

Herbert Hoover – A Fallen Hero? Various Perspectives on Underlying Forces for Hoover's Attitudes, Decisions, and Behaviors

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Herbert Clark Hoover, the thirty-first president of the United States from 1929 to 1933, is one of the historical figures whose personal and public life keeps puzzling historians. The various perspectives related to Herbert Hoover's pre-presidential enormous success as the Great Engineer and the Great Humanitarian and his following failure as the president of the nation suffering from the Great Depression are broadly diversified. The two stereotypical extremes show Hoover either as "the greatest innocent bystander in history; a brave man fighting valiantly, futilely, to the end" or as a man of complete and utter failure.¹ Why such a broad range of perspectives? The answer is linked to the many disagreements among scholars when determining the major forces that accounted for Hoover's attitudes, decisions, and behaviors; therefore, for his perceived successes or failures. To identify the underlying forces is a challenging task because as George Creel noted: "Writing about Herbert Hoover is like trying to describe the interior of a citadel where every drawbridge is up and every portcullis down."² According to the scholarly research from 1948 to 2009, the major underlying forces that accounted for Hoover's thoughts and actions were located either in the outside world defined by the American traditions and principles, in the specifics of Hoover's personality mainly resulting from his upbringing, or in the combination of these two.

In 1948 historian Richard Hofstadter stated in his book *The American Political Tradition and The Men Who Made It* that Hoover was a victim of his times. Hofstadter argues that Hoover's failure as a political figure "was not a

¹David M. Kennedy, *The American People in The Great Depression: Freedom from Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), D. M. Kennedy quoted William Allen White, 70.

²William E. Leuchtenburg, *Herbert Hoover* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), W. E. Leuchtenburg quoted George Creel at the beginning of the book; no page number.

sudden failure of personal capacity but the collapse of the world that had produced him and shaped his philosophy."³ American individualism is the particular philosophy that Hofstadter refers to; a philosophy associated with efficiency, opportunity, enterprise, material welfare, personal success, and laissez-faire liberalism.⁴ Hoover was a shining example of putting these ideals in practice. A self-made man, who worked himself up from the unfavorable circumstances of his childhood, was the perfect representation of the American traditions for this particular period of time. Hofstadter stresses that these very same principles made Hoover successful and popular in his pre-presidential era but made him highly unpopular (even hated at times) during his presidency.⁵ "He devoutly believed in the comparatively unregulated profit system under which he had grown up; a system that had suffered no major setbacks prior the Great Depression."⁶

Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., in his book *The Crisis of the Old Order: 1919 – 1933* published in 1957, did not disagree with Hofstadter but offered further understanding of the evolving concept of American individualism; the kind of individualism that Hoover represented and was firmly committed to. Schlesinger's explanation of the concept pictures Hoover in even friendlier light than the one of Hofstadter's. For Hoover, Schlesinger explains, the need to redefine individualism for himself and for the nation emerged along with his experience in World War I. With his own eyes, he saw the harsh realities that were caused by insatiable greediness of the European nations; greediness that brought injustice, inequality, and suffering.⁷

Moreover a desire of the American society for something more than just making money and buying more items was presenting itself as well. The American citizen yearned for a leader that represented moral and ethic qualities along with business skills.⁸ Hoover seemed to be an ideal combination of what the American society was looking for; a successful businessman with a Quaker upbringing (one of the pillars of Quaker beliefs is the importance of selfless service).⁹ Schlesinger supports his perspective by quoting Hoover: "We had neutralized the selfish tendencies in individualism

³ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and The Men who Made It* (New York: Random House Vintage, V9, 1948), 372.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 372.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 382.

⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Crisis of the Old Order: 1919 – 1933* (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1957).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

by affirming two great moral principles – the principles of equality of opportunity and of service."¹⁰ Neither Hofstadter nor Schlesinger denied that certain unfavorable personality traits of Hoover (his perceived cold and emotionless behavior for instance) along with other possible forces had an impact on his popularity or efficiency, but both historians stressed that the dominant forces of Hoover's "rise" and "fall" came from the outside world that surrounded him.¹¹

In 1987, Hoover's biographer David Burner in Lee Nash's book *"Understanding Herbert Hoover: Ten Perspectives"* agreed only partly with Hofstadter and Schlesinger. He admits that individualism along with other American traditions at that time had major influence on Hoover's motivations. His perspective differs though in one important aspect. Burner maintains that American individualism was influenced by Quakerism and Quakerism was influenced by American individualism.¹² Therefore, he sees Hoover – a practicing Quaker – in a different light than Hofstadter and Schlesinger. In Burner's view, Hoover acted from his deepest convictions that were rooted in his Quaker upbringing. The author complains that previous studies of Hoover (including those of Hofstadter's and Schlesinger's) virtually ignored "the effect on him of the faith of his childhood, the demanding faith of the Quaker."¹³ He insists that without examining Hoover's childhood the determinant forces for Hoover's attitudes, beliefs, and actions cannot be understood correctly.

