THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF HERBERT HOOVER

In the twenty-first century, the only thing most Americans remember about Herbert Hoover is that he failed to end the Great Depression. Many Americans even blame him for starting it, deliberately or through incompetence, and subsequently doing nothing to alleviate it. Will Rogers quipped that a man bit into an apple, found a worm, and exclaimed, “Damn Hoover.” Hoover consistently ranks near the bottom of presidential polls. However, many historians who have studied Hoover carefully are more positive. Still, attempting to resurrect Hoover’s reputation from the dustbins of neglect and distortion is a task comparable to that of a Samson, an Atlas, or a Sisyphus. It might appear that changing minds about such long-entrenched stereotypes is as probable as filling up the Pacific Ocean by tossing pebbles into it. Yet every challenge is an opportunity and the opinions of readers can only be changed one mind at a time.

Misunderstood and Neglected?

Hoover is not only a mis-understood president; he is also a neglected one. The last presidential biography was written in 1985 and is part of a series of brief profiles by an academic press. David Burner’s reasonably complete biography of Hoover, considered the standard study, published in 1979, ends in 1933, when the Quaker left the White House. However, Hoover lived for another 31 years, until 1964, and enjoyed one of the most productive post-presidential careers of any president. Among modern chief executives, only Jimmy Carter rivals him, and Carter has lacked political clout in his own part, whereas Hoover was the GOP spokesman until his death. Richard Norton Smith’s 1979 study, promoted as a full biography, is in fact far less than that. Originally to be a study of the post-presidential career of Hoover, the remainder was hurriedly
tacked on because his agent believed it would sell better. The result is a partial, episodic book, filled with interesting tidbits, but lacking sustained substance. For example, Norton ends his account of Hoover’s tenure as commerce secretary in 1923, at the death of Harding, yet Hoover continued in the same position under Coolidge until he ran for president in 1928. None of these books delves seriously into Hoover’s publishing career as the author of 24 books, second only to Theodore Roosevelt’s 36, his family life, included his gifted first lady, or his private life, including his hobbies. Thus none of them captures the private man and they serve, in many respects, to perpetuate stereotypes. Burner, for example, entitles his biography, *Herbert Hoover: A Public Life*. All of the above are dated, written before much richer archival material and oral interviews were available. Thus, the gap in Hoover biography is as vast as interstellar space and invites us to explore it. Hoover reminds one of the wooden Indian who used to stand before country tobacco stores, somewhat condescendingly, immovable, unchanging, stuck in time.

Perhaps more original things remain to be said about Hoover than about any but our most recent presidents and a mother lode of primary documents exists at the Hoover Presidential Library at West Branch, Iowa. Though unfair and superficial, Hoover’s ranking in the polls is easy to explain. Presidents are usually blamed for everything bad that happens on their watch, and given credit for everything good that happens, which oversimplifies cause and effect. For example, every president considered a great president is credited with winning a war, yet no president wins wars by himself any more than any president starts or ends a Depression by himself.
Satan vs. Jesus & the Scapegoat Syndrome

Almost all presidents who serve under the shadow of hard times are blamed for them and are not re-elected. Probably no one elected in 1928 could have been re-elected in 1932. If Satan had run on the Democratic ticket in 1932, Satan would have won. Some Republicans still think that Satan actually did. Put another way, if Jesus Christ had run on the Republican ticket, Jesus would have finished second. For the general public, symbols are more graphic and digestible than complex realities. It is easier to explain events, especially tragic ones, in terms of human scapegoats. The symbol sticks in memory and becomes a metaphor for the event which is etched in stone. Hoover and Depression might as well be synonyms in Roget’s Thesaurus. He is as indelibly linked in the public mind with the Great Depression as Isaac Newton is with the Law of Gravity. Yet blaming the Depression on Hoover is no more logical than blaming the Law of Gravity on the apocryphal apple that fell on Newton’s head.

