

# Herbert Hoover

## *Meetinghouse to White House*

by Glen Jeansonne

From the time of his birth in 1874 in West Branch, Iowa, until he left the care of his uncle in Oregon to attend Stanford University, Herbert Hoover was reared in a Quaker environment. The values he absorbed in his youth helped shape his character, personality, and beliefs, and influenced his careers in business, humanitarian undertakings, and politics. Most importantly, they shaped his presidency.

Quakerism was more than a form of worship. It was a way of life and a state of mind. Founded in 1647 in England by George Fox as the Society of Friends, the early Quaker church sought divine guidance without human intercession and tried to strip away much of the ceremony attached to most Christian denominations. Quakers rejected altars, music, and paid ministers. Services were silent until someone moved by the emotion of the "Inner Light" felt led to speak. They were known for practicing what they preached: humility, charity, tolerance, and equality. They opposed slavery, and they paid Indians for their land rather than seizing it.

Quakers were often characterized as being serious, industrious, individualistic, and scrupulously honest. Their word was their bond; among other Quakers they seldom wrote formal contracts. They cared for their own in times of crisis, yet

were known for philanthropy to non-Quakers in need. But once the needy could stand on their own, they were expected to shoulder their share of work.

They preferred simplicity and did not consider worldly wealth important, yet because they worked hard and spent little, they often accumulated significant sums. Their drab dress and austere customs, their tendency to create their own communities and schools, set them apart. Like other groups who chose separatism to preserve their traditions, they were sometimes viewed with suspicion by outsiders.

Hoover grew up not only amidst Quakers, but in a small town resonant of the American frontier. West Branch was but a village of 400 in his boyhood, and his Oregon homes, Newberg and Salem, were hamlets. His Quaker values were reinforced by frontier values such as independence, self-reliance, and individualism.

Hoover's parents, Jesse Hoover and Hulda Minthorn, married in 1870. Both had lived in West Branch, in eastern Iowa, for more than a decade. One of the town's three blacksmiths, Jesse was tall, slender, and muscular, and wore a beard. He loved laughter and was known for wit. Purchasing two lots, he built a tiny, two-room house on one, and his blacksmith shop on the other. Industrious and in-

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Herbert Hoover (right) and his siblings, Theodore and Mary in 1888.



ventive, he shod horses, made and sold plows, repaired pumps, and perfected a method of coating barbed wire with hot tar.

Within six years, three children were born: Theodore ("Tad") in 1871; Herbert ("Bert") in 1874; and Mary ("May") in 1876. The family was packed into two rooms; the only bedroom held a bed for Jesse and Hulda, a trundle bed for the boys, and a cradle for baby May. The partially enclosed porch was used as a kitchen in the summer and a storehouse in the winter. Frequently they shared meals with neighbors and friends. On some Sundays, as many as a dozen would spill out of the tiny house onto the yard.

Jesse rose to the middle class in a community that had few poor and no rich. He sold the blacksmith shop and began selling farm implements. He built a larger, four-room house, selling the old property for a small profit. Hulda, who had briefly taught school before she married, kept the home spotless and made the family's clothing. There was not much to read: a Bible, a Quaker almanac, an encyclopedia, and a few novels moralizing on demon rum. Hoover later said the only local Democrat was the town drunk. If so, he must have imported his libation because West Branch lacked a saloon.

Religion unified the family and community. Home life revolved around worship; there was Bible reading in the evening, meditation before meals, and silent prayers before bedtime. During the two-hour Sunday services, marked by long periods of silent meditation, young Bert learned patience.

Yet to describe Hoover's boyhood as one in which there was no joy would be to miss the spirit of adventure that permeated small-town and frontier America. He played with Indian children from a small Indian industrial school briefly located in West Branch. He learned to shoot a bow and arrow, trap rabbits, catch and fry sunfish, rob eggs from birds' nests, and spot fossils in the gravel along the railroad tracks. In summer there was a muddy swimming hole and in winter a fine sledding hill. Bert thrived in the outdoors, and he never lost his appreciation for the serenity of nature or his love of fishing and camping. As a student, he did not like stuffy classrooms. He was only a mediocre student, good at arithmetic and below average at English. He missed so much school because of family disruptions that he was almost held back a grade.

