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Hoover and the Historians: The Resurrection of a President

Part II

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In Part I of their essay (published in the summer 1981 issue of The Annals), Patrick O'Brien and Philip Rosen traced the evolution of Hoover historiography from the negative literature of the 1930s and early 1940s through the increasingly favorable revisionism of the 1950s and 1960s. Here the authors examine Hoover scholarship of the last decade, demonstrating that current historians balance their perceptions of Hoover's weaknesses with an appreciation of his merits.—Ed.

ALMOST EVERY PHASE of Hoover's nature, life, and public career has been reexamined in the past decade. The conclusion of this article is an attenuated bibliographical essay based upon representative writings selected from the mass of Hoover literature. Organized in some correspondence to the sequence of his life, this section provides a composite impression of "the Chief" in contemporary historical writing. He is not subject, however, to the symmetrical characterizations that once typified historical interpretation. Complex and multidimensional, the Hoover in much revisionist writing is more of an enigma than before.

Although the subjects of Hoover's personality and ideology had been considered earlier, Hoover literature since 1970 is replete with commentary on references to his character and

values. Gerald D. Nash identified "deep-seated beliefs regarding science and religion" as the foundations of Hoover's thought. A fusion of religious and scientific premises produced the themes of individualism, voluntary cooperation, and cooperative capitalism in Hoover's ideology. Nash thought that Quaker background likewise explained Hoover's behavior and habits. Simplicity, drabness, and sobriety were Quaker virtues, but these characteristics and a flawed personality contributed to Hoover's failure as a politician and thereby as president. "Highly efficient, rarely wrong in judgment, extremely ethical and benevolent, and the outstanding leader in every enterprise," was the magnanimous opinion that Hoover had of himself, according to Nash. That opinion was at variance with the reality of a fallible man of uneven effectiveness and faulty judgment in crises.²⁹

Recent Hoover biographers Joan Hoff Wilson and David Burner modify and refine the Nash interpretation. Besides religion and science, both authors emphasize environment, including childhood vicissitudes and rural life, as a decisive influence on Hoover. They regard religion as a strong but residual influence. Wilson states that "as an adult Hoover retained few outward signs of his boyhood faith." He was a chronic smoker, fished on Sundays, liked a stiff drink, and swore—all practices inconsistent with Quakerism. These vices did not nullify his belief in basic Quaker postulates, and his idealism, stoicism, pragmatism, and social inhibitions likewise stemmed from his Quaker background. Burner especially regards Hoover as a complex person with highly divergent strains in his personality. His acute public shyness concealed his humor, sociability, and compassion, and his private inhibitions account for an elusiveness in his personality. Hoover could exhibit unattractive characteristics, but he was decent, humane, and honest. The high opinion that Hoover may have had of himself was usually merited.³⁰

The selected bibliography following this article contains full citations for works mentioned in the text and in short form in footnotes.

²⁹Gerald D. Nash, essay in *Hoover and Crisis of Capitalism*, pp. 88, 93. Also see Blainey, "Forgotten Years."

³⁰Joan Hoff Wilson, *Forgotten Progressive*, pp. 4-7; Burner, *Public Life*, p. x.

Able and ambitious, Hoover as a young man acquired a global reputation as a mining engineer and substantial wealth through business enterprises. To Edwin T. Layton in the effusively reviewed *The Revolt of the Engineers*, Hoover symbolized the emergence of the scientist and technician to status and influence in American society, and his activities "represented a large scale attempt to put into action some of the fundamental ideas of engineering thought."³¹ Hoover had meshed science and public responsibility in his own thought, and he joined with like-minded associates to unite the engineering profession in behalf of social reform. The influence of the reform engineers reached its apex in the efficiency and planning philosophy of Hoover.

Hoover's compulsion for public service was fulfilled in World War I when he was responsible for Belgium relief, then appointed the U.S. food administrator, and finally served as director of the American Relief Administration. His influence was imprinted on both wartime policy and the relief and reconstruction programs after the carnage. This phase of Hoover's career has attracted appreciable attention, and the nearly categorical opinion is that he was a highly successful administrator whose policies compatibly fused American self-interest and humanitarianism.³²

Early in his government tenure, Hoover displayed an administrative style that continued through his presidency. The premise of *Aggressive Introvert* by Craig Lloyd is that Hoover's personal shyness prescribed his administrative methods. Hoover preferred to work "through figureheads, committees, conferences, and the printed media." This system insulated the shy Hoover and enabled his centralized control of activities to educate the public in civic responsibility. The system worked until the Great

³¹Edwin T. Layton, *The Revolt of the Engineers: Social Responsibility and the American Engineering Profession* (Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971), p. 226. Also see John B. Rae, "Memorial for Herbert C. Hoover," *Technology and Culture* 6 (1965): 108-109.

