

# Herbert Hoover and the Historians – Recent Developments: A Review Essay

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THE NEGATIVE IMAGE of Herbert Hoover created in the 1930s in American political and popular culture continues to be widely invoked and accepted. And professional historians continue to rank Hoover relatively low in presidential evaluations. Since the 1960s, however, particularly since the opening of the Hoover Papers in 1966, a wave of scholarly revisionism has challenged that image and sought to give him an important place in America's political, cultural, institutional, and intellectual development. In the 1970s a more positive image emerged not only from mainstream political historians but also from new leftists, students of American modernism and consumerism, and articulators of an organizational synthesis alleged to explain modern American institutions. As one of that period's newly inspired researchers, I was amazed both by the richness of the sources that had become available and by the breadth of interest in utilizing them.

In two previous articles in the *Annals of Iowa*, published in 1981 and 1988, Patrick O'Brien and Philip Rosen summarized and commented on the main outlines and features of this scholarly revisionism.<sup>1</sup> By 1981, they noted, a revised Hoover had

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1. Patrick G. O'Brien and Philip T. Rosen, "Hoover and the Historians: The Resurrection of a President," Parts I and II, *Annals of Iowa* 46 (1981), 25–42, 83–99; Patrick G. O'Brien, "Hoover and Historians: Revisionism Since 1980," *Annals of Iowa* 49 (1988), 394–402.

many of the characteristics that had made him attractive to contemporaries in the 1910s and 1920s. While recognizing certain frailties and failings and discounting Hoover's defense of himself, revisionist scholars were now depicting a man of decency, integrity, and humaneness, a man deserving respect and historical study for his roles as a humane reformer, idealistic visionary, and institutional developer. For new leftists he had become something of a prophet, and other revisionists now saw him as having been a major figure in the evolution of progressivism, the rise of a new managerial elite, and efforts to develop a substitute for statist controls through new structures and new forms of leadership and cooperation in the private sector. His life prior to 1929 had been one of huge successes: as a mining engineer, business organizer, wartime administrator, Secretary of Commerce, and presidential candidate. As president he had continued to push reforms and had been an innovative activist in efforts to promote recovery from the Great Depression.

In the 1980s, O'Brien noted, the ongoing revisionism tended to become less positive, as historians pointed out various failures and weaknesses in Hoover's prepresidential career and focused more on his political ineptitude and intellectual rigidity as president. Yet despite that tendency, much of the earlier revisionism remained intact and was now being filled out and added to in a variety of areas. A huge biographical gap in Hoover's early life was now being closed, particularly in the work of George Nash. Fuller accounts were appearing of his work in shaping the emergence of new industries and new regulatory structures. And greater attention was now being given to his relations with racial minorities, his conduct of foreign policy, and his postpresidential achievements. Differences among revisionists persisted, but most continued to agree that Hoover had not been the hard-hearted reactionary, financial charlatan, and do-nothing president depicted in the earlier derogatory portrait.

Since the 1980s a number of historians have continued to see Hoover as a worthy historical subject, and in a variety of works they have reacted to, built upon, reshaped, and redirected the earlier revisionism. Among the works of major importance have been the final four volumes of the six-volume biography sponsored by the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library Association

(HHPLA, now the Hoover Presidential Foundation), new biographies by William Leuchtenburg, Glen Jeansonne, and Kenneth Whyte, a new history of the presidency by Charles Rappleye, and new studies of Hoover's relationship with the press, his agricultural, unemployment, conservation, and trade policies, his intellectual development and vision of a progressive future, and his family and recreational life. This essay will focus on these works, looking particularly at how they have affirmed or modified earlier revisionism and the contributions made to Hoover's current standing among historians.

OF THE NEW BIOGRAPHIES, the most resistant to a revised Hoover is William Leuchtenburg's *Herbert Hoover* (2009), published in The American Presidents series edited by Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. and Sean Wilentz. In Leuchtenburg's account, Hoover remains an unattractive character, reclusive and wary, cold and overbearing, capable of sharp dealings, and given to exercises in self-delusion, audacious manipulation, and bureaucratic infighting. His philosophical treatise *American Individualism*, seen by contemporaries as evidence of statesmanship, really amounted to a "jejune screed" that could have been heard at most Kiwanis meetings. And as president, his efforts at reform accomplished little and his political ineptitude and distrust of government made it impossible for him to meet the challenges posed by the Great Depression and global disorder. Yet Leuchtenburg does express his gratitude to "the corps of revisionist historians who have labored indefatigably to provide us with a more nuanced portrait of Hoover" (173). And he does incorporate parts of that portrait, most notably the progressive side of Hoover's early presidency, his managerial skills, and his success in putting together organizational structures that worked effectively to provide Belgian and postwar European relief, ensure that America's wartime allies were adequately fed, build a new kind of Commerce Department, and cope with the natural disaster created by the Mississippi River flood of 1927.

