

Hoover and Historians

Revisionism Since 1980

A Review Essay by PATRICK G. O'BRIEN

ASSIDUOUSLY "BASHED" by progressive historians, Herbert Hoover suffered a generation of infamy as a callous and inept reactionary. Writing from widely varied viewpoints, revisionists convincingly resurrected the "Chief" from progressive ignominy between the late 1950s and about 1980.¹ Progressive and revisionist versions of Hoover had slight resemblance. Archetypal progressive historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., for example, claimed to be unaware that Hoover had redeeming qualities in *The Crisis of the Old Order, 1919-1933* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957). Revisionists, however, revealed the reform efforts, decent impulses, and broad vision of the less than perfect "Chief," and some even certified that he was a New Dealer.

Immutable historical interpretation is as common as a vacuum in nature, so it is not surprising that many of the impressions of Hoover in historical writing since 1980 diverge from those during the apogee of revisionism. Although Hoover literature since the 1950s cannot be neatly divided into inviolate phases, a perceivable transition between "initial" and "derivative" revisionism occurred early in this decade. Writing after 1980 can largely be construed as derivative in the sense that it has generously and explicity appropriated many ideas and concepts of earlier revisionism. Dissimilarity between the phases is, however, as evident as continuity. Although a portion of later writing may not equal the verve of initial revisionism, it is emphatically not without significant qualities. Later writing has encompassed new topics, applied twists to old ones, and even added facets to the already complex and enigmatic "Chief." One of the biggest differences in revisionism before and after 1980 is that the latter often has a harsher tone and less flattering assessments of Hoover.

Herbert Hoover Reassessed: Essays Commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Inauguration of Our Thirty-First President (Washington: GPO, 1981) may represent the high point and fruition of initial revi-

1. See Patrick G. O'Brien and Philip T. Rosen, "Hoover and the Historians: The Resurrection of a President," *Annals of Iowa* 46 (1981), 25-42, 83-99.

sionism. A sprawling anthology of twenty-nine essays with pronounced unevenness, the contributors largely restate their earlier and complimentary interpretations of the "Chief." Originality is neither expected nor particularly evident in this commemorative volume, but it is a useful summary and gauge of initial revisionist interpretations and sentiments.

NOT ALL BOOKS afterward, of course, have been inordinately negative toward Hoover, and that is especially the case with one that closed a huge biographical gap. Any neglect and superficiality with regard to Hoover's life and career before entry into public service is rectified in George H. Nash, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: The Engineer, 1874-1914* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1983). This exemplary first book in a projected multivolume biography is exhaustively researched, cogently written, and jammed with keen analysis. Although earlier revisionist influences are apparent, Nash's analysis is singular.

A terse review of Hoover's family history and childhood has incisive commentary on his personality, particularly as a consequence of his parents' deaths and unsatisfactory surrogates. Described in unequivocal terms is the Stanford influence on Hoover, and his inviolate attachment to the institution that substituted as family and home, provided his future wife, and prepared him for a career. The last is the book's emphasis, and it is absorbing biography, as well as economic, business, and social history, often on a global scale. Compulsively ambitious, calculating and astute, and inhumanly stubborn, Hoover's business failures and career frustrations were minimal when compared with his phenomenal success. Not above shrewd dealing and self-aggrandizement, he was fundamentally principled and decent, which made him somewhat conspicuous in mining and financial circles.

Nash is persuasive on the proposition that Hoover's later policies reflected views formulated while a private citizen involved with public issues. With an "aggressive introvert" personality, his instinct for unobtrusive control was sharpened by the machinations of international business, finance, and politics. The "Chief" would certainly squirm, stew, and erupt at portions of this book, but it is a model of critical and sympathetic biography.

Hoover's secretariat and presidency naturally elicit the greatest interest, provoke the widest controversy, and clearly reflect the trend toward less generous appraisals. Although each writer may adduce specific reasons to reprove Hoover, they are part of a larger framework in a sequence of perceptions. Restrained criticism of the initial revisionists was generally within the limits of new perceptions of the "Chief" as

either an incipient New Dealer or exponent of "associative state" voluntarism and cooperation, which allowed government guidance with a modicum of coercion. Although these were not wholly compatible views, both nullified the progressive caricature of a nineteenth century *laissez-faire*, individualistic reactionary with an unabashed business bias and veneration of competition. Hoover's resurrection to respectability was perhaps based more on what he was not than what he was. This favorable shift in perception, however, failed to cloak the "Chief" with immunity.