³²Hoover's tenure as food administrator is examined in Sworakowski, "Launching the Food Administration;" and Winters, "Hoover-Wallace Controversy." His post-war policies have been popular subjects in the last decade, see Best, "Technical Mission;" Best, "Relief as Price Support;" Rothbard, "1919 Food Diplomacy;" and Van Meter, "Economic Reconstruction."

Depression when it contributed substantially to Hoover's failure.³³

The 1918 to 1921 interim was pivotal to the crystallization of Hoover's ideology and included the prerequisite political groundwork for the presidency. Astringent and conscientiously researched, *The Politics of American Individualism* by Gary Dean Best is the standard monograph on the Hoover ideological and political odyssey from the armistice to the secretaryship. Identified as a progressive and internationalist, he was the choice of many Republicans and Democrats as a presidential candidate. Robert F. Himmelberg explains that Hoover's popularity stemmed from his media images of competence, justice, and reason that appealed to an American society that was convulsed by divisiveness and repression. Although rebuffed as a Republican candidate, Hoover demonstrated a strong political base and erudition that enabled his admission to the cabinet.³⁴

The fruition of his ideological introspection from 1918 to 1921 was "American Individualism," unfortunate terminology that contributed to the impression that it was "rugged individualism." George H. Nash discerns "the roots of Herbert Hoover's philosophy in the contrast he perceived between the Old World and the New."³⁵ His vision was an American society with equal opportunity, the mesh of individualism and social responsibility, the absence of classes and class consciousness, and the practice of cooperation without the loss of constructive competition. With these multiple, complex, and close to contradictory veins in Hoover's ideology, it is easy to understand why it is subject to a profusion of interpretations and why Hoover evades simple political taxonomy. It is now the conven-

³³Hoover's administrative style has also been discussed by Cuff, "Ideology of Voluntarism," who states that Hoover's reliance on voluntarism was a tool of political manipulation, bureaucratic control, and evasion of accountability.

³⁴See Himmelberg, "Hoover's Public Image." Hoover's progressive reputation stemmed largely from his attitudes toward labor, see Best, "Second Industrial Conference." Hoover supported the Versailles Treaty with reservations, see Schmidt, "Reflections on the Versailles Treaty." Best, "Hoover-for-President Boom" is useful on presidential politics.

³⁵George H. Nash, "Social Philosophy," p. 496.

tional interpretation that Hoover was a progressive, but there were infinite species of progressivism and the generic label does little to explain his ideology.³⁶

Historians have increasingly relied upon Ellis W. Hawley's explications of the "associative state" to explain Hoover's ideological vision and guide to his policies. The idealistic, practical, and complex Hoover had a comprehensive plan to adapt American society to the twentieth century without the loss of past values. He zealously assisted cooperative institutions to form a type of private government that would "preserve and work through individual units, committing them voluntarily to service, efficiency, and ethical behavior." His construction of networks, organization of constituencies, and voluminous programs of education and publicity were his administrative and political mechanisms to implant the "associative state."³⁷

Revisionism of the past decade has confirmed and expanded upon the Consensus era literature of Hoover as a reform and activist secretary of commerce. It has also refuted Hoover mythology and expressed greater comprehension of his vision. The preponderance of historians agree with Robert H. Zieger that Hoover "formulated a bold analysis of American capitalism from the variegated strands of prewar progressivism" and "his ideas still stand as a monument to the continuity of progressivism through the 1920s."³⁸

The derogatory Progressive interpretation of Hoover stemmed from the belief that he defended business interests to the exclusion of labor and agriculture. Hoover revisionism has

³⁶Himmelberg's essay in *Hoover and Crisis of Capitalism* examines Hoover's ideology and policy on control and concludes he was in the New Freedom progressive school. Burner and West broadened the consideration of Hoover, a progressive and later a conservative in American lexicon, "to see what he looks like against a background of philosophically stronger conservative and traditionalist concerns elaborated in western thought" (p. 236). Their conclusion in "Technocrat's Morality" is that his affinity with many conservative postulates fails to make him an archetypal conservative.

³⁷Hawley, "Hoover, and an 'Associative State,'" p. 117. See also his essay in *Hoover and Crisis of Capitalism*.