Sometimes people seek scapegoats for partisan reasons. In politics, Hoover has become a foil for Franklin D. Roosevelt, used to embellish Roosevelt’s reputation. They myth exists that Hoover ruined the country and then that the New Deal stepped in to save it. Yet Presidents are not omnipotent. The Depression did end on Roosevelt’s watch, but Roosevelt did not end the Depression, just as the Depression began on Hoover’s watch, yet Hoover did not instigate the depression. To the contrary, Hoover did everything in his power to avert it. He was in the vanguard of Cassandra’s, prophetic, yet despised. Both Hoover and Roosevelt did their best to mitigate the depression, and the United States did not topple into the abyss of totalitarianism as did much of the world. The New Deal, however, might have continued indefinitely without
ending the Depression. Unemployment was still 19% in 1938. The United States under the New Deal was actually one of the last major nations to emerge from the depression.

**Big Government vs. American Individualism**

The idea also exists that enormous government spending for World War II ended the depression. Yet government spending by itself is incapable of permanently ending a Depression. The economy is not literally a battery that can be jump-started or a pump that can be primed. Those are only metaphors. All government jobs are temporary. They end when the project ends or the appropriation expires. That is true of all the jobs created by the New Deal and also of those created by World War II. In fact, the New Deal barely made a dent in ending the Depression and the War did so only indirectly. The war did have an impact on the Depression, but it was not the usually suspected one of pumping up the economy with dollars.

The war changed the mood of the nation by breaking the psychology of fear. People no longer felt guilty for spending or too fearful to invest. Government regulations were relaxed to encourage production. Secondly, there were 14 years of pent-up consumer demand, not only the four years of the war, during which there was rationing and shortages, but the entire decade from 1930 to 1940—the period of the Great Depression. Psychologically and because of need, dollars were liberated to be spent. Perhaps most importantly, vast markets abroad opened up to Americans. The war had devastated the economic infrastructure of Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and numerous smaller nations, especially in Europe. The colonial empires that had nourished the economic appetites of the major European powers and Japan with cheap raw materials were beginning to collapse. The major powers, especially those on whose soil the war had been fought, needed American industrial goods, American agricultural products, American
capital, and American technology. In an economic sense and to some degree a military sense, America was in the driver’s seat as never before or ever since.

Still, if neither Hoover nor Roosevelt ended the depression, their exertions were not insignificant. While Roosevelt’s work is generally recognized, Hoover is frequently caricatured as a miserly misanthrope who cackled with his millionaire friends while hungry people huddled in cardboard shacks sardonically nicknamed “Hoovervilles”. Some of my students occasionally ask me what state Hooverville is in. I tell them it is in a state of mind. The exertions of Hoover to lift the nation from the trough of its deepest and longest economic catastrophe are not widely appreciated. For someone frequently dismissed as an inept politician, he extracted a package of useful legislation from a divided Congress in which even his own party was factionalized.

**Hoover the Realist**

Hoover was realistic about the Depression. Addressing the psychological paralysis, he utilized radio more than any predecessor and almost as frequently as his successor, although he was no mindless Pollyanna, but a realist. Under his leadership, America fared better economically than much of the Western world. The first Quaker president, the first born west of the Mississippi, and the first civilian never previously elected to office, he was a quintessential problem solver. However, he considered the idea that the federal government, or, more specifically, the federal treasury, held the solution to all problems, simplistically utopian. He clearly understood that there was no quack cure for the sick economy. He lacked the magic of Harry Houdini, and even Houdini produced not magic, but the illusion of magic. Both quick and deep, probably among the top ten of all presidents in intelligence, he understood people, their problems, and their impatience. Underlying his philosophy of American individualism was
equality of opportunity undergirded by a sound public education. He wanted America to be a meritocracy with a heart.

To Hoover, money was neither the root of all evil nor the solution to all problems. It was not necessarily a recipe for happiness. He knew there had been indigent Saints and miserable millionaires. Government spending might mitigate depressions but could not end them. The government could only transfer wealth, it could not create it. Short-term deficit spending was necessary, but if the government entered a permanent treadmill of spending to insure prosperity, somebody, someday, would have to pay the Piper. Many of Hoover’s warnings were unpopular, yet prophetic. For example, he believed bureaucracies, once created, were self-perpetuating, the closest thing on earth to eternal life. He disliked big government, big business, a big military, and big fortunes. He sympathized neither with greed nor with people helping themselves to other people’s money indiscriminately. He felt that the welfare state could become addictive. In many respects he was not behind his times but ahead of them.

