

## Was Hoover Actually as Bad as They Said?

by ROBERT K. LANDERS

Hoover: An Extraordinary Life in Extraordinary Times, *Kenneth Whyte, Knopf, 728 pages*

In January 1920 Franklin D. Roosevelt, then serving as assistant Navy secretary, wrote diplomat Hugh Gibson about Herbert Hoover: “He certainly is a wonder, and I wish we could make him president of the United States. There could not be a better one.” Gibson was a close friend of Hoover’s, and Roosevelt and his friends were promoting the notion of a Hoover-Roosevelt Democratic ticket. But Hoover, a popular national figure who served in the Wilson administration, had not yet revealed his party affiliation.

Many Democrats foresaw a bright political future for Hoover, who was internationally famous as a great humanitarian and mining engineer. But Hoover, who expected the Democrats to lose in 1920, announced in March that he was a Republican. His subsequent foray into presidential politics didn’t go well. He lost the GOP primary in his home state of California. And at the Republican National Convention (which, on the 10th ballot, nominated Warren Harding), he never managed to get even 10 votes on any ballot. That humiliation, Kenneth Whyte writes in *Hoover*, made him utterly determined to win over the Republican Party and capture the White House—as he did eight years later.

Of the many previous biographies of Hoover, I have read two, both relatively recent, both very good—the concise *Herbert Hoover* (2009) by William E. Leuchtenburg and *Herbert Hoover* (2016) by Glen Jeansonne (with David Luhrssen). Leuchtenburg is more inclined to prosecute Hoover; Jeansonne, to defend him. Whyte, a Canadian journalist and author of a 2009 biography

## Arts&Letters

of William Randolph Hearst, is more evenhanded. His superb *Hoover* provides, in vigorous, incisive prose, a realistic and lively portrayal of the man within the historical contexts in which he moved.

Born in 1874 to a blacksmith and his wife in the Quaker community of West Branch, Iowa, Hoover was six when his father died and nine when his mother died. Young Bert, as he was called, and his two siblings were then scattered among different relatives. Bert first lived with an uncle on a nearby farm; then, at age 11, he was sent to Oregon to live with an uncle who was a physician, the superintendent of a new Quaker academy (which Bert could attend for free) and also, as it turned out, a hard taskmaster. After a serendipitous encounter with a Quaker mining engineer, and with help from a kindly mathematics professor, Bert entered Stanford University's first class, graduating in 1895 with a degree in geology.

After working less than a year for an eminent mining engineer in San Francisco, Hoover landed a prized

position with the London firm of Bewick, Moreing, working as a mining engineer in the Australian goldfields. There the ambitious young man drove himself and others hard. Whyte writes, "He fired rafts of employees for laziness and incompetence." Before long, on his recommendation, Bewick, Moreing bought a lease on the Sons of Gwalia mine property. With Hoover managing the mine, it was soon on its way to becoming a truly sensational gold mine. "Despite his rapid promotion [to junior partner in the firm] and handsome pay increases," Hoover came to feel unappreciated, especially after the managing director above him in Australia was replaced by someone other than himself. He tried to organize the other engineers in a coup against the new boss, but his insubordination was discovered.

It could have been disastrous to his career. But, given Hoover's outstanding abilities, his firm gave him a second chance—in China, where foreigners were competing to gobble up the crippled empire's vast resources and anti-Western "Boxers" were staging a fiery rebellion. While serving as a technical adviser to a Chinese mining company, Hoover and his new American wife (with "a .38 Mauser strapped to her hip") in June 1900 took part in defending the foreign settlement at Tientsin from a Boxer attack.

In a less violent but more complex drama, one that would raise questions that "would dog Hoover for the rest of his life" and lead eventually to an embarrassing lawsuit, he "pulled off what has been called 'the largest transfer of property to foreigners in the history of China.'" The property was the Chinese mining company for which Hoover ostensibly worked, and—amid shady dealings

by various parties involved, including Hoover—the transfer was to Hoover's actual employer, Bewick, Moreing, and Belgian associates.