Hoover has been a vulnerable target in this decade, and it is tied in part to the issue of the New Era as prologue to the New Deal. Whereas initial revisionists often discerned strong continuity between the two, later writers are prone to regard it as more tenuous. Although the "Chief's" critics readily admit that his philosophy and policies were not of the antediluvian sort perceived by progressive historians, they often echo the progressive critique when they assert that they may as well have been when judged by the consequences.

Hoover's beliefs and programs, now largely equated with those of the associative state, have been subjected to a review probably more exacting and comprehensive than those of any other public figure. Often short on generosity, many historians have dismissed his blueprint and policies as inadequate to the realities of the 1920s and exigencies of the Great Depression. Evidence that Hoover used new departures to sustain prosperity in the expansive 1920s and resorted to unprecedented measures to generate economic recovery in the convulsions of the Great Depression satisfied many early revisionists, but later writers have judged Hoover less by his vision and goals than by their results.

Hoover's sagging reputation has partially turned on his limited and tentative recourse to government intervention as secretary of commerce and president. That issue, however, is not solely responsible for his limited eclipse. His political acumen, personality, administrative style, and social convictions have often generated equal controversy, and some have ignored no opportunity to emphasize his purported or genuine weaknesses. Even those basically sympathetic toward Hoover often discern less than admirable qualities that the initial revisionists overlooked or of which they were unaware.

Still unexplained is where Hoover found the necessary energy and mental concentration for his multifarious projects as secretary of commerce. Between 1921 and 1928 he gave full rein to his associative state reform impulses that ranged from the attempted rescue of struggling industries to improving the health care afforded children. Virtu-

ally without exception, historical writing since 1980 approves of Hoover's ideals and objectives.

Yet conclusions in the same writing by and large contradict the earlier favorable revisionist assessment that contributed to the "Chief's" resurrection. Not transfixed by his secretariat record, later writers emphasize its shortcomings. They would claim that his liabilities as president reflect those as secretary and were predictable. Impressions of Hoover in the two offices are actually almost inverted in the writing after 1980 in the sense that he is presented as more willing as chief executive to modify stifling principles than while running his secretariat. A consequence of the downgrading of Hoover as secretary is by comparison to raise his evaluation as president, which is definitely faint consolation.

Typical praise is bestowed on Hoover's perspicacity and goals in William J. Barber, *From New Era to New Deal: Herbert Hoover, the Economists, and American Economic Policy, 1921-1933* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). No person was more convinced of the validity and more influential and assiduous in the promotion of New Era propositions like high wages than Hoover. Committed to a rational, productive, and humane economy, he was as aware of the keys to national income and employment as anyone in his generation and as willing to use government in pursuit of prosperity. Barber's broad and coherent context is helpful in defining the roles of specific policies in Hoover's macroeconomic scheme. Not all of Barber's content is new, but it is readable and instructive economic history that cogently argues that Hoover's views were profoundly advanced when compared with contemporaries.

A collection of uniformly impressive essays, first presented at the Herbert Hoover Centennial Seminars, is contained in Ellis W. Hawley, ed., *Herbert Hoover as Secretary of Commerce: Studies in New Era Thought and Practice* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1981). The Hoover secretariat is also the subject of essays in Carl E. Krog and William R. Tanner, eds., *Herbert Hoover and the Republican Era: A Reconsideration* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984). A composite Hoover is not easily assembled from the disparate topics and perspectives in these anthologies, but they basically portray an activist and rational manager with an associative state reform blueprint compounded of realism and idealism. Although the Hoover reform view was never starkly economic, nearly all the essays in these anthologies deal with his economic policies and theories. Generally described in the essays is not the archetypal reactionary of progressive animus, but a secretary committed to the welfare of farmers and workers, inter-

ested in industrial democracy, and responsible for the precedent of a managed peacetime economy.

Unfortunately for Hoover's reputation, the essays are nearly unanimous in the appraisal that his programs were failures, including his "War on Waste," efforts at industrial democracy, and the early 1920s economic recovery measures. Varied and complex reasons are offered for the abundant failures amassed by Hoover. Some find the fault in inherently invalid assumptions upon which the associative state was based, which would have prevented its realization irrespective of the limitations of its principle architect. The "Chief," however, is not allowed to escape criticism that easily. A preponderance of writers are also prone to emphasize Hoover's own contradictory, fuzzy, and inconsistent perceptions, flawed personality, and political ineptness as decisive for or contributing to his failures. The principled idealist with a humane and visionary outline of the associative state is often in graphic relief with the dogmatic and blundering practitioner.