One might say that Bert Hoover's boyhood had

BOTH PHOTOS: COURTESY OF HERBERT HOOVER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY-MUSEUM



Hoover's parents, Hulda and Jesse, in 1879.

much in common with Huckleberry Finn's. They fished in the river, roamed the woods, stretched their imaginations by inventing games. And, like Huck Finn's boyhood, Bert Hoover's was tainted by tragedy. The origins were the same, family instability. But unlike Huck, Hoover did not leave his home of his own free will. He was orphaned.

The first blow came when Bert's father died of a heart attack at age 34. Although in later years Bert could barely remember the man with brown hair and soft brown eyes, Jesse left a gap that was never filled. Hulda tried to fill it, but it stretched her resources. Always serious, she turned increasingly to religion. In the 1870s a wave of revivalism had swept through West Branch, fragmenting Quaker solidarity. The progressive Quakers, with whom the Hoover family aligned, approved of the introduction of music into services and the use of preachers. Hulda was recognized by the elders as one who had the gift to speak and she became a "recorded preacher." Now she felt herself torn between her family and her obligation to

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A child who loved the outdoors, Hoover played with some of the Osage children who boarded at the Indian Industrial School in West Branch, founded by his mother's relatives.



God. Strong-willed, determined, gifted, she struggled to find a balance between her domestic responsibilities and her calling. After the death of her husband she wrote to her sister Agnes: "I just keep myself ready first for service to my master—then to work at whatever I can to earn a little to add to our living and then the care of my little ones every day is full and some times the nights." Later she wrote, "I will try to do what I can and not neglect the children."

**H**ulda was sensitive, with a strong conscience. She tried to set priorities. She took in sewing. She raised a garden. Her views were so rigid that they verged on militancy. She became involved in the prohibition and woman suffrage movements. She took positions of leadership in a church dominated by men. She enrolled Bert in a boys' temperance organization. Sometimes she boarded him with relatives for weeks while she traveled to preach.

It was too much. Her Quaker spirit was more powerful than her physical body. In the winter of 1884 she was called to a revival in a nearby town in inclement weather. She became ill and died of pneumonia com-