³⁸Zieger, "Labor, Progressivism, and Hoover," p. 208.

now cogently refuted that Progressive staple. Robert H. Zieger concentrates on the neglected topic of *Republicans and Labor, 1919-1929*. The secretary of commerce was an influential instigator of labor policy and representative of labor welfare in Republican administrations. He "worked constantly to mute labor-management antagonism and to reduce the waste and disruption that both caused and grew from labor troubles," and his objective to "create a whole pattern of labor relations based on concepts of efficiency and cooperation" attracted reformers and unionists.³⁹ Zieger expands upon Hoover's labor philosophy and practices in subsequent articles, which are unequivocal statements of Hoover's genuine concern for labor and his acceptance of collective bargaining and other measures to increase real wages, raise the standard of living, and advance "welfare capitalism."

The writing on Hoover's attitudes and policies toward agriculture has been as revisionist as that on labor. Joan Hoff Wilson, in "Hoover's Agricultural Policies, 1921-1928," describes Secretary Hoover's ideas on agriculture as original, compliments his "comprehensive view" of the farm problem, and dismisses as "patently false" the accusation that Hoover sacrificed the farmer to big business. Gary H. Koerselman concludes that Hoover had more genuine concern for the "dirt farmer" than many agrarian representatives. In the assignment of responsibility for the economic hardships of the farmer, he states that the "agricultural leaders themselves must shoulder most of the blame. . . ." ⁴⁰

The manifold economic activities of the secretary had prosperity for the whole society as an objective. In "Secretary Hoover and the Emergence of Macroeconomic Management," Evan B. Metcalf describes Hoover's amplification of government responsibility to provide full employment through stabilization of business production and investment. His success in mitigation of seasonal and minor cyclical fluctuations explains his original reliance on business initiative in the Great Depres-

³⁹Zieger, *Republicans and Labor*, p. 13. Also see his essay "Hoover and the New Economic System."

⁴⁰Koerselman, "Hoover and Farm Policy," p. 395.

sion and anticipated official government policies to manage prosperity.⁴¹

ONLY A FEW BOOKS in the last decade have surveyed the Hoover administration. Written for the general public, Gene Smith, *The Shattered Dream*, had little value to professional historians. Edgar Eugene Robinson and Vaughn Davis Bornet, *Herbert Hoover*, was afflicted by fuzzy prose, a patent Hoover bias, and neglect of pivotal Hoover scholarship. Although not uniformly informative and cogent, the essays that comprised Martin L. Fausold and George T. Mazuzan (eds.), *The Hoover Presidency* attained an unusually high level for an anthology.

The Great Depression is the valid focus of the Hoover administration, but it has been considered to the exclusion of his pre-Depression contributions. David Burner rectified the omission first in an essay in *The Hoover Presidency* and then in his biography of "the Chief." He describes an activist president responsible for genuine reforms in civil rights, prisons, Indian affairs, child welfare, and conservation. J. Richard Snyder supplements Burner's conclusions on the pre-Depression presidency. The political ineptitude thought to be characteristic of Hoover is refuted in his study on the widely miscomprehended politics of the Hawley-Smoot Tariff. Hoover's "legislative leadership" on this complex and divisive issue is summarized as "impeccable."

The Depression phase of the presidency explicably receives the most attention by historians. Although not stated with the vehemence of the first generation historians, there is still a residue of acrimony in the Hoover literature. An unusual concession in Jordan A. Schwarz, *The Interregnum of Despair*, is that Hoover "had some continuity with the New Deal." Apprehensive of government reform and activism, Hoover acquiesced to new departures while "Congress . . . became the reluctant vehicle for an orderly and coherent transmogrification in the relationship between the federal government and the economy."⁴² This originally harsh judgment was compounded

⁴¹ A discrete study that confirms Hoover's macroeconomic responsibility of government is Grin, "Unemployment Conference."

⁴² Schwarz, *Interregnum of Despair*, p. vii.

when Schwarz examined the bases of antipathy between Hoover and Congress in an essay in *The Hoover Presidency*, which castigated Hoover for political incompetence, egregious flaws in temperament, contempt for elected officials, and dogmatic ideas on government responsibility and the congressional role of government.

