

*Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive*, by Joan Hoff Wilson.  
Boston: Little, Brown, 1975. pp. x, 307, Sources and index.  
\$3.95.

This well-written book focuses upon Herbert Hoover's personality and ideology rather than attempting to present a definitive portrait of a living, breathing human being. Then again, as Joan Hoff Wilson herself admits, Hoover often seemed to resemble an automaton even to some of his closest associates. All of the key details of his life are here, but the book has a topical rather than a strictly chronological structure. This is no "popularized" biography, but a serious, scholarly study of how an extraordinarily singleminded individual inevitably ended up at odds with a world he could not control.

The author's particular slant is apparent in the subtitle she has chosen for her book "Forgotten Progressive." Few would deny that Herbert Hoover is all but forgotten. Indeed, despite his awesomely diverse interests, his tireless capacity for work and administrative details, and his succession of prestigious offices, he is as unfamiliar to the present generation as his taciturn, narrow-minded, and lazy predecessor in the White House, Calvin Coolidge. Ms. Wilson tells us why: One of the cardinal beliefs Hoover held throughout his long life was the importance of urging others, whether his fellow countrymen or foreigners, to help themselves rather than to expect some god or demagogue to do it for them. He predicated his own leadership upon the premise that the American people should never be led but should be encouraged to follow their own desires in an atmosphere of individual freedom. Thus he had no intention of establishing for himself a record as a great, charismatic leader, dispensing support and welfare to the people. It is hardly surprising, then, that he heartily disapproved of Franklin D. Roosevelt both for his personal style as well as for his jerry-built New Deal programs. Hoover regarded the New Deal and all that came after as deviations from and destructive of his own vision of America.

Was Hoover actually a Progressive? Again, our biographer supplies a convincing answer. Hoover's childhood hardships taught him resiliency and self-reliance. As a young mining engineer he became almost fanatically impressed with and devoted to the concepts of efficiency and scientific management.

These earlier experiences naturally played key roles in shaping his own social and political ideology. The Progressives of the early twentieth century were an ill-defined, often self-defined group who espoused a wide variety of programs and ideologies. Hoover's fascination with orderly, intelligently managed operations fit in well with the Progressive concept of efficient, expert government leading to a full realization of the United States' social and economic potential. At the same time, the Progressives championed the concept of greater popular participation in the governing process. Hoover's repeated and insistent efforts to urge the American people toward individual self-reliance and national self-sufficiency thus clearly placed him in the mainstream of Progressive thought in the period prior to the First World War.

Unfortunately for Hoover, as for many of his fellow Progressives, monumental events interfered with the full flowering of the Progressive ideal. The Great War required much more than voluntary action on the part of individuals and institutions. President Woodrow Wilson even hired Hoover himself to coordinate and control the entire nation's production and distribution of food. During the 1920s, while Secretary of Commerce Hoover continued to extoll the virtues of voluntary association and to work against arbitrary federal regulation and restraint, the nation raced heedlessly ahead toward its economic doomsday. As Ms. Wilson emphasizes, Hoover's publicizing efforts in the direction of voluntary action had had virtually no effect in the prosperous twenties, yet when the stock market crashed and the economy foundered, President Hoover stubbornly refused to violate his own principles and step in forcefully to lead the nation out of the morass of the Depression. After losing his 1932 re-election bid, he spent the remaining three decades of his life lamenting the loss of an idealized America which had existed only in his own mind.

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