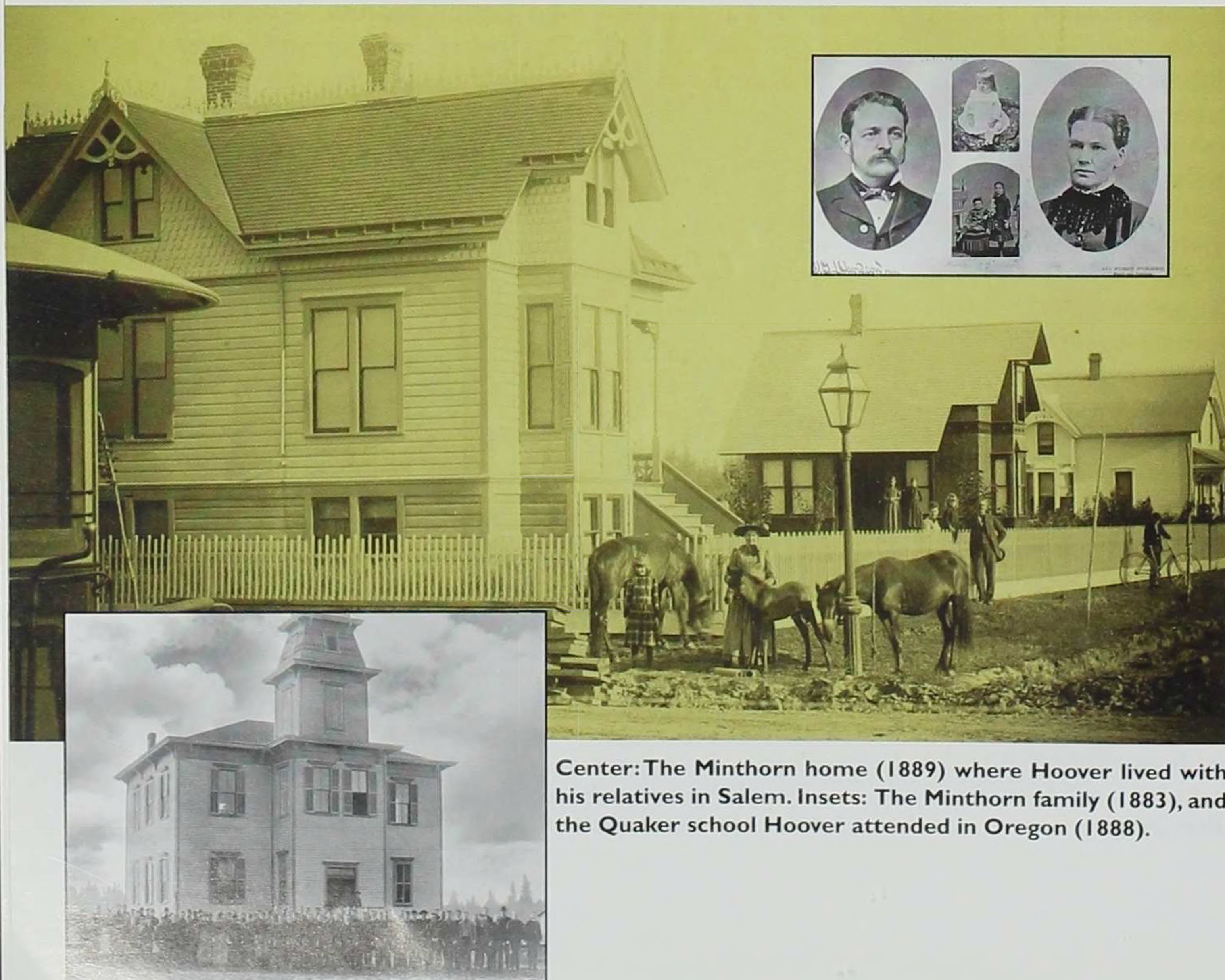
plicated by typhoid fever. Hulda, at 35, followed her husband to the grave within only two years. Bert, at nine, was an orphan.

One of his teachers, Mollie Brown, tried to adopt him but was denied custody because she was single. A family council dispersed the three children. Bert went to live on a farm near West Branch with his Uncle Allen, where he remained for two years, attending school in town and working at farm chores during the summer. When he was 11, the family decided to send him to live with his mother's brother, John Minthorn, in Oregon. Minthorn was an educator, a physician, and a real estate agent. He had lost his own son and wanted to raise Bert. He could offer a better education than what was available at West Branch.

For the next six years Bert Hoover lived with his Uncle John, Aunt Laura, and their three daughters. Here, the Quaker environment was even more pervasive. In West Branch he had attended public schools. In Oregon he attended Quaker schools, good ones. He bonded with another teacher, expanded his reading interests, tinkered with mechanical devices, and learned to keep books as an office boy. As in West Branch, he was slow with language but could work magic with numbers.

Even more than Jesse and Hulda, Minthorn taught Bert to set a worthy goal, then work unceasingly until he achieved it. He was quite stern, unlike Bert's father, Jesse, and he worked Bert hard, making him earn his room and board. There was less time for play in Oregon than in West Branch. Bert chopped wood, hoed onions, cleared forests, and milked cows. His work ethic solidified. He learned to find satisfaction in work, to never lose faith in himself, to be organized, to refrain from gossip, to avoid idleness. Bert

THREE PHOTOS: COURTESY OF HERBERT HOOVER PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY-MUSEUM



Center: The Minthorn home (1889) where Hoover lived with his relatives in Salem. Insets: The Minthorn family (1883), and the Quaker school Hoover attended in Oregon (1888).



did stage minor rebellions: he went fishing instead of to church one Sunday but doubtless pondered whether the fish would bite the line of an infidel. But he learned that work brought rewards, both personal and monetary. He took pride in his accomplishments, and they were recognized by his adopted family.

What the boy lacked, however, was genuine affection, especially physical affection. He sometimes felt lonely and overworked. But he learned to deal with adversity and combat grief, to reach within himself and find fortitude. From a boyhood marred by traumas and sad surprises, he might have become an embittered derelict. Instead he would become a humanitarian. One lesson was paramount from his Quaker upbringing: others were more important than he.