Ellis W. Hawley is more representative of historical opinion. He states that Hoover had an activist anti-depression program, but that he was unwilling to adopt measures incompatible with his ideology. Committed to his inviolate blue print, Hoover consigned himself to public ignominy rather than modify it. Hawley's most comprehensive statement of the theme is *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order*, which includes the "story of the Hoover vision at bay, of an administration still committed to the formulas of 1929, fighting desperately . . . to restore faith in them and to block what it considered prescriptions for bureaucratic despotism and social degeneration."⁴³ Yet Hawley discerns idealism, validity, and continuity with the New Deal in Hoover's ideology.

Historians increasingly defend Hoover in the Depression phase. An example is Barry D. Karl's "Presidential Planning and Social Science Research: Mr. Hoover's Experts." Not only does it dispel the mythology of Hoover inactivity during an economic cataclysm, but the "American revolutionary" continued to expound "social science utopianism" and work toward a "Great Society." Unprecedented is James Stuart Olson's impression of Hoover's depression policies in *Herbert Hoover and the Reconstruction Finance Corporation, 1931-1933*. In refutation of the paralysis, callousness, and dogmatism imputed to Hoover, Olson is emphatic that Hoover transcended ideological inhibitions to his anti-depression measures. The failure of his programs to arrest the downward economic spiral cannot be ascribed to the litany of Hoover's deficiencies in Schwarz. The continuity that Olson perceives between Hoover and the

⁴³Hawley, *Great War*, p. 193. Also see his essay "American Corporatism." An earlier failure in associationism is examined by Hawley in "Coal Problem." Fausold, "Farm Policies" concludes that the Hawley thesis is applicable to Hoover's farm policies, but only that it "might apply to other policy areas in his presidency" (p. 363).

New Deal is both in the unduplicated use of government and concrete administrative and legislative measures. Hoover "should not be remembered as the man who followed Calvin Coolidge in the White House, but as the man who preceded Franklin Roosevelt."⁴⁴

Of the many failures imputed to Hoover in the presidency, his alleged callousness toward unemployed, dispirited, and indigent citizens was considered his most reprehensible transgression. Even those detractors willing to excuse Hoover's inability to generate economic recovery could not excuse his supposed inhumanity to Americans in desperate need. It is now well known that Hoover had genuine concern for citizens in penurious circumstances, and revisionist historians have defended his relief programs as unprecedented. Hoover's attitudes and policies on relief are not immune to criticism, but he cannot be reproached as malicious.⁴⁵

The Bonus March and subsequent Riot confirmed Hoover's worst frailties to many Americans and historians. Donald J. Lisio expunges misunderstanding in the thoroughly researched and well written monograph entitled *The President and Protest: Hoover, Conspiracy, and the Bonus Riot*. Sympathetic to veterans and the author of reform programs in their behalf, Hoover provided the bonus marchers with supplies and shelter, defended their civil liberties (and those of radicals), and worked to avoid violence. An important Lisio contribution is his incontrovertible documentation that General Douglas MacArthur disobeyed Hoover's order when he routed the veterans. Hoover may have been culpable of poor communications, political misjudgment, and unmerited loyalty to a subordinate, but not inhumanity and repression.⁴⁶

The early Consensus attention to Hooverian foreign policy

⁴⁴Olson, *Hoover and the RFC*, p. 90. On the deficiencies of the RFC and Hoover's response to the Depression, also see Olson's "Rehearsal for Disaster" and "End of Voluntarism." "Philosophy of Hoover" is Olson's attempt to demonstrate that Hoover's political philosophy is "far more relevant today than it was during his own presidency" (p. 181).

⁴⁵See Lambert, "Hoover, Red Cross and Food" and Ortquist, "Unemployment and Relief."

⁴⁶A divergent interpretation of the event that also absolves Hoover of complicity in the rout is Daniels, *Bonus March*.

may explain why the bulk of historical writing in the last decade has been on domestic policy. Yet, historians have not neglected foreign policy. A revisionist Hoover is ubiquitous in *American Business and Foreign Policy, 1920-1933*. The complementary veins of practicality and idealism in Hoover were evident in his foreign policy principles, which usually were attuned to the realities of the post-war world. Joan Hoff Wilson neglects neither the inconsistencies nor the myopia in Hoover's global vision, but she implores readers to appreciate his valid contributions and apply them to the present. Wilson's conclusions on Hoover are representative interpretations in much historical writing.⁴⁷

