONDENCE

by

Benjamin Rogers

Harry Truman, like most Presidents, wrote a great many letters during his life, and among the most pleasant and charming are those he wrote to ex-President Herbert Hoover. Mr. Hoover's replies were warm and friendly, and the correspondence between these two political leaders, one a Republican and one a Democrat, illustrates a chapter of American history during the period following World War II.

When Herbert Hoover stepped down from the Presidency in March 1933, he had few admirers among the American people, and incoming President Franklin Roosevelt was not one of them. As a result, Mr. Hoover's long career of public service which had started during the first World War came to an abrupt halt. During Roosevelt's presidency the advice of Herbert Hoover was not asked, and the White House doors were closed to him.

Hoover's public service resumed as the result of a telegram which he sent to President Harry Truman on April 12, 1945, as Truman assumed office on the death of Franklin Roosevelt: "All Americans will wish you strength for your gigantic task. You have the right to call for any service in aid of the country."

Within a week President Truman replied, "Please accept my thanks for your message of the twelfth. I need not assure you that your good wishes are deeply appreciated," and added a postscript in his own hand, "I assure you that I shall feel free to call upon you. Thanks for the offer." More than a month passed before President Truman decided how best to use the services of his Republican predecessor, and on May 24, he penned an invitation to Mr. Hoover:

My dear Mr. President:-

If you should be in Washington, I would be most happy to talk over the European food situation with you. Also it would be a pleasure to me to become acquainted with you.

Most sincerely,

Harry Truman

President Hoover responded affirmatively, arranged an appointment with one of the White House secretarial staff, and journeyed from New York to Washington to meet with President Truman at 10:30 on the morning of Monday, May 28. Thus began a fruitful collaboration which restored President Hoover to the ranks of public service and which resulted in a lifelong friendship between the two men.

During Harry Truman's tenure in office his correspondence with ex-President Hoover was almost entirely concerned with the business of the Federal government, but it was always pleasant and cordial. Mr. Hoover offered his services and President Truman put to good use the boundless energy of his Republican predecessor. On request of the President, Mr. Hoover set aside other activities and devoted his time to the project at hand. President Truman's pleasure at Mr. Hoover's prompt assistance is evident in his many expressions of gratitude. Hoover's services included the planning of world
food distribution in the wake of World War II and the gigantic task of reorganizing the executive branch of the United States government undertaken by the Hoover Commission from 1947 to 1949. Within two days of Mr. Hoover’s first visit to President Truman in May 1945, the White House received four detailed memoranda on the subjects they had discussed: The European Food Organization, The Domestic Food Organization, The Creation of a War Economic Council, and The Japanese Situation. Apparently President Hoover felt that his task had been completed, for he concluded his covering letter, “I trust you will command me in any further service.”

President Truman appreciated Mr. Hoover’s quick response. He put Hoover in charge of all planning in the area of food relief for the post-war world and sent him on a 35,000 mile tour to study the world food situation. Hoover was asked to make plans for transporting available surpluses to areas in danger of famine.

Hoover’s recommendations were followed, and by November 1946, the famine emergency seemed under control. President Truman wrote to express his gratitude:

Truman’s letter to Hoover requesting assistance on the world food problem, (courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa)
Yours was a real service to humanity. Without your efforts . . . the suffering abroad would have been much greater during those dread months last spring and summer when so many nations had exhausted their own food supplies. In expressing my thanks, I also express the appreciation of all those who were benefitted by your efficient service.

President Truman left the door open for another call to service: "I know that I can count upon your cooperation if developments at any time in the future make it necessary for me to call upon you again."

Only two months had passed when the President wrote Mr. Hoover, noting that world conditions that year were "not nearly as threatening" as they had been in 1946 and added:

... a serious shortage in food still exists in certain areas . . . . I believe a food survey by you of these areas would be of great benefit to us in determining our policy in supplying food or funds for its purchase . . . . I should, therefore, like to ask you to undertake this mission and report to me upon it.

President Hoover’s reply was mailed the next day. He "did wish to be of service," he stated, but he urged that the mission be "somewhat broadened out." Calling attention to the fact that it would "come as a great shock to our people that the American taxpayer for a second year must expend huge funds to provide food for the enemy peoples," he suggested that the mission inquire into the steps necessary to enable those nations to become self-supporting, and that it report "when charity can be expected to end." President Truman was willing to go along with Mr. Hoover, and a new draft of the original letter of January 18 replaced his final paragraph with the following:

I should, therefore, like to ask you to undertake this economic mission as to food and its collateral problems, and report to me upon it. It is hoped that methods can be devised which will release some of the burdens on the American tax payer. Please accept my sincere thanks.