Years later, as a parent of two sons, he did not impose the strict discipline that he had endured. Although he put his work first and often traveled, he was a permissive parent, rarely physically affectionate, but loving.

**A**nother key to Hoover's character was his ferocious drive, which also had roots in Quakers' distaste for laziness, his uncle's prodding, and his own desire to prove himself. Freed from the straitjacket of constant supervision, he blossomed as a student at Stanford University. He enrolled at age 17 in 1891, the year Stanford opened its doors. Thriving on self-discipline, he graduated in 1895 with a degree in geology.

As a young mining engineer, he started at the bottom and by 1901 was the highest salaried professional man under 30 in the United States. In his career, developed on six continents, he exhibited traits often attributed to Quakers; he was shrewd, thrifty, hard-headed, and fair. Single-minded, he harnessed his prodigious energy. In an era before sophisticated mining instruments, he relied on intuition and instinct to determine where fortunes lay underground—which mines could be revived and which should be abandoned, when an apparently worthless lead slag could be turned for a profit. His mind was quick and inventive, and he was willing to take chances.

Competitive by nature, Hoover enjoyed testing his mettle in business, and by the eve of World War I he had amassed a potentially enormous mining empire.



Hoover at the time of his wedding to Lou Henry in Monterey, California, 1899. Both were 24

But "just making money wasn't enough," he said. He "did not want to be just a rich man." Material progress was empty without spiritual values. Deeply spiritual, he once remarked while president, "I cannot conceive of a wholesome social order or a sound economic system that does not have its roots in religious faith."

World War I presented Hoover with an opportunity to serve humanity. Threatened with starvation, tiny Belgium was trapped between Germany's occupation and the British Blockade, yet neither the Allies nor the Central Powers wanted the blame for starving the Bel-





**An American Expeditionary Forces photograph shows “the evacuation of a Belgian hamlet during bombardment.” As head of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, Hoover marshaled massive, international resources for the Belgian people.**

gian people. As leader of the Commission for Relief in Belgium and as a private citizen of the most powerful neutral nation, Hoover leveraged world opinion.

He seemed to have a little of Joan of Arc in him, crossing military lines to meet with European royalty, prime ministers, and generals. Some considered him crude and unpolished. One European diplomat remarked: “Mr. Hoover is the bluntest man in Europe.” Had the Europeans understood his Quaker roots, they would have recognized that he was being what he always was: plain, blunt, and determined.

He persuaded cynical rulers to give him what he wanted without seeming to bully, though he was tenacious to the point of stubbornness. His ideas flowed easily and he communicated them effectively. He found that under the right conditions he could inspire, that he could almost telepathically communicate his idealism and empathy to the world.

Under his direction, the Commission for Relief in Belgium became the largest private philanthropic undertaking in history, combining private control, government money, and private donations. Although he directed attention away from himself and toward his cause, many credit Hoover as having saved more human beings from starvation than any other person in history.

One who traces the first half of Hoover’s adult life

gains an appreciation of his ability to inspire despite his reserved demeanor. First, he inspired those closest to him on the Commission for Relief in Belgium to work tirelessly, without compensation. Returning to the United States, he was appointed food administrator under President Woodrow Wilson. Under the slogan “Food Will Win the War,” he inspired Americans to conserve food voluntarily, without rationing.

He did not like public speaking but could do it when he had to. Later, during four years as president, he delivered between 70 and 80 addresses via radio. The last president to write his own speeches, Hoover was not as effective a radio speaker as Franklin D. Roosevelt, but he was better than Al Smith, William Howard Taft, Warren G. Harding, Calvin Coolidge, and Alf Landon, and equal to Harry Truman.

Hoover wanted to accomplish goals that could only be achieved through politics, yet he did not want to be a politician. Rather than heed the call of both major parties to run for president in 1920, he declared himself a Republican. Appointed to Harding’s cabinet as secretary of commerce, he accomplished major efficiencies and reorganized the department. He supervised the infant radio and aviation industries and was responsible for their development. Arguably, Hoover was the most progressive member of Harding’s cabi-



net, certainly the most active. "Progressive men never go backward," he said.