Burner tries to prove his point of view by listing the major principles of Quakerism; the principles that were consistent with American individualism. Then he tracks the merging of these principles with Hoover's attitudes, decisions, and actions. As an example, he chose a period of Hoover's life when he was assigned to a Relief Administrator in Belgium during World War I.¹⁴ Hoover became almost instantly famous for his heroic effort to feed the suffering Belgians. He used his ability to assemble a great number of volunteers and to collect funds for large scale relief.¹⁵ Burner linked Hoover's strong belief in organized volunteerism (as a preference to federal government's direct interference) to the Quaker traditions of "voluntary, organized, and efficient giving."¹⁶ There were other Quaker traditions or principles that fused with the principles of American

¹⁰ Ibid., 83.

¹¹ Ibid., 80.

¹² Lee Nash, *Understanding Herbert Hoover: Ten Perspectives* (Hoover Institution Press, 1988), 56.

¹³ Ibid., 56.

¹⁴ Ibid., 60.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

individualism. For instance, Burner states that Hoover "made a virtual career out of political progressivism, humanitarianism, and the championing of enlightened business practices."¹⁷ All three, according to Burner, "fit a Quaker conscience and temper."¹⁸ Burner is not trying to portray Hoover as someone who rigidly followed the Quaker principles; rather he assumes that Quakerism might adapt itself to "the habits of the world and the means of power."¹⁹ Hoover was the representation of that adaptation and with its collapse (marked by the Great Depression) Hoover's collapse was inevitable as well. Within the whole study, Burner mentions in one sentence only that Hoover should have recognized the need of direct governmental intervention when the Great Depression hit; but Burner did not elaborate on this statement in any additional way. In that sense, he is in agreement with Hofstadter and Schlesinger who pictured Hoover mainly as a victim of the circumstances with very limited personal accountability.

Following the footsteps of Hofstadter, Schlesinger, and Burner, David M. Kennedy in his book *The American People in the Great Depression: Freedom from Fear* published in 1999 concluded that Hoover's underlying forces for his attitudes and decisions were heavily influenced by the tradition of American individualism with its equal opportunity, laissez-faire, selfless service, and organized voluntarism but Kennedy added another aspect. He argues that Hoover's narrowness of beliefs were caused not only by the outside world that formed him and therefore limited him but also by limits of his own personality.²⁰ Walter Lipmann (quoted in Kennedy's book) explained: "The unreasonableness of mankind is not accounted for in Mr. Hoover's philosophy. Ominously, the Great Engineer was showing himself to be a peculiarly artless politician."²¹ According to Kennedy, Hoover proved himself a poor politician in dealing with the Great Depression because of his unwillingness to step out of the realm of reason and to act more empathetically in crisis situations.²²

In 2009 William D. Leuchtenburg in his book *Herbert Hoover* furthered Kennedy's perception of Hoover as a poor politician in much greater depth. Leuchtenburg argues that the major forces that motivated Hoover's behavior were rooted in his childhood and were evident long before he became the president of the United States. Leuchtenburg

¹⁷ Ibid., 57.

¹⁸ Ibid., 57.

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ David M. Kennedy, *The American People in The Great Depression: Freedom from Fear* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 56.

²¹ Ibid., 50.

²² Ibid.

maintains: "His boyhood experiences left Hoover permanently scarred – reclusive and wary to a degree that not even decades of success could erase, and they would have unfortunate political consequences when he sought to lead the nation."²³

In comparison to previous studies of Hofstadter, Schlesinger, Burner, or even Kennedy, Leuchtenburg's view of Hoover is, in most cases, an unfavorable one. The author shows evidence of Hoover's manipulative behavior, his despotism, inability to admit mistakes, blaming his mistakes on others, dishonesty, as well as self-delusion.²⁴ These traits Leuchtenburg argues played a major role in his pre-presidential as well as presidential career. The author avoids any judgment; he simply states the facts and shows evidence for these facts. For instance, he quotes the U.S. ambassador to Belgium, Brand Whitlock: "Hoover was always trying to force, to blackmail, to frighten people into doing things his own way."²⁵ This quote, Leuchtenburg states, was typical of how Hoover was perceived by many of his contemporaries. Leuchtenburg, as the other researchers, did not deny the outside forces that formed Hoover or ignored Hoover's qualities ("a prodigiously effective," genuinely generous, etc) but he stressed the negative personality traits as the underlying forces for his attitudes and behaviors and "made" him very much accountable for his actions.²⁶ Leuchtenburg suggested that even without the Great Depression, Hoover would fail as a president of the nation.

The issue of perspectives in relation to forces that determined Hoover's attitudes and actions is evident among historians. They built on each others' work extensively but came to different conclusions. Leuchtenburg specifically showed Hoover (more than any other historian) as a human being with all his imperfections and flaws. He also questions the stereotypical "labels" of Hoover as the Great Engineer or the Great Humanitarian; the labels that the previous historians used as unquestionable and always flattering facts. I think that should be the trend: re-examining the "established" facts along with taking a new fresh look at Hoover by finding out more information about him as a person (in order to better understand his attitudes, decisions, and actions). But as mentioned in the introduction, it is difficult to know Hoover and most probably always will be.

²³ Leuchtenburg, 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62, 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.