Although the favorable impression of his foreign policy that originated in the Consensus era has continued to the present, contemporary literature includes both ambivalence toward and rebuke of Hoover. Richard N. Kottman concluded in his study of the complex diplomacy of the St. Lawrence Seaway Treaty that "Hoover was too often politically inept, too vindictive, too irascible and suspicious, too sensitive to criticism, too dogmatic . . . and too rigid." But "at the same time [he] manifested vision, occasional political courage, and a determined commitment to effecting a great national enterprise." In "Herbert Hoover and the Smoot-Hawley Tariff: Canada, A Case Study," the same author discerned less to commend in the president, and concluded with a testy challenge to the revisionists that they "will have a difficult task to reconcile this 'new Hoover' with the realities of Canadian-American relations, 1929-1933."⁴⁸

Hoover's post-presidential years have not received the studious attention that historians applied to his prior public career. Except for his assignments in the Harry S. Truman administration and work in the Hoover commissions, this phase of his life has been neglected. With the exceptions noted above, extant studies usually emphasize his choleric dissent from the course of history in general and the New Deal in particular. It is

⁴⁷Also see Rhodes, "War Debts;" Costigliola, "Other Side of Isolationism;" and Leffler, "Republican War Debt Policy."

⁴⁸Kottman, "St. Lawrence Seaway Treaty," p. 315 and "Smoot-Hawley Tariff," p. 635. Also critical is his study of "The Hoover-Bennett Meeting."

easy to understand how Hoover could be dismissed as a bitter anachronism. His intemperate language and rhetorical excesses made it appear that he was engaged in a vendetta brought on by frustration and rebuff. It can be said in Hoover's defense that his political opponents, ideological nemeses, and American public usually heard only what they wanted.

Gary Dean Best focuses upon Hoover's disaffection with the New Deal. Although Hoover first avoided publicity as a private citizen, he was resolved to be the titular head of the Republican party. Not especially effective in his objectives to encourage Republican public opposition to the New Deal and shape the party into a vehicle of alternatives to it, Hoover renounced "public silence and private anguish" to become a strident detractor of the domestic New Deal. Hoover then transferred his dissent to foreign policy. Revulsion toward war, antipathy toward both Communism and Fascism, and fear of domestic regimentation explain his futile protest against World War II interventionist policy. He misjudged the Nazi military capacity and the effect of war on the society, but his comprehension of geopolitics and the consequences of the war on the global power system surpassed that of the FDR administration.⁴⁹

World War II did not appreciably modify Hoover's perceptions. Afterward, he became a vehement critic of Truman's foreign policy because of international alliances and domestic mobilization that resulted in the "military-industrial complex." Donald J. Mrozek states that Hoover's "special definition of American individualism . . . forced him to oppose Truman's policy," not misguided isolationism as his opponents thought. The Truman policy "endangered the possibilities for imperial growth within the domestic limits of constitution and tradition."⁵⁰

The conclusion should not be drawn from the above descriptions that Hoover was either immune to ideas not his own or incapable of adaptation to new realities. As the influential chairman of the First Hoover Commission, he contributed to bipartisan acceptance of the strong managerial executive, a New Deal

⁴⁹ See Best, "Titular Leader," and "Road to War."

⁵⁰ Mrozek, "Progressive Dissenter," pp. 289, 291.

axiom. Convinced that the authority of the office must be equivalent to its official responsibility and based upon strictly managerial terms, Hoover was less willing than commission liberals to confine the presidency to an organizational form.⁵¹

The profusion of monographs on disparate phases of Hoover's life and political career was synthesized into two revisionist biographies published in the latter stages of the 1970s. Joan Hoff Wilson, *Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive*, and David Burner, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life*, have parallel themes and conclusions. The divergence between them is less in interpretation than in emphasis, style, and attitude. Wilson's characterization of Hoover as a *Forgotten Progressive* indicates both the premises and the cogency of current revisionism on Hoover. The occasionally obtuse style, expression of "presentism," and intermittently metallic criticism of Hoover fail to invalidate the scholarship in *Forgotten Progressive*. *A Public Life* has all the merits and few of the liabilities of *Forgotten Progressive*, and it is the best one volume biography extant.

The historical interpretations of Hoover have now made nearly a full revolution, and the currently revised Hoover has many of the same characteristics that first made him attractive to his contemporaries. Although historians of this generation are conscious of Hoover's frailties and failures, they also have an appreciation of his decency, integrity, and humaneness that an earlier generation repressed. The revisionist reconstruction of "the Chief" has enabled him to receive the respect that evaded him in his own lifetime. The mills of historical revisionism can grind slowly but they finally ground fair in the instance of Hoover.

⁵¹ See Arnold, "Hoover Commission and Managerial Presidency."

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