In the wake of the Harding scandals and as the 1928 election year loomed, the last thing voters wanted was a traditional politician as president. The party bosses did not want Hoover and did not trust his independence. But Americans accurately perceived that Hoover was not a politician and that is precisely why they voted for him.

With the economy booming and Hoover enshrined as the chief engineer of the locomotive of prosperity, he won by a landslide, the largest popular vote in history and the first Republican since Reconstruction to win a bloc of states in the solidly Democratic South. Hoover accomplished this without waging an aggressive campaign. It was a Republican year and he was considered the best-qualified Republican, and because of his work with food conservation and distribution, he was one of the most respected men in the world.

As president, Hoover was uncomfortable with patronage. Cutting political deals was unethical; all appointments should be based on merit, regardless of political considerations. He was appalled by the idea of punishing or rewarding senators or representatives because of how they voted. Pork-barrel politics were anathema, and he insisted on operating in the open rather than negotiating behind closed doors. Quakers do not seek converts, and Hoover did not seek political converts.

**M**uch of Hoover's work to this point has been forgotten because of what followed: collapse of the stock market in 1929 and, a year later, commencement of the most intractable depression in modern history. Yet his accomplishments before his presidency should not be obscured by events that were beyond his, or anyone's, ability to predict or reverse in the short term. As president, he operated on the basis of what had worked for him in the past. Volunteerism, which had worked well in feeding Europe and conserving food in America during the First World War, proved insufficient for the dimensions of the Great Depression.

Hoover's inability to duplicate his earlier successes opened him to volleys of criticism from the opposing party. He was shocked to learn that many

professional politicians did not want him to succeed. His failure was their gain. "Why is it," he asked one of his assistants, "that when a man is on this job as I am day and night, doing the best that he can, that certain men . . . seek to oppose everything he does, just to oppose him?"

Even more painful was the perception that he did not care. In Belgium and later as president during the depression, he rarely toured bread lines and soup kitchens for fear he would break down in public. He bottled up many emotions, fearing that a show of emotions, even empathy, was a sign of weakness. His external stoicism, a virtue according to his Quaker upbringing, masked internal intensity. But sometimes he was judged stubborn and self-righteous, appearing to set himself apart.

Before the depression Hoover had impressed the press and the public. Public opinion now turned against him with a vengeance. No other 20th-century president has been subjected to such vilification.

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**Citizens of Hoover's hometown of West Branch gather for the news of his nomination for the presidency in 1928.**

Even Harding and Coolidge had received far more favorable press coverage. Comparing his press clippings when he was savior of Belgium and secretary of commerce with those when he was president, one would think journalists were writing about two different people. If the depression had ended on Hoover's watch, as the Civil War did on Lincoln's,





**On a chilly day at the White House, President Hoover (right) plays his daily game of Hoover-ball with his White House staff. The president's doctor developed the game. The hefty medicine ball weighed five pounds.**

the journalistic diatribes would be overlooked today.

Ironically, Hoover's public image as a "do-nothing" president was almost totally the opposite of reality. Public buildings in Washington rose. He worked for banking reform, to save farms and homes from foreclosure, to shore up shaky businesses, to dispose of the agricultural surplus. As secretary of commerce he had tried to dampen the speculation that fueled the crash and had been ignored. As president he believed it was intellectually dishonest to promise more than he could deliver and to inspire false hopes.

A permanent solution to the depression, he believed, required not the creation of temporary government jobs but the restoration of old, permanent jobs. Contrary to the stereotype that his administration was a lackey of big business, it filed more anti-trust suits than any previous administration. Hoover was both an incubator of ideas and a man of action. True to his Quaker rearing, he believed the best response to a challenge was hard work.

Hoover believed that government's role worked best and most efficiently on the local level, with local officials setting priorities. There was less chance of corruption, of trading jobs for votes, of excessive bureaucracy, of congressional log-rolling. Starting at the private, local, and state levels made sense, especially in trying to stimulate employment, because that is where the resources were. At that time, expenditures at these

levels dwarfed those of the federal government as a percentage of the Gross National Product.