Also resistant to the positive revisionism on Hoover is Charles Rappleye's *Herbert Hoover in the White House* (2016). As president, Rappleye finds, Hoover was often surly, frustrated, and vindictive, conflicted and insecure, given to unproductive

feuding with Congress and the press, and unable to transform himself from the hugely accomplished antipolitician that Americans had elected in 1928 into the political leader, policy innovator, and regenerator of hope that they needed after 1929. His presidency was a failed one — and not just because of fate or poor timing. But, in Rappleye's view, it was also a highly significant one, a presidency torn and tortured by the birth pangs of a new order and therefore one that deserves the detailed scrutiny that he gives to its political and legislative battles over the emergence of that order. Rappleye's work goes beyond previous accounts in its often gripping detail about those battles. While critical of Hoover, it also credits him with an active and energetic response to the depression, with being right about the dangers of a centrally planned economy, and with being the strongest pacifist ever to occupy the White House. In addition, despite his negativism toward Hoover, Rappleye concludes that the president was a man of integrity, principle, and wisdom with a strong sense of duty, major prepresidential and postpresidential achievements to his credit, and ideas that have had continuing resonance.

The new biography most embracing and adding to the positive revisionism on Hoover is Glen Jeansonne's *Herbert Hoover: A Life* (2016). In this work and in his earlier contribution to the biography sponsored by the HHPLA, *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Fighting Quaker, 1928–1933* (2012), Jeansonne depicts Hoover as “one of the most extraordinary Americans of modern times” (1), one whose life's work was more versatile than any American since Benjamin Franklin, and hence one deserving of an inclusive biography even if he had never become president. His early life and subsequent educational and work experiences produced a man with reclusive and introverted tendencies but also one who was ambitious, self-reliant, and highly intelligent and one who came to have an extraordinary blend of technical knowledge, organizing ability, business acumen, and human compassion. In Jeansonne's account, Hoover's life prior to the presidency was one of huge successes, feats that made him clearly deserving of his prepresidential reputation as an “engineering legend,” the “great humanitarian,” and a “master of emergencies.” Where Jeansonne notes criticisms of those efforts, he usually finds reasons to dismiss or discount them. As for Hoover's presidency,

Jeansonne credits Hoover not only with efforts at progressive reform but also with an array of constructive legislation and diplomatic achievement, with major innovations foreshadowing the constructive side of the New Deal, and with an unprecedented war on the depression that helped to save American capitalism. No one electable in 1928, he argues, could or would have done more. Although Jeansonne admits that Hoover was not a great president, he insists that he deserves some consideration for being “near-great.”

Jeansonne, to be sure, stops short of embracing the whole of Hoover’s earlier efforts at vindication. He recognizes that Hoover had faults, that he made errors, and that some of his claims were exaggerated. But recent research, he believes, bears out much of Hoover’s story, and he is inclined to accept Hoover’s contention that he had economic recovery under way in 1932, only to have his efforts undercut by Roosevelt and the New Dealers. That, Jeansonne says, is still disputable but “certainly plausible” (405). In addition, he sees Hoover’s subsequent critique of New Dealism as a major factor in the development of an American conservatism that would eventually put Ronald Reagan in the White House. Hoover was the bearer of the conservative “torch,” a view also expressed by Gary Best in his *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Keeper of the Torch, 1933–1964* (2013), the last volume in the HHPLA project.