While most of Mr. Hoover’s energies in the early years of President Truman’s administration were devoted to world food problems, he had long been interested in the desirability of reorganizing the executive branch of the Federal government and in October 1945, had indicated this to President Truman. The President’s response was instantaneous:

As you so wisely observed, the overlapping, waste and conflict of policies between executive agencies have been a scandal for the whole thirty-five years during which six successive Presidents have recommended this reform.

When Congress passed a law in 1947 providing for the establishment of a Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government, President Truman asked Mr. Hoover to serve as chairman. Hoover accepted, and the work of the Commission got under way immediately. In order to keep it out of politics, Congress had provided that no reports were to be made until after the election of 1948. As a result, although the task was of great significance, the Hoover Commission received little publicity, doing most of its work behind closed doors.

Note on Sources
Aside from the standard biographies of the two principals of this article, the major source was, of course, the correspondence between Herbert Hoover and Harry Truman. This correspondence is housed at the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library at West Branch, Iowa. Also helpful were pertinent issues of national magazines such as Life and newspapers such as the New York Times.
An interesting footnote to American political history is presented by the relations between Mr. Hoover and President Truman during the summer of 1948. Campaigning for re-election, Mr. Truman had much opposition from within his own party and was forced to carry his message directly to the American people. His “give-em-hell” campaign was directed primarily at the “good-for-nothing” Eightieth Congress, but he did not neglect Mr. Hoover in his abuse of the Republican party. On several occasions, he laid the blame for the Depression squarely on the former President.

While President Truman was attacking his Republican predecessor from the stump, Mr. Hoover was devoting most of his time to the work of the Commission on Organization. Moreover, when Herbert Hoover addressed the Republican convention, President Truman wrote him in longhand: “Your speech to the Republican Convention was the utterance of a statesman. May I presume to congratulate you upon it.” To which Mr. Hoover replied: “That was a touching note. I do want you to know how deeply I appreciate it.”

As the campaign reached fever heat in August, Mr. Truman found time to send
his friend "Hearty congratulations and best wishes for a happy birthday." And when President Truman on November 3 upset the pollsters with a victory over Thomas Dewey, Mr. Hoover was in the vanguard of those with messages for the press: "All Americans will rally unitedly to President Truman's support that we may have peace and prosperity for our country."

The election was hardly over when President Truman wrote from Key West on November 12 to Mr. Hoover:

The country is fortunate that a Commission, composed of men whose capacity in this field has been forged by experience has devoted so much time and thought to the tremendous problems involved.... its recommendations will go far to make sound and effective organization possible.

If at any time the Commission's work can be facilitated by action on my part, you have but to let me know.

Further evidence of Truman-Hoover collaboration in the business of governmental reorganization was jotted down by Mr. Hoover on April 7, when the President called on the telephone. Mr. Truman asked for Hoover's help. He wanted the ex-President to speak to Republicans in the Senate about passing the government reorganization bill.

"That will be fine," replied Mr. Hoover, "I will come down on Monday and see what we can do from our side."

Although all of the recommended measures were not passed at that time, the result of this cooperative effort was the passage of the Reorganization Act of June 20, 1949, shortly before Mr. Hoover's seventy-fifth birthday.

Herbert Hoover had told the press that this would be his last venture into the area of public service. However, when the Communist government of North Korea launched its attack on the South in June 1950, he was again in communication with the White House. "Dear Mr. President," he wrote in longhand, "I need scarcely write to you that I will be glad to be of any service within my limitations at this time." And Harry Truman penned in response, "Dear Mr. President:—I appreciate most highly your letter of the 1st. . . . If events require, you may rest assured that I will want your help and advice. I pray that peace may come."

Five months later, in November 1950, the President again requested assistance from Mr. Hoover:

There has been a great deal of talk [he wrote] about the infiltration of communists in the government, particularly in the State Department. I've decided to appoint a bipartisan Commission consisting of all parts of the population of the United States—some churchmen, both Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, some outstanding men from the legal fraternity, from business and from labor. I would personally appreciate it if you would be willing to act as Chairman of that Commission. . . .

For the first time Mr. Hoover's response was in the negative. "Despite the encroachments of advancing age," he wrote, "I do not wish to ever refuse service to the country." But there were some aspects of the question which troubled him and which he wished to lay frankly before the President:

First, I doubt if there are any consequen- tial card-carrying communists in the Government, or if there are, they should be known to the F.B.I.

Second . . . I suggest that the current lack of confidence arises from the belief that there are men in Government (not Communists) whose attitudes are such that
they have disastrously advised on policies in relation to Communist Russia . . . 

Third. Without a widespread inquiry into the past and present of such men and the facts, the answer to this problem could not be determined . . . 