Hoover's views about the role of government in public welfare were shaped by his idealism, his religion, and his frontier upbringing. He favored private giving not only because it helped the recipient but because it ennobled the act of giving. "Our people are the most generous of all people," he wrote. "I sometimes think of relief in terms of insurance. Over the years our people contribute to the aid of others. The unexpected time comes of their own need, and they draw from this common pool."

Even before he had attained wealth as a mining engineer, Hoover devoted part of his income to educating and helping relatives and friends, sometimes anonymously. Perhaps because he was orphaned at age nine, he developed a lifelong bond with children. All of his adult life, he sought to provide a secure, healthy childhood for boys and girls, with opportunities to grow

up more slowly than he had as a nine-year-old orphan. As secretary of commerce and president, he helped found and nurture the American Child Health Association. As an ex-president, his chief charitable activity was fundraising for the Boys' Clubs of America, of which he served as chairman of the board.

Hoover never accepted remuneration for public service. When required by law, he took pay, but donated it to charity. As president he not only donated his entire salary but paid many of the expenses of the office. He was generous to his alma mater, Stanford University. His philanthropy continued throughout his long post-presidential career, some of it performed in the twilight. His generosity is especially noteworthy because he did not flaunt it.

Hoover hoped, in his Quaker fashion, that unadorned common sense and reason would lead politicians and the public to support him without having to arouse them. He did not panic. Sometimes being a good politician means being patient—in Rudyard Kipling's words, "If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs and blaming it on you." His enormous internal drive was hidden from the public. He was reluctant to indulge in verbal combat and did not lose his temper in public, never shouted or lost his poise—though sometimes he fumed in private. His outward equanimity might have masked resentment, but he maintained Quaker discipline.



Hoover's most intractable problem was not his policies, which were advanced for his time, but his Quaker reserve. A man who met him in 1928 observed: "He stares at his shoes, and . . . he looks down so much of the time." An individualist in the mold of Theodore Roosevelt, whom he considered his political mentor, he had none of the Rough Rider's self-promotion and was one of the most restrained personalities to ever occupy the White House. "The crown of that personality is shyness," a friend said of him. A man who knew him at Stanford said: "He seemed shy to the point of timidity—rarely spoke unless spoken to. It wasn't until later, when we got into politics on the same side, that I realized how much it was possible to like him."

Hoover was a shy man in a profession that rewards gregariousness. He found it difficult to make small talk at formal gatherings, although he could do so with friends. He seemed incapable of enjoying himself and appeared stiff and non-athletic, though he played medicine ball with his cabinet and staff because it gave him three times as much exercise as tennis and six times as much as golf in a fraction of the time. "I have never liked the clamor of crowds," he wrote. "I intensely dislike superficial social contacts." He did not waste time shaking hands with thousands of casual visitors, as Harding had done. He gobbled five courses of a state dinner in eleven minutes so he could get back to work.

**L**osing the presidency to Roosevelt, Hoover left the White House in 1933 as largely a discredited figure, and he spent the rest of his life defending his ideals with typical Quaker tenacity, as always, marching solely to the drums of his conscience. He did not accept the verdict of his contemporaries, nor of many historians, that he was to blame for the Great Depression. That would have been comparable to a scientist blaming the law of gravity on the apple that fell on Isaac Newton's head. "I'm the only person of distinction," Hoover said, "who's ever had a depression named after him."

Was Herbert Hoover really out of sync with the times, as historians have habitually written? Or were the times themselves out of sync, unsettled, wanting change, yet lacking unity about any specific change, and, simultaneously, fearing change? Hoover understood the context of his times and their political consequences better than most. He knew that in 1928 no Democrat could have won and that in 1932 no Republican could have won. In retrospect, it would have been impossible for the nation to leap from Coolidge to the

New Deal without Hoover in between. He was less an enigma than a plain-spoken Quaker whose ideas made common sense. Moreover, no one was offering better alternatives that had any realistic chance of fruition.

What the country wanted was not a sober, hard-working president but a magician, like the mythical Merlin, who could wave his wand and magically make the depression disappear. But, alas, there was no magical solution to the Great Depression, just as there was no Merlin. ♦

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

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Annotations to this article are held in the Iowa Heritage Illustrated production files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City).