Occupying a middle ground between Leuchtenburg and Jeansonne are the recent works of Kendrick Clements, notably *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism* (2000) and *The Life of Herbert Hoover: Imperfect Visionary, 1918–1928* (2010). In the first of these, he sees Hoover not only as a man of extraordinary energy, intelligence, and administrative ability but also as the pioneer of a new kind of conservationism, one envisioning the more efficient and rational use of national resources so as to raise living standards for the masses and provide them with opportunities for outdoor recreation and other beneficial uses of leisure that could improve their quality of life. It was that vision, Clements argues, that underlay much of Hoover’s work as Secretary of Commerce and on into his presidency, particularly his War on Waste, his preoccupation with waterway development, and his actions in regard to national parks, better play, child welfare, and

the oil, lumber, power, housing, and fishing industries. Coupled with the vision, moreover, was an ideology concerning how it should be implemented and managed, one that equated the "American Way" with a decentralized and largely voluntary system mobilized and directed by scientifically informed and socially conscious experts at the national level. In that system, the "state" would be largely limited to helping private citizens and the private sector to become more statesmanlike. It was an approach that could be frustrating, but it also had its successes in the 1920s. And it was Hoover's continued commitment to it that produced unworkable recovery and relief programs and flawed conservation proposals and measures during his presidency. He was, Clements concludes, the wrong person to deal with a depression that demolished the structure of American voluntarism and obliterated public confidence in it. After his presidency, Hoover continued to defend the approach and, in reaction to the New Deal's conservation measures, moved more toward the idea of free-market environmentalism.

In Clements's second work, published as the fourth volume in the HHPLA biography, he offers a similar depiction of Hoover along with generally positive accounts of his immediate postwar activities, interwoven depictions of his family life and business affairs, and the fullest and best documented account yet of how he remade and used the Department of Commerce and hoped to make similar use of the presidency. More than other works, moreover, it sticks with a chronological order that gives us a better sense of how the many issues that Hoover dealt with interacted with each other and demanded simultaneous consideration. In Clements's judgment, Hoover's greatest successes were in promoting standardization, simplification, waterway development, and child welfare programs, building a new apparatus to promote trade, and shaping new regulatory and promotional structures for the aviation, radio, and housing industries. His interventions in agricultural, labor, taxation, and foreign policy failed to produce the structures he envisioned. His efforts to solve the problems of such troubled industries as coal, oil, railroads, shipping, and fishing were largely failures. And his belief that partly through his actions the business cycle was being tamed and

could be managed kept him from foreseeing the coming economic catastrophe. Before that catastrophe, one could “perhaps” say that no other American leader had ever taken “so sweeping a view of the public interest or seemed so confident of his ability to improve life for everyone” (289). But the catastrophe would soon show him in another light.

The most recent of the new biographies of Hoover is Kenneth Whyte’s *Hoover: An Extraordinary Life in Extraordinary Times* (2017). Whyte draws on much of the revisionist scholarship on Hoover, adds significant insights gleaned from previously unutilized accounts by Hoover’s associates, and provides an engaging and detailed account of a life that moves from a difficult childhood through roles as a successful businessman, life-saving humanitarian, innovative public servant, embattled president, and conservative polemicist. The challenge for Hoover biographers, Whyte says, has been “to find a coherent personality amid the nonstop action” (xi). To a greater degree than in other biographies, Whyte delves into Hoover’s conflicting impulses and the consequences of his efforts to reconcile them. Featured in particular are the clashes between Hoover’s modesty and his ambition, his ruthlessness and his humaneness, his defense of freedom and his search for order, his sense of vulnerability and his faith in controls. For the shaping of those impulses, Whyte assigns more credit than other biographers to Hoover’s Oregon experiences in the household of his uncle Henry Minthorn. But also involved was a life that made him a kind of embodiment of the period’s national conflicts, particularly those between tradition and modernity, rural and urban, individual and collective, rich and poor, wet and dry, isolationist and internationalist.

In places Whyte is critical of what revisionist scholarship has produced. He finds the “six-volume official Hoover biography” to be masterful in parts but “of uneven quality overall” and “generally defensive about Hoover” (xiv). In his own depiction of Hoover’s business career, he portrays a man who could be ruthless with “an element of savagery” in pursuit of his interests (56) and one who would later seek to obscure the record of that. Yet when it comes to the presidency, Whyte’s portrayal tends to be closer to Jeansonne than to Leuchtenburg. He notes Hoover’s weaknesses as a political leader but also credits his presidency

with important successes, notably in the areas of conservation, social research, and prison reform. And as Hoover faced the depression, Whyte credits his presidency with an unprecedented interventionist program that produced economic upticks on no fewer than six occasions. Like Jeansonne, moreover, Whyte is inclined to see the last uptick as having a potential to continue had it not been undercut by Roosevelt and the New Dealers. Like Jeansonne also, he sees the postpresidential Hoover as an important figure in helping to develop a new conservatism that could serve as an antidote to the New Deal. Politically, he concludes, Hoover can be seen both as a progenitor of New Deal liberalism and as a father of modern conservatism.