Fourth. The Congress itself is likely to be engaged in such investigations anyway.

Therefore it seems to me that any inquiry as to “Communists in the Government” by an informal Commission would not be likely to satisfy the public or to restore confidence. I dislike indeed to respond in terms of declination to any request of yours as I would like greatly to be helpful to you in these troublous times.

Although President Truman was understandably disappointed with Mr. Hoover’s refusal to serve, he answered the ex-President’s letter at some length on December 7. Thanking Mr. Hoover again for freely giving “of your time and energy to your country,” and indicating that he still intended to name a commission which was “above all political partisanship,” he explained carefully exactly why he thought his action was necessary and requested the support “of the leaders of the country.”

Harry Truman did not ask for Herbert Hoover’s services again, but many years later, in December 1962, Mr. Hoover, in reflecting on his activities during the Truman administration, wrote to his old friend thanking him for a book which Truman had sent him:

This is an occasion when I should like to add something more, because yours has been a friendship which has reached deeper into my life than you know.

I gave up a successful profession in 1914 to enter public service. I served through the First World War and after for a total of about 18 years.

When the attack on Pearl Harbor came, I at once supported the President and offered to serve in any useful capacity. Because of my varied experience, during the First World War, I thought my services might again be useful, however there was no response . . .

When you came to the White House within a month you opened the door to me to the only profession I knew, public service . . . .

For all of this and your friendship, I am deeply grateful.

Mr. Truman’s reply was in longhand:

Dear Mr. President:

You’ll never know how much I appreciated your letter of Dec. 19, ’62. In fact I was overcome, because you state the situation much better than I could.

I’ll quote you, “For . . . your friendship, I am deeply grateful.”

Most sincerely

Harry Truman

There is no indication in the correspondence of these two ex-Presidents that they ever engaged in any partisan controversy. Perhaps their approach to politics was best expressed in a letter President Hoover wrote President Truman in August 1960:

I received the great honor of the Presidency of the United States from the Republican Party. I will naturally vote for its ticket. And I have no doubt my good friend President Truman will vote the Democratic ticket!

Birthdays invariably brought letters or telegrams of congratulation. In 1958, Mr. Hoover, unable because of illness to attend a birthday luncheon for President Truman in Kansas City, wrote a letter to be read at the celebration. Mr. Truman expressed deep appreciation and a desire to see Hoover the next time he was in New York and added in longhand, “I’m reading your biography of Wilson and I like it.” On Hoover’s eighty-ninth birthday in August 1963, Mr. Truman wired him, “Congratulations on another birthday tomorrow. You must reach one hundred as
TO
Honorable Harry S. Truman
Harry S. Truman Presidential Library
Independence, Missouri

October 14, 1964

BATHTUBS ARE A MENACE TO EX-PRESIDENTS FOR AS YOU MAY RECALL
A BATHTUB ROSE UP AND FRACTURED MY VERTEBRAE WHEN I WAS IN
VENEZUELA ON YOUR WORLD FAMINE MISSION IN 1946. MY WARMEST
SYMPATHY AND BEST WISHES FOR YOUR SPEEDY RECOVERY.

Herbert Hoover

The famous telegram sent on the occasion of Truman's bathtub fall. (courtesy of the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa)

I intend to do.” Hoover, ill with cancer, was unable to reply, but his son Allan answered for him:

My father wants you to know how deeply he appreciated your gracious and encouraging birthday greeting. He says he'll race you to that hundred!

There are in the Truman-Hoover correspondence many invitations, some accepted and some not. There are letters concerning their respective Presidential libraries, honorary chairmanships of organizations, and relations with the press. But perhaps most touching of all was Mr. Hoover's last communication with his friend, a telegram sent on October 14, 1964 when President Truman had fallen in a bathtub and broken two ribs:

BATHTUBS ARE A MENACE TO EX-PRESIDENTS FOR AS YOU MAY RECALL A BATHTUB ROSE UP AND FRACTURED MY VERTEBRAE WHEN I WAS IN VENEZUELA ON YOUR WORLD FAMINE MISSION IN 1946. MY WARMEST SYMPATHY AND BEST WISHES FOR YOUR SPEEDY RECOVERY.

Within less than a week, President Hoover suffered a massive internal hemorrhage and died at the age of ninety. Harry Truman grieved as he wrote to Allan and Herbert Hoover, Jr.: “I was deeply saddened at the passing of your father. He was my good friend and I was his. . . .”

So we have a glimpse of a warm human relationship. Also important, however, is the demonstration that Harry Truman made great use of Herbert Hoover. As he wrote in his reminiscences: “Only a man of Hoover's talents, with the very important experience he had as President, could have achieved so difficult a task with such marked results.”