Neither was Hoover an inert reactionary. He was the first president to pit the government against the economic cycle, a progressive in the lineage of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. He had served in Wilson’s administration and supported ratification of the Versailles Treaty. Yet unlike the Rough Rider, he led more by example grounded in moral conviction rather than by inflammatory oratory. He succeeded in pushing emergency legislation through a divided Congress because he did not care who received the credit. Modest, thrifty, yet a philanthropist, he refused to trade patronage for votes, to lie to the public in order to embellish his record, and he dodged the limelight. He wanted to be president not to cement himself in office but because he believed he could do the most good by serving at the highest level. If he had known of the
tragic challenges his nation would face, he nonetheless would have wanted the job, perhaps more so.

**Legislative Accomplishments A Plenty**

Hoover’s legislative cupboard was hardly bare. He wrangled out of a divided Congress, in which he never had a working majority in both Houses, and in which his own party was factionalized, the most integrated, sophisticated, constructive program of any president up to his time except perhaps for Woodrow Wilson’s first term. He worked as well with a bipartisan Congress during an election year, 1932, as any president in history during hard times. Earlier he had addressed agriculture, a struggling sector since the First World War, by pushing through Congress the Farm Marketing Act, creating a Farm Board to rationalize farming like other businesses and to encourage cooperative purchasing and marketing. However, overproduction remained intractable. Hoover could not persuade farmers that they could earn more by planting less.

In the 72nd Congress, with the nation mired in the muck of the Depression, he shepherded through the Reconstruction Finance Corporation designed to lubricate the economy with credit in order to save banks and businesses from failure. Yet banks hoarded their liquid assets rather than loaned them and business was reluctant to borrow to invest in expansion during uncertain times. The Glass-Steagall Act prevented the hoarding or fleeing of bullion and currency to safe havens abroad, keeping more money in circulation, and stabilized international trade. Hoover’s public works program was more expansive than any to that time. These included the Hoover Dam, waterways, highways, river and harbor improvements, and numerous buildings in Washington DC still in use today. His administration planned many projects completed under the New Deal,
including the San Francisco Bay Bridge, the Los Angeles Aqueduct, and the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River, and he negotiated a treaty to construct the St. Lawrence Seaway, which Congress refused to ratify. The greatest conservationist president since Theodore Roosevelt, he expanded national parks and forests and built roads and paths within them providing local employment. He preserved labor peace, increased credit for farmers and potential home buyers, and worked to stimulate private construction of homes and businesses. He kept wages at existing levels as long as possible.

Tolerance was the cornerstone of his Quaker philosophy. Hoover reformed prisons, backed women’s suffrage and their political participation, and won the black vote not only in 1928 but in 1932. During hard times, he increased appropriations for the Indian Bureau, the Women’s Bureau, and Howard University, a black university in Washington. Hoover had strong support among women because he considered the family the glue of society. He supported a Constitutional Amendment to outlaw child labor. Hoover was not class conscious. He considered neither the rich nor the poor inherently predatory. The Quaker never engaged in negative campaigning. He believed in regulation but not over-regulation and he filed more anti-monopoly suits than any previous president. He did not believe the strong should be permitted to crush the weak. Hoover was certainly not a laissez faire president. The Old Guard of his own party did not want him to be nominated because they considered him too independent. The radicals of his party did not want him either, because he rejected reckless experimentation. Eminent Hoover historian George Nash has termed Hoover a “political orphan” too progressive for the conservatives and too conservative for the radicals. One of his arch enemies during the early
New Deal, Raymond Moley, the head of FDR’s brain trust, termed Hoover “the greatest Republican of his generation.”

Upon becoming president, before the Depression undermined the foundations of western civilization, Hoover had planned to implement his Quaker ideals by making world peace his top priority. Despite the Depression, his accomplishments are impressive. He initiated the Good Neighbor Policy with Latin America, often attributed to FDR, and inspired the London Naval Disarmament Treaty of 1930, the Intergovernmental Debt Moratorium of 1931, and the Stimson Doctrine of 1932. He held summit conferences in the United States with Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald of Britain, Premier Daladier of France, and Foreign Minister Dino Grandhi of Italy. Hoover dominated world statesmanship during his term and changed the dynamics of international diplomacy. Previously heads of state had exchanged letters through ambassadors. Now they negotiated face to face. An internationalist who had supported ratification of the Versailles Treaty, under Hoover the United States was more involved in international affairs during peacetime than under any previous president.