Also helping to make the case for Hoover's standing as a conservative was the appearance in 2011 of Hoover's own *Freedom Betrayed*, the "magnum opus" that he had worked on during much of his postpresidency but which his heirs had kept in storage until George Nash persuaded them to allow its publication. In what amounted to a combination of memoir, diplomatic history, and documentary collection, Hoover had pulled together and expanded upon right-wing critiques of Franklin Roosevelt's foreign policy, especially his alleged role in helping to start and getting the United States into World War II, his appeasement and strengthening of the Soviet Union, and his responsibility for the subsequent Cold War. The work provided further evidence of Hoover's efforts to document a conservative antidote, not only to the New Deal's domestic policies, but to its foreign policies as well.

Despite such evidence, Hoover's standing in conservative historiography remained lower than one might expect. The supply-side heirs of the Reagan era tended to idolize Andrew Mellon and Calvin Coolidge rather than Herbert Hoover. And a long-standing libertarian critique of Hoover, associated particularly with Murray Rothbard, continued to find expression, most notably in Amity Shlaes's *The Forgotten Man: A New History of the Great Depression* (2007).

Other recent studies contributing to or seeking to reshape Hoover revisionism have examined particular aspects of his policies, ideas, and behavior. In the first category, for example, recent works have dug deeper into and offered additional insights about his agricultural, unemployment, and trade policies.

In *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy from Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928–1933* (1991), David Hamilton provides the fullest and best-documented account yet of the origins, workings, and failure of Hoover's Federal Farm Board, a story, he shows, that was substantially shaped by Hoover's simplistic views of agriculture and rigid conceptions of associationalism. In *Herbert Hoover, Unemployment, and the Public Sphere* (2005), Vincent Gaddis re-examines what came out of the President's Conference on Unemployment in 1921 and shows, to a fuller extent than elsewhere, how and why it set the tone and model for Hoover's later response to the Great Depression. And in *Peddling Protectionism: Smoot-Hawley and the Great Depression* (2011), Douglas Irwin provides a more comprehensive account of the politics behind and economic consequences of the Smoot-Hawley tariff, concluding that it was not responsible for the Great Depression but that it did contribute to the decline in world trade and deserves most of its reputation as a combination of bad politics and bad economics. Taken together, these works focus on three areas of policy failure. But since these were areas of failure generally acknowledged in the earlier revisionism, they leave its larger view of Hoover substantially intact.

Among recent works offering further illumination of Hoover's ideas and visions are Bradley Tice's *Herbert Hoover's Intellectual Development* (2004) and Edward Agran's *Herbert Hoover and the Commodification of Middle-Class America* (2016). Tice analyzes the values embodied in Hoover's *De Re Metallica*, *Principles of Mining*, *American Individualism*, and *The Challenge to Liberty*, finding in them a combination of deep-seated historical consciousness, a kind of managerial progressivism, a form of liberal corporatism, and an enduring concern with statist encroachment on fundamental liberties. The four works, he argues, reflect the "essence of the man and constitute a chronological map of his intellectual development" (63). Agran brings cultural analysis to bear on Hoover's writings and activities, sees them as having a central place in equating national progress with the expansion of a new, consumer-oriented middle class, and argues that, despite the setback that made Hoover a pariah in the 1930s, he proved to be more prophetic than misguided and could still be relevant for those currently concerned about the shrinkage of the middle class.

Two recent works shed new light on particular aspects of Hoover's behavior: Louis Liebovich's *Bylines of Despair* (1994) and Hal Elliott Wert's *Hoover, the Fishing President* (2005). Liebovich re-examines in detail the deteriorating relations between President Hoover and the news media, noting how that exacerbated a national calamity and attributing much of the deterioration to Hoover's misconceptions about objective reporting, his faulty expectations of what the press should do, and his view of it as something to be distrusted and manipulated. Wert illuminates the recreational side of Hoover's life, particularly his passion for fishing as a relief from stress and a source of renewal, his enthusiasm for getaways to Camp Rapidan and Bohemian Grove, and the role that recreation played in his family life. Hoover, Wert argues, was a man pulled in two directions at the same time. His ambition and achievements pulled him into the public spotlight while "the shy, retiring part of his character pushed him to seek secluded private retreats in the wilderness" (134).