Revitalization of ailing industries and impetus to new ones along associative state lines has been a popular topic since 1980, but one largely expounded in journals. Hoover's policies are pronounced as failures nearly without exception, but success is discerned in Philip T. Rosen, *The Modern Stentors: Radio Broadcasters and the Federal Government, 1920-1934* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980). This well-written, extensively researched, and nicely synthesized book informs readers that Hoover was only one of the many principals in mercurial, early broadcast history, and that adoption of his particular views of private ownership, industry practices, and government regulation were anything but inevitable. The fact that nearly all aspects of radio broadcasting had the "Chief's" imprint attests to his aggressive bureaucratic acumen and infinite tenacity.

HOOVER'S LOWER STOCK as secretary of commerce is a preview to that as president. Few of the complimentary earlier revisionist versions are left unchallenged, and the Hoover evinced since 1980 is often a markedly less likable and more hapless figure. Not since the apex of the progressive interpretation has some of the writing been as devastating. Journals have been particularly scathing forums, and articles abound with testimony on his personal, political, and ideological deficiencies. The writing, however, should not be construed as a simple reversion to the progressive interpretation. Whereas progressive historians often employed greater portions of emotion and ideology than reason and evidence, writers since 1980 often make their case with convincing evidence and astute analysis.

Writing of the post-1980 variety is also likely to give Hoover credit for unprecedented anticyclical measures. An interesting phenomenon is that when differences narrow they also loom larger between the New Era and New Deal. Hoover transcended or sacrificed important aspects of the associative state vision that he regarded as nearly inviolate in the 1920s to combat the depression and generate economic recovery, but he could not and would not adopt unrestrained New Deal intervention. The halting and gloomy reluctance with which Hoover adopted policies that skewed or openly violated his economic tenets only accentuates differences between the tentative "Chief" and uninhibited New Dealers. Not unexpected, however, is that much recent writing on the presidency attaches greater importance than once was given to Hoover's political and personal deficiencies. Strongly inferred in a portion of the writing is that Hoover's political ineptitude, defective personality, and, one could add, bad luck were of such a magnitude that not even expansive New Dealism could have saved the occupant of the White House.

Many of these propositions are presented in a restrained and not unsympathetic way by Martin L. Fausold, *The Presidency of Herbert Hoover* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985). This astute survey has an instructive introduction that explains the various influences on Hoover's views and personality, and is particularly interesting on his transition from sectarian to secular Quakerism. Committed to reform, including a "new social system," Hoover's political passivity and ineptitude and inability to shape and inspire public opinion were apparent even before his administration was shaken by the stock market crash and ensuing depression. Hoover responded to the crisis in an unprecedented manner, although his actions were often concealed or poorly explained, obscured by optimistic statements, and distorted by critics who were often more myopic than the subject of their denigration.

Although Hoover was a victim of base partisanship, personal vindictiveness, and public misunderstanding, he often did little to help his situation and often made it worse by always looking at the "dark side first." Hoover was an unfortunate captive of his own personality and political principles, and he was probably even more dogmatic in clinging to dubious beliefs like non-partisanship than to his economic views. Although never an advocate of unconditional government intervention, Hoover's economic policies moved a great distance between 1929 and 1932. Yet Hoover's too little, too late departures did not prevent the economy from sinking to its nadir.

Hoover's liabilities had fewer international than domestic repercussions, and Fausold is generous in his foreign-policy appraisal. Rec-

ognizing Hoover as the pivotal policymaker in his administration, the author assigns high marks for his restraint and sound judgment in pursuing American interests in a way that was compatible with a large part of the globe. Notwithstanding compliments on foreign policy and credit for domestic reform and economic recovery efforts, Fausold concludes that the negative assessment of Hoover is both valid and unlikely to change. A large part of the post-1980 writing parallels Fausold's analysis and concurs with his evaluation.

A substantial part of Fausold's book is retold by Barber, in *From New Era to New Deal*, which is not less instructive simply because it is no longer seismic news that Hoover's anticyclical activism during the Great Depression violated his associative state postulates. Hoover subscribed to the Keynesian axiom that aggregate volume of spending determines macroeconomic system behavior. Although Hoover is often criticized for dogmatic inflexibility, his views were fluid and that axiom is one of the few constants that explain his economic policies.

The "Chief" receives his due in Barber's book, which analyzes his fluid views and responses to the economic disaster. Often off the mark, along with many economists, Hoover nevertheless moved almost inevitably in retrospect to broaden government responsibility and intervention. Even persons generally conversant with Hoover's policies may discover edifying information, like his effort, too successful for his later reputation, to obscure his "dramatic departures." The "Chief's" failure was due not to economic illiteracy, as that phrase is commonly understood, but to his inhibitions about the role of government. Hoover's unprecedented but circumscribed use of government resulted in "striking discontinuities" and "arresting continuities" between the New Era and New Deal.