In September 1901, 27-year-old Hoover departed China for London and a full partnership in Bewick, Moreing. Seven years later, he established himself as an independent mining financier. In 1909, he published *Principles of Mining*, which became a standard text in many engineering schools. By his late thirties, Hoover was worth "several million, with perhaps ten times that amount in sight."

When the Great War commenced in 1914, Hoover's global businesses crashed around him. On August 4, shortly after German troops occupied neutral Belgium on their way to Paris, Hoover walked into the U.S. Consulate in London, then under siege from American tourists fleeing the continent. To aid his stranded countrymen, he organized American residents in London who would loan money to them and recruited volunteers to help them book passage home. By early October, 120,000 anxious Americans had made the journey.

It was the beginning of the humanitarian phase in Hoover's career. He next organized, under U.S. auspices, the Committee for the Relief of Belgium, with the ambitious mission of feeding 7.5 million Belgians threatened with wartime starvation.

The CRB's scope and powers were "mindboggling," observes Whyte. Hoover "was granted a form of diplomatic immunity by all belligerents, with the British permitting him to cross the Channel at will and the Germans providing him a document stating: 'This man is not to be stopped anywhere under any circumstances.'" Hoover had "privileged access" to generals, diplomats and ministers, and "enjoyed personal relationships with the heads of four warring governments," Whyte writes. "He negotiated treaties with the belligerents, advised them on policy, wrote letters that they released under



President Herbert Hoover *Library of Congress*

their own signatures, and delivered private messages among them.” Great Britain, France, and Belgium gave him \$150 million a year, “enough to run a small country, and taking nothing for it beyond his receipt.”

When America’s 1917 entry into the war compromised Hoover’s neutral status, he reluctantly relinquished leadership of the CRB. But his public service career was just beginning. Appointed U.S. wartime food administrator by President Woodrow Wilson, he urged food conservation on American housewives while pressing for increased production and price restraint on food producers and distributors. In 1918 Wilson directed Hoover to foster post-war reconstruction in Europe. Through his American Relief Administration he distributed \$1.1 billion in food and aid. “Only Hoover, with his keen grasp of the mechanics of civilization, could have made the logistics of rehabilitating a war-ravaged continent look easy,” Whyte comments.

**A**fter the failure of his amateurish presidential bid in 1920, Hoover served as an uncommonly powerful commerce secretary in the Harding and Calvin Coolidge administrations as he geared up for another White House try in 1928. Though he was highly respected throughout the country, Hoover’s inner circle worried that he was too much the “bloodless engineer,” writes Whyte, adding, “He had no affecting anecdotes to tell, no endearing frailties to expose, no humor, no whimsy, no charm.” From an early age, Whyte notes, Hoover was “deeply uncomfortable with his feelings,” bespeaking the orphan’s “massive sense of vulnerability” and loss. Casual observers would wonder if Hoover had any feelings at all. He did, but his “reticence was chronic”—and liable to be misconstrued.

Despite these shortcomings, Hoover’s path to the Republican nomination proved easy. “The Republicans had come to see themselves as the natural governing party of the United States,”

writes Whyte. “...If Republican delegates declared an uncharismatic Hoover worthy of the presidency, voters were unlikely to argue.” Hoover had achieved an almost unrivaled national stature—“the picture of competence, progress, and prosperity.” He won the GOP nod on the first ballot and went on to defeat Democrat Al Smith resoundingly. Then came the October 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression. The Democrats and his erstwhile admirer FDR eventually turned Hoover into the scapegoat for both.

Critics then and since have accused Hoover of contributing to the Depression by rejecting the advice of more than a thousand economists and signing the pork-laden Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, which raised tariffs on numerous imported manufacturing and agricultural items. But Whyte argues that the economic impact of Smoot-Hawley was “negligible.” He writes that the legislation generated merely a 5 percent decline in American imports, “an insignificant amount when dutiable imports represented just 4 percent of [gross domestic product] in 1929.” Smoot-Hawley did encourage other nations to raise tariffs, but the later decrease in foreign trade was due largely to the Depression itself and the loss of purchasing power worldwide. The most significant damage Smoot-Hawley did was not economic but political—and to Hoover himself.

