

# Herbert Hoover As Secretary of Commerce 1921-1928: Studies in New Era Thought and Practice

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## Book Reviews

*Herbert Hoover as Secretary of Commerce 1921-1928: Studies in New Era Thought and Practice*, ed. by Ellis W. Hawley. Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1981. pp. xii, 263. Photographs, notes, bibliographic essay, index. \$19.95.

This stimulating volume, which highlights Herbert Hoover's tenure from 1921 to 1928 as secretary of commerce under Presidents Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge, is a most welcome addition to the growing literature on Hoover and the New Economic Era. This book, the second volume in the Hoover Centennial Seminars Series, is adeptly edited by Ellis W. Hawley, professor of history at the University of Iowa and expert on the history of American economic institutions and business-government relations. The volume contains essays by Robert Murray of Pennsylvania State University, Hawley, Robert Zeiger of Wayne State University, Joan Hoff Wilson of Indiana University, Melvyn Leffler of Vanderbilt University, Joseph Brandes of William Paterson College, and George Carey of Georgetown University, seven new generation historians who have published significant works on the Hoover era.

Hawley writes stimulating introductions and skillfully arranges and organizes the essays into a comprehensible whole, delineating how Hoover transformed the Commerce Department. Besides demolishing traditional stereotypes about Hoover's political conservatism, the essays demonstrate how Hoover's programs and policies were innovative and paved the way for the future. The essays generally paint Hoover as a modern, resourceful, creative manager rather than as a defender of traditional or established institutions. Based on careful research in the Hoover Papers and on recent scholarship, the essays illuminate Hoover's political philosophy and his relationship to other executive branch figures. Following each selection, Hawley includes lively rebuttal commentary made by other seminar participants.

In an excellent introductory essay, Hawley summarizes the changing framework of New Era historiography. Contemporaries viewed the 1920s as a New Economic Era of dynamic, democratic, and progressive impulses. From the 1930s through the 1950s, historians pictured the period as conservative and portrayed Hoover as an outmoded *laissez-faire* ideologue defending an obsolete nineteenth-century liberalism. During the last two decades, however, revisionist historians have viewed the 1920s as a productive period and have categorized Hoover as a modern organizer and planner.

Murray's broad essay features Hoover and the Harding cabinet. A

renowned Harding scholar, Murray describes how Hoover helped initiate public policy, promoted, guided, and protected America's economic development, and made a major impact on other departments. Murray commends Hoover, who secured full cooperation from Harding, as one of the ablest, more energetic, and aggressive cabinet administrators in the nation's history.

Hawley, Zeiger, and Wilson ably demonstrate how Hoover promoted and shaped the nation's domestic economic policies. Hawley traces Hoover's economic stabilization efforts during his first two years as commerce secretary. Although the stabilization program failed, Hoover helped create the tools for managing a modern, peacetime economy. According to Hawley, Hoover espoused associational progressivism and a neo-corporate ideal over traditional "laissez-faire" and "rugged individualism" policies. Zeiger, a labor expert, stresses that Hoover originally favored giving organized labor more meaningful participation in building the new economic system. Although initially supporting union recognition and responsible collective bargaining, Hoover's policies ultimately enhanced the power of management. Wilson, a Hoover biographer, sketches the commerce secretary's attempts to restore prosperity in the depressed agricultural sector. Hoover agreed to a surprising extent with Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace in searching for order and profitability and in encouraging business collectivism, but the latter was more receptive to a statist approach. Wilson effectively argues that Hoover's approach was wiser, more realistic, coherent, and innovative than the McNary-Haugen plan.

Leffler and Brandes detail Hoover's involvement in helping frame economic diplomacy, while Carey traces the Commerce Secretary's political and social thought. Leffler, an authority on Franco-American relations, states that Hoover based his economic policy on coherent, ideological, managerial, and functionalist assumptions, recognized the interdependence of the world, and urged cooperative action. According to Leffler, Hoover's diplomacy failed because the commerce secretary overestimated the degree of enlightenment and solidarity in private enterprise, underestimated the power of political and strategic considerations, and relied too little on real expert advice. Brandes describes Hoover's campaign against foreign monopolies and particularly against the British rubber cartel, which threatened America's expanding automobile industry. Hoover, Brandes stresses, sought to protect the American economy by encouraging market restoration, trade control, and cooperative action, but too often acted inconsistently in dealing with economic diplomacy. Carey, a political

## Book Notices

theorist, pictures Hoover as a conservative traditionalist, transcendentalist, and pluralist seeking true enlightenment and progress through liberty and spiritual awakening.

Hawley's volume does not attempt to provide a comprehensive view of Hoover's activities as secretary of commerce; it does not treat Hoover's policies toward social welfare, urban development, transportation and communication, or resource development and management. The essays, although well documented, may be too imbalanced toward revisionist scholarship. In addition, this reviewer does not always agree with the assumptions made or conclusions reached by the writers. Nevertheless, this fine book provides a fresh perspective and enhances considerably our understanding of both the New Economic Era and Secretary of Commerce Hoover.

WILLIAM PENN COLLEGE

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## BOOK NOTICES

*Growing Up in the Midwest*, edited by Clarence A. Andrews. (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981. pp. 215, photographs, \$12.95 cloth.)

Professor Andrews has brought together the words of twenty-two writers, nearly all well-known and widely published in magazines, newspapers, and journals. They reflect a wide range of experiences—professors, farmers, housewives, editors, a radio disc jockey, and numerous ethnic groups including blacks, a Greek, a Scotswoman, Native Americans, and one man whose father was a Jewish cantor. Among the authors represented are three Pulitzer Prize winners, a National Book Award winner, honorary degree holders from prestigious universities, and writers whose works have been made into plays and films. They range from the poetic words of James Hearst to the prose of McKinlay Kantor, Edna Ferber, and Ruth Suckow. Clarence Andrews, himself a very prolific writer and literary scholar, illustrates that the Middle West is more than a physical location, it is more of a region of the heart. This handsome volume gives a sense of what being a midwesterner is all about through the words of its native sons and daughters. A nice companion volume to Andrews' earlier work, *Growing Up In Iowa*, also published by Iowa State University Press.

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