Barber's estimate of Hoover is higher than that of many post-1980 writers, whose interest is largely in political and social aspects of his administration. Essays in Krog and Tanner, *Herbert Hoover and the Republican Era*, for example, often portray a politically maladroit and intractable president whose principles and dogmatism were stronger than sound judgment and compassion. A shift in emphasis is also discernible in later writing, and racial minorities have obtained virtual parity with destitute Americans as principal victims of Hoover's policies.

This is the thesis of many articles and the well-written and thoroughly researched book on the conundrum of race by Donald J. Lisio, *Hoover, Blacks, and Lily-Whites: A Study of Southern Strategies* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985). Anything but a Hooverphobe, Lisio nevertheless concludes that the "Chief's" policies toward blacks were disastrous. Hoover had enlightened racial atti-

tudes for his generation, but few of his high principles and policies went more seriously awry than those on race. His plan to end black subjugation through tenancy and peonage fizzled, and his strategy to benefit blacks through patronage reform that would lead to a two-party South was dubiously conceived and ineptly executed.

Unwillingness to disclose the black gains envisaged in the strategy and egregious political bungling led to the widespread and mistaken belief that Hoover had a lily-white southern strategy and was hostile to black rights and aspirations. Lisio describes a steady and pathetic deterioration of relations between Hoover and blacks, and a widening gulf between principles and practices. Hoover's losses as a consequence were largely self-inflicted. Although "more an unwitting victim of racism and of his own peculiar failings as a political leader than he was an enemy of black people," Hoover's "venture into southern politics proved a sad encounter both for him and black Americans."

AMPLELY COMPENSATING for past inattention to the third of Hoover's life after the White House are the two works: Gary Dean Best, *Herbert Hoover, The Postpresidential Years, 1933-1964*, 2 vols. (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1983); and Richard Norton Smith, *An Uncommon Man: The Triumph of Herbert Hoover* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984). Parallels are stronger than dissimilarities between the authors, and they dispel any notions that Hoover faded into obscurity, abandoned politics, or drastically altered his mind on any important issue. Best posits that the "Chief's" later career alone was influential enough to make an imprint on history, and neither he nor Smith leave many grounds for dispute.

Hoover lived with slander, spite, and public approbrium after 1933, and was a pariah even within his party, which twice denied him renomination. Not one to suffer rejection with equanimity, he often answered his tormentors in a petty and vindictive spirit. Will power, political adroitness, longevity that surpassed enemies, public forgetfulness, and conciliatory gestures, for example, by Harry S Truman enabled Hoover to regain respect, influence, and a sense of proportion.

Progressive by earlier standards, Hoover was conservative by later ones—if the last appellation is not distorted. Without renouncing welfare capitalism, he balked at intrusive government, and his foreign policy views were a blend of isolationism and internationalism. When Hoover's age and health curtailed his public activity, he became even more compulsive about writing. Prolific if not riveting, his writing was strongly didactic, reflected his particular vision, and expressed his per-

sonal version of the past. Hoover despaired about America, but he died at the age of ninety with his faith preserved.

Best has written excellent political biography that does not deviate long or far from the subject; Hoover's myriad interests and prodigious activities are left largely unexplored. Interesting and perceptive vignettes in the Smith biography are an instructive supplement to the Best narrative. Competing viewpoints are often omitted or summarily dismissed in the Best volumes, with the consequence that they can read like a Hoover monologue. Best is convincing that the "Chief" would be an ideal fishing companion, except for the one-sided conversation. Although deferential toward his subject, Smith is less hesitant to impute frailty and error to Hoover.

THE FAVORABLE INITIAL REVISIONIST PORTRAYAL of Hoover that gained many adherents has been qualified in the writing since 1980. It is important to note, however, that later writing does not amount to a categorical scuttling of earlier revisionism and reinstatement of the progressive interpretation. Writing in this decade, in fact, contains many affirmations of earlier revisionism, and many of the differences reflect a logical progression in historical interpretation. Whatever the criticisms and failures of Hoover, they are not of a nineteenth-century reactionary; they are of an early twentieth-century progressive whose philosophical bridge between the past and future was buckled by the weight it had to carry. Although historians have recently emphasized the "Chief's" political, personality, and doctrinal limitations, the initial revisionist view of an able and activist reform-minded secretary of commerce and president is dented but intact.

Martin L. Fausold concluded in his perceptive book on the Hoover presidency that the negative evaluation of the "Chief" was unlikely ever to change. Progressive historians, of course, subscribed to the same proposition. Prediction is perilous business, but it seems safe to suggest that Hoover may well be a subject of nearly infinite revision. This is both because many varieties of historians write in habitually changing contexts and because Hoover, as illustrated in the famous "Ding" Darling cartoon, was a man for all interpretations.

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