Building on three years of savage Democratic attacks against Hoover, Roosevelt in 1932 “portrayed the president as a slow and tentative executive, all but inert in the face of crisis,” and entirely to blame for the 1929 crash and the Depression. “Roosevelt gleefully recited every prediction of prosperity and recovery that Hoover had ever uttered.” Hoover was slow to fight back, and when he did it was on Roosevelt’s terms. He denied, for example, that he was “a heartless fraud.”

The engineer in Hoover prevented him from reckoning realistically with the role that appearances inescapably

play in politics, even when at variance with reality. He was hurt badly by his disdain for political theatrics, for politics itself really, his difficulty expressing his feelings, and his inability to project empathy and persuade Americans that he cared about their suffering (as he surely did). Roosevelt, in sharp contrast, “developed a confidential, intimate rapport with voters, exhibiting a highly developed political talent that could make the smarmiest of phrases radiate with sincerity: ‘You and I as common-sense citizens know...’ Perhaps most importantly, Roosevelt acknowledged the genuine hardships endured by millions of Americans in the depression, a welcome message that Hoover, bearing more responsibility for the situation, choked on.”

**T**he November verdict: Roosevelt won by a greater margin than Hoover’s victory margin four years earlier. But the Depression was not the only thing on voters’ minds. Whyte cites an apparently scientific national poll, commissioned by Hoover and completed three weeks before the election, that found that more than any other issue, Prohibition—which Hoover firmly supported—“was driving Republicans into Roosevelt’s arms.” Nearly 84 percent of defecting Republicans joined the vast majority of Democrats in favoring repeal. Regarding the Depression, Whyte says the poll’s “most interesting revelation” was that almost two-thirds of Americans believed that “‘business in general is picking up,’ as Hoover had insisted.”

After several false dawns, Americans had reason then for optimism about the economy: an apparent upturn, “in more convincing fashion than ever,” was evident by September, Whyte says. “The passage of Hoover’s reform packages and the settling of the federal budget before the conventions had put virtually every important economic indicator on a positive track. ... After three years of backbreaking work, Hoover had in fact stopped the depression in its tracks and

by most relevant measures forced its retreat.” But would the improvements last?

During the four months between the election and Roosevelt’s inauguration, Hoover—having met futilely with Democratic congressional leaders, who were taking their cues from the president-elect—sought Roosevelt’s cooperation on renegotiating international war debts and other matters. Roosevelt, who had refused to acknowledge the Depression’s international dimensions, preferred to wait, avoid any blame, and take sole credit for any recovery. “During the debt discussions, and to some extent as a result of them,” Whyte writes, “the economy turned south again. . . . Hoover would forever blame Roosevelt and the Democratic Congress for spoiling his hard-earned recovery, an argument that has only recently gained currency among economists.”

Whatever the reason, Hoover failed to end the Great Depression. But by the measure of the unemployment rate, which did not return to pre-crash levels until World War II, FDR—who in office adopted many Hoover programs as his own—failed, too, as Amity Shlaes argued in her 2007 history, *The Forgotten Man*. Yet, in devastating contrast with Hoover’s fate in 1932, FDR in 1936 was elected by a landslide to a second term. Explains Whyte: “Republicans could grumble all they wanted about how voters had been bought with their own money, how Roosevelt was paying the young, the elderly, and the farmer not to work and paying healthy young men to do make-work, and still producing double-digit unemployment figures—it did not matter. FDR was wildly popular.” It was Hoover’s *political* failure, the engineer’s failure to reckon with appearances, that ultimately did him in. ■

---

*Robert K. Landers is a former reporter at Congressional Quarterly and a former editor at The Wilson Quarterly. He is the author of An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James E. Farrell.*