Hoover the Man

Although Hoover’s tangible accomplishments are substantial, his reputation rests not solely on what he did, but on who he was. A great man, if not a great president, he was also a good man. He was unusually pure of heart, intellectually and fiscally honest, perhaps our most unselfish president in the modern age. He never let his ego overpower his principles or told a self-serving lie. No modern president contributed more before entering the White House, and none made comparable contributions as an ex-president. Jimmy Carter comes close as an ex-president, yet Carter has never had the clout in the Democratic Party that Hoover had in the
Republican Party. His presidency bookended by an active career in and out of politics, Hoover led a fascinating life that would be worth writing about even if he had never become president. Hoover’s adult life bridged the “Gay Nineties” and the Populist movement, the Progressive Era, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, the First and Second World Wars, the Atomic Age, and the Cold War. When he was born, his father was shoeing horses in West Branch Iowa. When he died half a continent away in New York City, men were planning a voyage of discovery that would set sail upon the Sea of Tranquility.

Indeed, if one traces the world figures he met and knew, they seem to include nearly every major world figure of his lifetime. From David Starr Jordan, Jan Paderewski, and Andrew Carnegie, all of whom he met as a mere Stanford student, to Winston Churchill, Vladimir Lenin (at least by correspondence), Woodrow Wilson, John Maynard Keynes, Adolf Hitler, Douglas MacArthur, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Chang Kai-Shek, and Mahatma Gandhi, the list appears endless. It includes women, too: Mary Pickford, Amelia Earhart, and Eleanor Roosevelt. Hoover enjoyed the company of the aviator Charles Lindbergh; the auto magnate Henry Ford; the inventor Thomas Edison; and scores of prominent journalists, statesmen, engineers, and scientists. He knew every president from Theodore Roosevelt to Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Hoover was a principled pragmatist who liked to describe himself as a practical idealist. John Kennedy borrowed from him the aphorism that “Ideals without illusions are good. Ideals with illusions are no good.” Hoover loved people and he loved work, in that order. Few people who knew him intimately were unaffected by his dedication to humanitarianism and his low voltage magnetism. He appealed to spiritual values, common sense, and self-interest. Though he did not entirely succeed at everything he did, it was not due to lack of effort. On Judgment Day,
no one will ever say “Herbert Hoover did not try.” His character could be summed up in a single word: unselfish. He was unpretentious and unaffected by fame, high office, honors, or wealth. He did not lust for power nor did he turn politics to his own ends. He knew what many men in public life fail to realize; that the only kind of morality that really counts is when no one is looking. The test of a nation occurs not when everything is humming along well. The test of a football team comes not when it wins the big game, but when it loses the big game.

His presidency might have been a disappointment, but it was not the unmitigated disaster many believe. If one surveys world leaders who were incumbents at the time the Depression began, it would be difficult to find many, if any; who served their country better during the first act of a tragedy that could have been written by Sophocles. One also searches in vain for a candidate who was electable in 1928, who was better equipped to handle the tribulations of the Great Depression steering the Ship of State. Neither Hoover nor Franklin D. Roosevelt solved the Great Depression during a single term, nor did any other world leader of their time. Yet America’s democratic system remained intact. Hoover appointed men of quality to office, without regard for political considerations, making merit, not political influence, the criterion for appointments. Of the top 100 men in his administration, some died, some retired, some were promoted, but none were fired for incompetence or corruption. Although later generations have insisted that he should have done more, in 1932 his most severe and most conspicuous critics, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, complained not that he was doing too little, too late, but that he was doing too much too soon. They warned that he would wreck the Ship of State upon the shoals of fiscal irresponsibility. Hoover has often been handed down to subsequent generations as a skinflint. However, many of his own generation considered him a profligate spender. In fact,
he was neither. He was not lackadaisical like his predecessors, Harding, and Coolidge, nor did he place the government in overdrive, like Franklin Roosevelt. He did not act rashly, but he did act. In fact, unlike many politicians, he was preeminent a man of action. Many books have been written about what Hoover didn’t do or should have done. This one focuses on what he actually did and why he did it.