Finally, any list of recent contributions to Hoover historiography must include *Uncommon Americans: The Lives and Legacies of Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover* (2003), edited by Timothy Walch and published in the hope of "enticing more historians to West Branch" to continue research on these "extraordinary individuals" (5). One of its major contributions is to show the extent to which Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover were a team with complementary skills and talents. In addition, it brought together a number of essays examining particular aspects of Hoover's life and offering further insights on how his career and presidency should be interpreted. Deserving particular note are George Nash's explanation of how Hoover became a "political orphan," David Hamilton's showing of how Hoover's "New Day" vision kept him from dealing effectively with depression emergencies, David Quigley's argument that Hoover's failed recovery efforts were part of a larger national failure, and Richard Norton Smith's discussion of Hoover's efforts to formulate and implement a "third way," one that would preserve the benefits of individualism yet bring forth the new managerial tools and welfare structures needed for further economic and social progress. That vision, Smith concludes, still has appeal and now seems "less nostalgic than prophetic" (261).

CLEARLY, recent years have witnessed a continuing effort to understand Herbert Hoover. For much of his life and career, the revisionist picture that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s has become more firmly established. That is particularly true of his early life and his achievements prior to becoming president. On these some disagreements persist, notably over Quakerism as a shaping influence, Hoover's early business conduct, and the nature of his interactions with others. But the recent works on him are inclined to recognize him as a truly extraordinary figure, one who had a major impact on the mining industry, the engineering profession, the evolution of relief organizations, the shape of American government during and after World War I, the workings of the American business system in the 1920s, the rise of a consumerist culture, and America's evolving vision of national progress. The "smear" books of the 1930s have been almost totally discredited, and the prepresidential Hoover now being depicted comes relatively close to the one appearing in the campaign biographies of 1928. Recent years have also seen more praise of his post-presidency and what appears to be a growing acceptance of some of the earlier revisionism on Hoover as president, most notably in regard to his activism, his progressive side, and his disdain for and ineptitude at conventional politics.

In assessing his presidency, however, a growing division seems to be taking shape. Some interpreters are now stressing the positive side of his legislative record, seeing him as a needed transitional figure in America's political development and crediting him with recovery programs that helped to save America's economic and political system and were on the road to ending the depression in 1932. At the same time, however, other recent interpreters have continued to see his presidency as a failure and his role as a political leader as being sadly deficient, some going so far as to argue that a man of his type and disposition was simply unsuited to the presidential office and what was expected of it after 1929. The latter view, moreover, has remained dominant among scholars of the presidency and has continued to be reflected in their presidential evaluations. Hoover was ranked thirty-sixth, both by the C-SPAN survey of historians in 2017 and by the American Political Science Association poll in 2018.

Another kind of continuing disagreement has to do with Hoover's role in helping to build the modern American state. In the more common revisionist view, he is seen as paving the way for the kind of state-building that would take place under Franklin D. Roosevelt and his liberal successors, particularly in helping to provide a number of the instruments, premises, and learning experiences that made the New Deal possible. This is the view found, for example, in David Kennedy's *Freedom from Fear* (1999), the volume in the Oxford History of the United States that covers the years 1929 to 1945. The other view locates Hoover not in this kind of state-building but in another long-standing American tradition, a search for a workable alternative to governmental expansion by entrusting needed regulatory powers and social duties to instrumentalities coaxed from civil society and an enlightened private sector. Some would argue, moreover, that this kind of state-building would reassert itself once the New Deal began to recede and that the outcome would be welfare and regulatory systems that could be regarded as extensions and elaborations of what Hoover was attempting to create during his presidency. It is this view of Hoover's state-building that one finds in works like Brian Balogh's *The Associational State* (2015) and Gary Gerstle's *Liberty and Coercion* (2015).

As things stand at present, then, historians studying and depicting Herbert Hoover are inclined to see him as a great man and an interesting historical figure but not as a great president. Some, to be sure, would make him a candidate for near-greatness. But given the strength of the opposing argument, that seems unlikely to become the common view. More likely are continuing debates about his place in history and, as contexts change, still more revisionism.