**Behind the Private Curtain**

Yet this study is not simply a political history about Hoover’s presidency, but rather an examination of his life in its fullness during the years 1928-1933. Like all of us, Hoover was not an island, separated by moats from the larger universe. The nation’s leader was not one dimensional. If he had been a mere technocrat, his philanthropies would have been directed at scientific projects rather than those that fed the hungry and empowered the weak. On a personal level, there have been few kinder presidents, perhaps none. His friendships, many of which began at Stanford, were life-long. He bonded with people. It was said he was a man who had enemies, but no ex-friends. As president, Hoover embarked upon a profession that does not reward modesty but flourishes on boasting and self-aggrandizement, which he shunned, partly because of his Quaker rearing. Yet Hoover was no loner. He enjoyed human company and he had a multitude of friends, great and humble, who swept the spectrum of professions. All their lives, the Hoovers invited dinner guests virtually every night. Hoover thrived on good conversation and could be a riveting raconteur. He enjoyed a good laugh and his own humor was original, not derivative of something he had heard. Beginning in 1914, he collected cartoons and caricatures of himself, many of them scathing, and by the beginning of the White House years the collection had reached 20,000. He relaxed by chuckling about himself.
No modern president, except Theodore Roosevelt, loved the outdoor life so much as Hoover. His eloquence verged on poetry when he wrote about fishing. Much of his writing was unusually erudite because Hoover was one of the best-read presidents. He devoured Greek, Roman, British, French, German, and Russian, as well as American literary classics and his memory for Biblical passages instilled in him as a child was precise. He educated himself about philosophy, economics, and American and world history. He also read scientific journals and biographies. The Quaker was addicted to detective novels. As a young engineer, he read incessantly while traveling by steamer and he set aside time for leisure reading every night of his adult life, even during the depths of the Great Depression. Hoover read four or five newspapers daily, tackling the sports pages first. He avidly followed baseball and college football. He admired people who did a difficult thing well, such as hitting a baseball. Though he never took notes, he stored everything he read in the filing cabinets of his prodigious memory.

The Quaker president enjoyed a companionate marriage with Lou Henry, a Waterloo Iowa native, Stanford’s first woman geology major, and only the fourth woman in America to earn a B.S. in engineering and geology. Fluent in five foreign languages, including Chinese, she could also read Latin, and read many of the European classics in their original tongue. A gifted, versatile writer, Lou, like her husband, personally wrote all of the hundreds of speeches she delivered on behalf of humanitarian causes. But Lou was also a creative writer, whose finely crafted essays describing natural beauty are elegant and eloquent. She also wrote scientific essays, poetry, biographical sketches, and joined with her husband to publish a translation of a 16th century classic on mining processes written in corrupted Latin. She was a pioneer in the organization of the Girl Scouts and of women’s athletics. Lou was her husband’s equal in
intellect, and superior in creative writing, but she lacked his ferocious drive. She was the only woman Hoover ever loved, or dated seriously. After her death in 1944, he never actively sought a romantic relationship.

There were many sides to Hoover the public rarely glimpsed, such as his gentle humor, his love of children, the intellectual stimulation he derived from convivial conversation, his physical stamina, toughened by outdoor exercise and his remarkable health. Working eleven and twelve-hour days, he never missed a day of work due to illness during his presidency. Few appreciated the profound nature of his friendships and the breadth of his interests, probably matched by no American since Benjamin Franklin. Despite a busy, active life, Hoover wrote 33 books, excelled only by Theodore Roosevelt’s 36. He represents the best example one can find of the type of American individualism he espoused. Devoutly spiritual, though not openly religious, Hoover believed in the Divine Spark of the Quaker creed which enables individuals to navigate their life’s path, find their own meaning, and pursue their goals without trespassing on the rights of others. His speeches are sprinkled with Scriptural references and virtually every talk includes an appeal to the better side of humanity. If the meek do, indeed, inherit the earth, Herbert Hoover will be among them.